



Primate Behavior Program
Teaches Students to Learn
— Page 8

Sky Is Not the Limit
for Aviation Alum
— Page 20

CWU volleyball players show off their star power during their media day this fall. From center, counter-clockwise: senior Marianna Payne, senior Shaunesy Fisk, senior Morgan Halady, junior Scottie Ellsworth, senior Emma Daoud-Hebert, and senior Hannah Stires.

The Wildcats won their first Great Northwest Athletic Conference championship since 2005 with a record of 16-2 and began NCAA Division II tournament play in early December. Payne, Daoud-Hebert, and Stires were named to the all-GNAC first team and head coach Mario Andaya won Coach of the Year in his 29th season. Stires was the GNAC Defensive Player of the Year, while Halady and Ellie Marble received honorable mention.

Photograph: David Dick





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On the Cover: U.S. Marine Corps pilot instructor and Blue Angels team member Josh Soltan learned how to become an elite pilot in the CWU Aviation program. Photograph: David Dick

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Dear Wildcats,

As fall turns to winter, I find myself reflecting on the incredible year we've had at Central Washington University and the promise of what still lies ahead. It's hard to put into words just how proud I am of all we have achieved together and how excited I am to see what the future holds for this institution and the communities we serve.

CWU's success is rooted in the remarkable efforts of every member of the Wildcat family—from our incredible students to our dedicated faculty and staff—and beyond the borders of our university through the connections and partnerships we have formed across the state and the world.

Your commitment to our shared vision of becoming a model learning community of equity and belonging is an inspiration, and I enjoy working alongside so many wonderful people as we redefine what it means to serve our students and society at large.

Watching our students return every September is a vital reminder of who we are as Wildcats and what it is we do here. CWU students bring passion, persistence, and a full spectrum of viewpoints to our institution, and through those intangibles, they enable us to do the work that moves the world forward. I am reminded every day of the impact our students and alumni are making in their communities, and it gives me great satisfaction to know that, in many ways, our work is just beginning.

In this issue of *Crimson & Black*, you will discover many examples of why CWU is at the center of a better future. Among the highlights:

- We celebrate the legacy of Ruth Harrington, whose Scholarship Luncheons have paved the way to college for hundreds of aspiring students over the past 50 years.
- An up-close look at our world-class primatology program, which produces some of the foremost experts in conservation for our closest relatives in the animal kingdom.
- CWU is elevating mental health care in our local community by reopening our counseling clinic and bringing back our master's degree program in counseling.
- Our new Business and Community Services (BCS) department, launched just last year, is partnering with government agencies, small businesses, and nonprofits in seven Central Washington counties to advance key economic development initiatives.
- A celebration of retired Professor Anderson Parks' groundbreaking work developing programs to advance equality and emotional intelligence in the workplace.

At CWU, our institutional goals are deeply aspirational, and the journey to fulfilling the promises we've made to ourselves and our constituents is far from over. I would like to thank you for joining me on this path, and I can't imagine any other community I'd rather have by my side as we forge a bright future together.

With deep gratitude,

A. James Wohlpart
President

CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Central Washington University acknowledges the people who have been on this land since time immemorial. The Ellensburg campus is on lands ceded by the Pshwanapum and other bands and tribes of the Yakama Nation in the Treaty of 1855. The Yakama people remain committed stewards of this land, cherishing it and protecting it, as instructed by elders through generations. We are honored and grateful to be on their traditional lands, and give thanks to the legacy of the original people, their lives, and their descendants.

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Unity

Retired CWU
Scholarship
Luncheon
Coordinator
Ruth Harrington
leaves legacy of
bringing people
together

By David Leder

When Ruth Harrington's friends describe what she has meant to the local community over the past 50 years, words like "incredible," "legendary," and "inspirational" often get thrown around.

"Committed," "selfless," "determined," and "humble" also tend to come to mind when people recount Ruth's half-century of dedication to the CWU Scholarship Luncheon program, which has raised well over \$1 million since its inception in 1973.

Ruth, 90, retired from her leadership role earlier this year, but not before leaving an indelible mark on the CWU community and countless families across Central Washington.

"She is truly amazing," said longtime friend and Scholarship Luncheon participant Louise Wright. "She has a history like no other in this community, and we're inspired by everything she has done over the years. It's important for us to keep her legacy going."

Louise and another Scholarship Luncheon veteran, Peggy O'Neil, were hand-picked by Ruth to help oversee the 30 current luncheon groups and 10 after-hours and weekend groups. Each of the groups will have a designated representative who will work alongside Peggy and Louise to make sure everything runs smoothly.

From September through June, Ruth's successors will help maintain the membership lists, recruit new members, and—most importantly—collect dues and deliver them to the CWU Foundation office in Barge Hall at the end of every month.

After all, that's what the CWU Scholarship Luncheon program is all about: bringing people together to raise money for young people to attend college.

"We just want to keep it going because Ruth has done so much for this community over the years," Peggy said. "She has such a strong sense of community, and she believes in the importance of education. She also has a real knack for bringing people together, and that's going to be the most difficult thing for us to replicate."

While Louise and Peggy are planning to put in the work required to keep the program going, they know they won't be able to match Ruth's unbridled enthusiasm for the position.

"We aren't taking over for Ruth," said Louise, who first started attending the Scholarship Luncheons in 1984. "There's no way anyone could ever replace her."

Even though Ruth is no longer involved in organizing and coordinating the monthly gatherings, she still plans to check in from time to time. She may even jump in as an occasional substitute host. As her friends have come to understand, she's not one to take a back seat.

"We tell Ruth to let it go, but she never will," said Marianne King, another longtime member. "She will keep checking in because it's what she loves to do."

Added Ruth: "I don't want to have lunch by myself every day, so I will be at the top of the sub list."

How It Started

Ruth has hosted dozens of CWU Scholarship Luncheons—and attended hundreds more—since she started organizing them three years after moving to Ellensburg in 1970.

When her late husband, Edward Harrington, was hired as the vice president of academic affairs at CWU, they moved up from San Jose, California, with their four children.

Ruth noticed that the town felt very separate from the university—unlike San Jose—and she wanted to do something to bridge the gap.

"My original goal was to mix university people with townspeople," she said. "For whatever reason, the college and the townspeople didn't mix, and I felt like I could do something about it."

Ruth Harrington put her heart and soul into the CWU Scholarship Luncheon program for 50 years.



Ruth in the early 1970s, when she moved to Ellensburg from California.



Photo courtesy of Daily Record, edited by C&E.

From left, Ann Ringe, Ruth Harrington, and Rita Sparks hosted a pie-tasting for the 20th anniversary of CWU's Scholarship Luncheons in 1993. At that point, the luncheons had raised more than \$356,000 and awarded 503 scholarships to CWU students.

Ruth began immersing herself in the CWU community, getting to know the faculty and staff and their spouses. She would also talk to people at church and at the supermarket, selling them on the idea of joining her new Ellensburg social club centered around raising money for college scholarships.

It didn't take long for her to attract a following, and the CWU Scholarship Luncheon program eventually grew to 100 groups of different shapes and sizes. Most, if not all, of them were orchestrated by Ruth herself.

"She would always try to put people in groups that they would fit in with because she wanted to help people find a community," said Marianne, who moved to Ellensburg in 1976 and joined two long-standing groups shortly thereafter—both of which still meet to this day, albeit with a slightly different makeup.

While participation has dwindled in recent years due to an aging membership, a changing social landscape, and the pandemic, the people who are still involved remain very active.

The members are mostly women, but a number of men have also joined over the years as part of couples and singles groups.

"Some of the singles became lifelong friends and some even got married," Ruth recalled. "I just loved to hear those stories."

Participants contribute \$60 in annual dues and typically host one gathering per year at their homes. Most of the groups get together in Ellensburg, although some have occasionally sprouted up in Yakima, Cle Elum, and on the west side of the state. Some groups meet for coffee and dessert; others might host a potluck or have dinner at a restaurant.

As Ruth noted, there are no hard-and-fast rules.

"I love to cook and have people over to my house, but not everyone does," she said. "The most important thing is getting people together. As long as people are having a good time with one another, I am happy."

Peggy and Louise are hopeful that they can rekindle some of the interest from past years among the younger generations. They have started using modern technology like group texts and emails to stay in touch with the groups they are overseeing—a sharp departure from Ruth's favored communication method of pen, paper, and a landline telephone.

"We are using a digital database to keep track of the different groups and group leaders," said Peggy, who was recruited by Ruth in 1992. "I'm still a little old-fashioned; I like to have a printout of people's names and addresses. But I will still send a text or use Google Maps. Ruth's system was more like, 'oh, it's the yellow house on the corner.'"

Lasting Legacy

When Ruth officially retired at the end of the 2023-24 academic year, CWU honored her with a community celebration in the SURC Ballroom. About 200 guests showed up to pay tribute to the matriarch of the Scholarship Luncheon program, whose fundraising efforts surpassed \$1 million back in 2017.

The total has grown significantly since that time, but as Executive Director of the CWU Foundation Paul Elstone noted, what matters more is the number of students the program has helped over the past 50 years.

"At last count, the number of scholarships Ruth helped raise money for was around 1,200," said Paul, who also serves as the vice president of University Advancement. "To be able to have a positive impact in the lives of so many students is an incredible achievement."

Paul remembers the first time he met Ruth when he came to CWU in 2021. She just cut right to the chase.

"After some brief pleasantries, she said, 'Tell me your wife's name. We need to find a group for her,'" he recalled.

Angie Elstone joined a luncheon group shortly thereafter and has been involved ever since.

"One of the reasons Ruth has been so successful is that she is relentless about recruiting people," Paul said. "In my 24 years of working in advancement, I have never met anyone like her. These scholarship groups have become an institution in this community, and she has created a truly unique legacy. I can't imagine there will ever be another Ruth."

Likewise, Ruth's friends also recognize what she has meant to CWU and her neighbors across Central Washington. The

“I have built so many great relationships and touched so many lives over the years. We’ve been able to help high school students, college students, and single parents continue their educations, and that means a lot to me.”

Ruth Harrington

one-time Ellensburg Volunteer of the Year never puts herself first; she’s always thinking about what she can do to help others.

“She’s extremely humble, and so giving of herself. That’s what makes her so special,” Louise said. “I don’t know how she did it. Raising four kids, volunteering all over town, and managing 100 groups at one time without a computer. We all look up to her so much.”

Peggy has always admired Ruth’s ability to remember everything about everyone. She never missed an opportunity to create lasting connections between people who may not have otherwise become acquainted.

“It was always amazing to me how she was able to bring so many people together who have similar interests,” she said. “Many of these groups have been together for a really long time, and it’s all because of Ruth.”

“She is a real treasure to this community,” Marianne added.

What’s Next?

While not one to pat herself on the back, Ruth is keenly aware of the lasting impact she has had on the university and her community.

She will forever be proud of what she accomplished with the CWU Scholarship Luncheon program, and her greatest hope is that the connections she helped facilitate will continue long after she is gone.

“I have built so many great relationships and touched so many lives over the years,” Ruth said. “We’ve been able to help high school students, college students, and single parents continue their educations, and that means a lot to me.”

She has confidence in Peggy and Louise to keep the program going, and she believes there could be some hidden opportunities to increase participation. She also recognizes that few people can match her passion for this kind of work, so no matter what direction the program goes, she will be happy—as long as it continues in some capacity.

“It’s a lot of work, which is probably why no one wanted to take over my job,” Ruth said with a laugh. “It takes some doing to keep people involved, but it’s so rewarding. I’m going to miss it because I did the job for so long. But I’m still going to be around.”

Paul, from the CWU Foundation, concedes that few people could ever match Ruth’s enthusiasm or doggedness in the coordinator role. At the same time, they don’t have to.

If people in the CWU and Ellensburg communities are able to give just a fraction of the time and effort that Ruth has, new opportunities to support aspiring college students will continue to materialize.

“I don’t know what the Scholarship Luncheons will look like in the future, but the need for relationships and being together will always be there,” Paul said. “People crave that sense of community, regardless of generation, and we need to find new ways to engage with them.”

With the help of people like Peggy, Louise, and Marianne, a new era is underway for the program. And while it will never be the same as it was under Ruth’s expert guidance, Paul remains optimistic due to the strong foundation Ruth created.

“Things are going to change, and I’m excited to see what Peggy and Louise do with the program,” he said. “Our focus will remain on supporting our students, and those efforts have always relied heavily on volunteer support. Volunteers are so critical to what we are doing here, and we look forward to building new relationships in the community so those partnerships can continue.” ■

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Teaching to Learn

CWU Primate Behavior program has had an unmatched influence on the field

By Rune Torgersen

In September of 1965, a very special chimpanzee was born in West Africa.

Captured by the U.S. Air Force for use in the space program, she was named after Washoe County, Nevada, where she was raised and taught to use American Sign Language (ASL). Her caretakers, R. Allen and Beatrix Gardner, realized that, since previous attempts to teach chimpanzees to use vocal speech had failed, it might be possible to pass on a different means of communicating using the primate's natural talent for complex gestures and socialization.

It worked, and Washoe became the first non-human to ever learn and teach a human language.

Project Washoe formed around the signing chimpanzee, and in 1980, she and her family arrived at Central Washington University, in the care of Professor of Psychology Roger Fouts and other faculty. In 1993, CWU built the Chimpanzee Human Communication Institute (CHCI), a specialized building to house the chimpanzees and allow for educational programs. The interdisciplinary Primate Behavior program Fouts helped found would evolve into one of CWU's most unique fields of study.

Washoe's influence guides the program to this day, infusing the work and research being conducted with a deep understanding of the rich inner lives of primates.

Senior Lecturer of Primate Behavior Mary Lee Jensvold joined the Experimental Psychology program in 1986, and has watched as Primate Behavior at CWU become the force of nature it's known as today.

"I call the students who come out of our program 'shooting stars,'" she said. "They go out and do great things at sanctuaries and research sites all over the world. They're unique, and they take an incredibly compassionate, individualistic approach to caring for these intelligent, social animals."

Jensvold served as director of the CHCI until it closed in 2013, and she continues her work with Washoe's remaining family members, Tatu and Loulis, at the Fauna Foundation in Carignan, Quebec, Canada. As a consultant for the Friends of Washoe, she helps ensure Tatu and Loulis are well cared for in their old age, and that all of the valuable data gathered from Project Washoe is put to use in educating the next generation of primatologists.

"One of the things we've always emphasized in the program is that primate research needs to be as non-invasive as it possibly can be," Jensvold said. "It needs to be humane, with consideration for the primate you're studying."

Washoe passed away in Ellensburg on October 30, 2007, at the age of 42. Her legacy includes the formation of the CWU Primate Behavior program, a wholly unique and interdisciplinary approach to the field that is revered and respected around the world for helping advance our understanding of primates.

Washoe, the matriarch of the CHCI family, not only learned American Sign Language; she also taught it to other chimps.



Professor of Anthropology Lori Sheeran provides students with one of the components of the interdisciplinary Primate Behavior and Ecology degree.

Unmatched Expertise

The Primate Behavior program at CWU is split into a Bachelor of Science in Primate Behavior and Ecology, and a Master of Science in Primate Behavior. The BS degree is a double major, requiring classes from anthropology, biology, and psychology, and it remains the only program in the western hemisphere where undergraduate students can earn a degree in primate behavior.

“The sheer amount of primatology-specific classes offered at CWU is part of what makes the program unique,” Jensvold said. “When I was an undergrad, and I knew I wanted to work with primates, I ended up having to do an anthropology minor to get there.”

This approach to the field extends to the MS program, where students have broadly varied fields of study, yet share the camaraderie that comes with common purpose. Katie Seymour, who’s working on her master’s thesis, came to CWU because of Project Washoe’s history, and she stayed for the connections she has forged with her classmates.

“We’re a very tight-knit cohort, and we all get along super well,” she said. “The program does a great job of bringing together all the different disciplines within primatology, and working alongside people with different focuses gives us all a broader perspective on the field.”

Seymour spent last summer interning with Fauna Foundation, working alongside Jensvold, Tatu, and Loulis. This was the first time she had seen chimpanzees sign with one another in person.

“The work that I’d done up until that point was all based on recorded footage from the CHCI,” Seymour said. “Seeing

chimps signing to themselves and with each other for the first time in person was a very interesting and humbling experience. It was super reaffirming for someone like me, who came into primatology from a psychology background.”

Seymour’s thesis centers on how signing chimpanzees experience and express familiarity through signing behaviors.

“I’m looking at the speed and reiteration of their signs when directed at different humans,” she said. “Humans change how they express themselves depending on their relationship with the person they’re talking to, so I want to see if the same is true in chimpanzee-human interactions in sign language.”

While some students go into research after graduation, others choose to pursue conservation and sanctuary work. Kailie Dombrasuky (’18) works at Project Chimps in Georgia as a caregiver for a group of 95 chimpanzees. She says her time at CWU has helped her give the primates the kind of care they deserve.

“I’m applying everything I learned in grad school here,” she said. “I provide our chimps with enrichment and get to see them interact with each other and build the strong relationships they need to thrive.”

Jensvold remarked that primate sanctuaries saw a surge in demand after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service classified all chimpanzees in the country as endangered in 2015, ending all biomedical studies on them and leaving thousands in need of a home.

“It used to be that being a caregiver at a chimpanzee sanctuary was a dream at best,” she said. “Now, caregivers have their pick, and can walk onto a job anywhere.”

Dombrasuky believes taking care of this population of chimpanzees is a moral obligation following their release.

“What’s important to understand is that chimpanzees are our closest relatives, and all of our research suggests that they are intelligent beings with complex inner lives,” she said. “They have emotions, and chimps that have spent long periods of time in less humane forms of captivity begin to show signs of PTSD and depression. They are with us because they were raised in captivity and wouldn’t be able to reacclimatize to a life in the wild. It’s up to us to not write them off as animals, and give them the care and attention we owe them after their years of trauma.”

Students from CWU’s Primate Behavior program are uniquely suited to this task, thanks to the opportunity they have to practice on the chimpanzees living just 20 miles down the road in Cle Elum.

Common Cause

Opened by Keith Lachappelle in 2008, Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest (CSNW) provides care to 15 chimpanzees. Sanctuary directors JB Mulcahy and Diana Goodrich both graduated from CWU’s Primate Behavior MS program in 2001, and continue to give back to the school by offering internships to aspiring primatologists.

“We’re in the unique position of being very closely aligned with CWU, both ideologically and geographically,” JB Mulcahy said. “For students looking to get hands-on experience in an academic environment, we’re really the best option nationally. We’re really excited that this came about, and even more so about all the places it can go from here.”

Interns at CSNW prepare meals and daily enrichment activities for the chimpanzees, and some even receive special training that allows them to work directly with the animals. Mulcahy explained that the internship program benefits both parties, as CSNW grows and learns through the constant influx of new perspectives.

“While the students act as extra staff members, they also bring new ideas to the table that keep the sanctuary evolving,” he said. “They take what we’ve taught them about high-level care guided by compassion and implement it at sanctuaries and care facilities all over the world.”

The experience working with, and caring for, chimpanzees is often a pivotal moment in students’ careers, leading them down a road they might not have otherwise considered.

“Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest was really how I got my foot in the door for chimpanzee caregiving,” Dombrowsky said. “Getting that experience early on was crucial when I was applying for jobs after I graduated, and ultimately led me to my role at Project Chimps.”

As Primate Behavior and CSNW work in tandem to produce field-defining professionals, a lot of those professionals find ways to contribute to the program that gave them their start. One such alum is Jake Funkhouser (’18).

“We can reach out to people like Jake and ask him questions about his research as it applies to our sanctuary, in order to stretch our own research further,” Mulcahy said. “Having that personal connection means that we get better, more tailored advice, and are able to help our friends out in kind.”

Worldwide Visibility

Funkhouser jumped into volunteering with CSNW as early in his college career as he could.

“Before I had even declared my major, I was spending as much time at Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest as possible,” he said. “That experience provided the foundation for my career, ignited my love for primates, and even led me to other opportunities like time in Panama.”

In addition to CSNW, the primate behavior program offers field placements all over the world, in order to help students put their education into vivid context. During his junior year of undergraduate studies in Primate Behavior and Ecology, Funkhouser found himself heading to Panama to help rehabilitate primates confiscated from the illegal pet trade.

“We were brought a spider monkey that had been rescued from a pet trader, and were immediately faced with the challenge of providing the right kind of environment to help her learn the fundamental skills she needed to succeed in life as a spider monkey,” he said. “I knew from my classes that spider monkeys have a really distinct way of moving through the trees, so I was able to apply that in designing a forest enclosure, ensuring she learned what she needed to.”

Following his graduation from CWU, Funkhouser earned his PhD at Washington University in St. Louis, and is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. He regularly works with CWU students to continue the culture of collaboration that makes the program possible.

“At this point, it is a multi-generational network of highly skilled primatologists, helping each other grow and learn even long after our time at Central is over,” Funkhouser said. “My PhD advisor, Crickette Sanz, studied at the CHCI, so from the very beginning we had this shared background, and she was able to help me tailor my degree to suit those needs. We’re all in it together, and wherever I go, I always run into at least one other Central alum in the room with me, helping to build that cumulative body of knowledge and bringing it back to Central to advise the next generation of scholars focused on primate conservation and well-being.”

Current Primate Behavior MS student Jianna Terranova has completed research programs in Uganda and Costa Rica, and she concurs that the opportunities students have to apply the knowledge they glean from the program before graduation are everywhere.

“Wherever you go in Dean Hall, there are always posters for field schools and research experiences hanging on the walls,” she said. “Those opportunities are the best, because they take what you’ve learned in the classroom and show you how it fits into the real world. It’s just amazing how it all comes together. My future really clicked into place when I first saw the opportunity to go to Africa for field school.”

Lifelong Connections

When Washoe passed away in 2007, she left behind a flourishing family transcending the boundaries of species to shed new light on the study of primates as a whole. Her adopted son, Loulis, continues to use the sign language she taught him, much like the students of CWU’s Primate Behavior program continue to benefit from the culture she left behind.

Each student who goes out into the world to research and care for our closest genetic relatives in the animal kingdom brings the knowledge they gain back to CWU to start that cycle anew, and continue growing what has become a keystone program for the study of primate behavior.

“The program is successful because of the incredible people who support it,” Funkhouser said. “University leadership, faculty, teachers, research partners, graduate students—everyone plays a part in continuing the incredible international legacy of this program. We know that it’s a fairly niche area of study, and nobody’s expecting thousands of students to show up for it, but the dozens of students who do come, they will become the world’s experts in this field, without a doubt.” ■

Washoe (right) with her adopted son Loulis, who learned sign language from his mother without human intervention. Among the first signs she taught him were TICKLE, DRINK, and HUG.

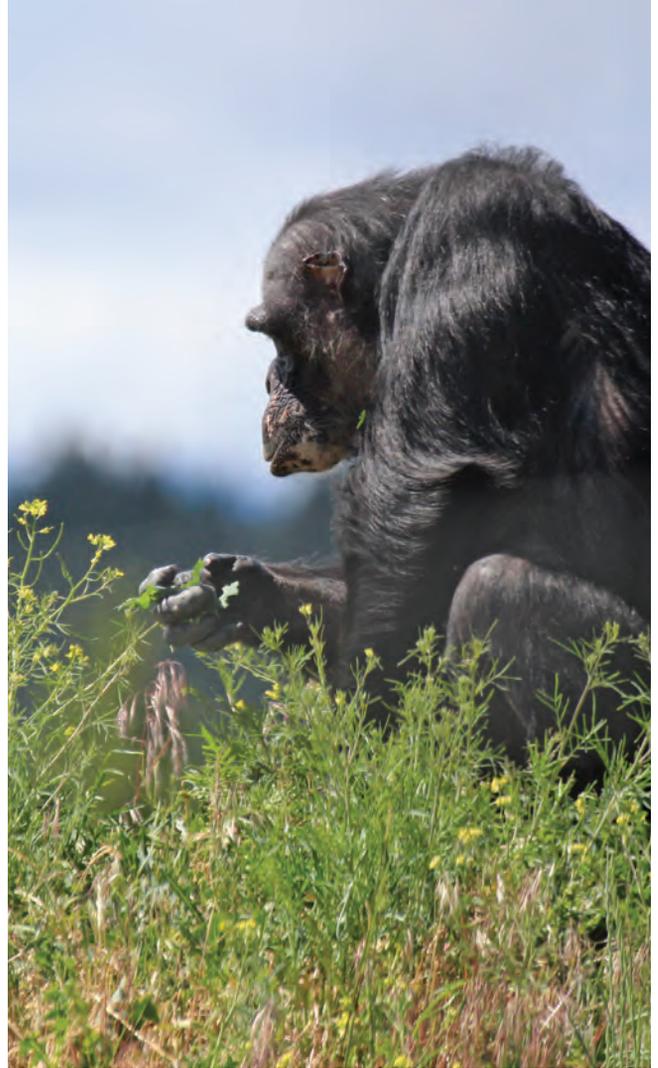


Photo courtesy of Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest

Rescued chimpanzees like Negra receive the care they need at Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest in Cle Elum.



Photograph: April Ottey



Photo courtesy of Kuenzang Dorji

CWU alumnus Kuenzang Dorji received a Whitley Award this year for his primatology work in Bhutan.

Primatology Alum Earns International Recognition

By Rune Torgersen

Kuenzang Dorji ('21) always knew he wanted to pursue conservation through academia.

“As a Buddhist, I believe in karma, and the predestined nature of the world,” he said. “My whole life, I had wanted to get my master’s and my PhD, and for a couple of reasons, it kept not working out—until I met Dr. Lori Sheeran.”

Sheeran, a CWU professor of anthropology, learned of Dorji’s work for the Royal Government of Bhutan through a network of peers in the region. Those connections allowed CWU to send a cohort of primatology students to Bhutan for an exchange program, formalized by a Memorandum of Understanding with the Bhutanese government in 2018.

“Where my wildlife center is located, there’s no internet, no medical services, and no road,” Dorji said. “It’s a very different environment from what most students are used to. That first cohort was very happy with their experience.”

Sheeran learned of Dorji’s academic aspirations and helped secure him a place in Central’s primatology program.

“At CWU, I got to meet so many wonderful people and study primate behavior in the way I had always dreamed of,” Dorji said. “That was a real life-changer for me. In Bhutan, we didn’t have any primatologists until I graduated. That’s all thanks to the faculty and staff of CWU.”

As the first primatologist in Bhutan, Dorji dedicated himself to the study of golden langurs, an endangered species with deep cultural significance to the Bhutanese

people. Changes in the environment had brought the monkeys closer to human civilization, and they had started to forage on the crops of local farmers, presenting a danger to their livelihood, as well as the lives of the langurs.

“This is why I wanted to intervene and revive that relationship,” Dorji said. “This is mainly about deterring the monkeys away from the farms, but in doing so, we have to make sure they have a high-quality habitat to return to, too.”

Dorji’s efforts are community-led and currently use imitation tigers and other predators to scare away the monkeys. This helps human, monkey, and forest coexist in harmony.

“It’s an ongoing arms race between us and the monkeys, because the monkeys are really smart, and they pick up on our tricks quickly,” Dorji said. “They’re working out that the toys aren’t real, so we’re researching ways to incorporate a few robotics into the process, having them blink their eyes and move their tails, for instance.”

Last May, Dorji’s groundbreaking work, and the community effort that’s led to its success, were recognized with a Whitley Award from the Whitley Fund for Nature. He sees the award as an opportunity to spread the word about these kinds of efforts, and as recognition for the decades he’s committed to them.

“I don’t even remember how many meals I’ve skipped, or how many nights I’ve slept under trees in the forest over the last 20 years,” Dorji said. “It really feels like it has paid off. I feel happy for both me and my country, and for the support I’ve received along the way from institutions like CWU.” ■

Cross-Species Conversation Deepened on CWU Campus

It seems appropriate that a program grounded in empathy and connection with the primates it seeks to understand found its start through direct interspecies communication. Founded in 1993, the CWU Chimpanzee and Human Communication Institute (CHCI) provided the spark that continues to fuel the primatology program to this day.

Former CHCI director Mary Lee Jensvold explained that the initial interest the institute received has directly led to the ongoing success of the program.

“Many of our key faculty members joined us because of the CHCI, and the fact that they’ve stuck with CWU is part of what makes the program special today,” she said. “Washoe and her family really kickstarted it all.”

When Washoe, Loulis, Moja, Tatu, and Dar moved to CWU in 1980-81, they were initially housed on the third floor of the psychology building, as part of their role in the Experimental Psychology program. The chimpanzees’ caregivers, Roger and Deborah Fouts, along with their students, successfully lobbied university administrators and Washington legislators to construct a dedicated housing facility for the family of primates, and officially opened the CHCI building on May 7, 1993.



Roger and Deborah Fouts working with Washoe and the other chimps at the CHCI.



The family of chimps that lived at CWU from 1993-2013.

The CHCI dedicated itself to humane research, and as such, did not permit any research projects which might in any way inconvenience or hurt the chimpanzees. This meant that most research conducted through the CHCI was purely observational, with students, staff, and faculty never depriving or forcing the chimpanzees to participate. Instead, they focused on taking the chimps on their terms and designing ethologically based studies including their learning of American Sign Language (ASL) and how they used it to communicate with each other and humans.

Jensvold said the attention brought about by the CHCI led to the formation of a distinct primate behavior program at the university, designed to accommodate all of the students who weren’t specifically interested in pursuing the psychology side of primatology.



The Chimpanzee and Human Communication Institute Building.

“Students who were getting their master’s degrees working with the CHCI were getting them in experimental psychology, so there was an opportunity to create something a little more tailored to primatology,” she said. “It was frustrating to take so many psychology classes that didn’t seem relevant to the work, so the primate behavior program allowed students more freedom to examine what they really wanted to pursue.”

Over the course of her life, Washoe was confirmed to have learned more than 350 individual ASL signs. She combined them in new ways to communicate about objects she didn’t know the sign for, such as referring to a thermos as a METAL CUP DRINK, and to form unique



Deborah and Roger Fouts with Washoe in 2007.



Loulis



Tatu

phrases. She conversed with humans and chimpanzees using the pragmatics and grammar that humans use in signed conversations.

While debate continues as to whether the chimpanzees were using the signs as a form of language, or merely imitating their human caretakers, research at the CHCI showed that they signed to each other even when no humans were present. The interspecies communication that happened at CWU continues to inspire countless primatology students. Among them is Katie Seymour, who is currently finishing her master's degree in the field.

"I absolutely fell in love with that stuff, and then I learned that CWU is where all of that research happened," she said. "Knowing that the sign language research was the foundation of the program here made it clear that CWU was where I needed to go."

Washoe passed away in 2007, and the CHCI closed its doors for good in 2013. The remaining chimpanzees, Tatu and Loulis, were rehomed at the Fauna Foundation in Carignan, Quebec, Canada. Washoe's legacy is preserved through the conservation efforts of the Friends of Washoe nonprofit organization. ■



Moja



Washoe and Dar

"Roger, through his ongoing conversations with Washoe and her extended family, has opened a window into the cognitive workings of a chimpanzee's mind that adds a new dimension to our understanding. Clearly chimpanzees are capable of intellectual feats that once we thought unique to humans."

—Jane Goodall

Quote taken from the information sign at Friendship Park in Ellensburg.



A bronze statue of Washoe signing the word FRIEND was sculpted by Georgia Gerber and stands in Friendship Park in downtown Ellensburg.



Partners In Prosperity

BCS Executive Director Rob Ogburn, left, and recent CWU graduate Miguel Gomez speak to Sy Ruiz with the Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC) of Washington last summer in Ellensburg.



CWU Business and Community Services works alongside community partners to lay foundation for sustainable economic development

By Rune Torgersen

The word “stewardship” comes up a lot in the ongoing conversation about the role universities play within their communities.

Indeed, the American Association for State Colleges and Universities defines stewardship of place as one of the key responsibilities held by regional comprehensive universities like CWU. The concept is baked into our vision and mission statements, reminding us to give back to the communities we serve in as many ways as we can.

Since August 2023, the newly formed Department of Business and Community Services (BCS) has been aiming to do just that. Led by Executive Director Rob Ogburn, BCS has been spinning a web of connections and resources with the end goal of nourishing the communities and economies of Central Washington through careful listening and humble collaboration in the face of the adaptive challenges facing the region.

Ogburn and his colleagues know that this approach is the best way to fulfill the promise of CWU.

“As a regional comprehensive university, we have a responsibility to be an economic and cultural support mechanism for our community,” he said. “This means we don’t show up and act like we have all the answers, but rather, we join the conversation with deep curiosity and the willingness to engage with local leaders over the long term to find answers that work for everyone involved.”

Innovation Steeped In Tradition

The economic development work being initiated by BCS has its roots in the innovation and entrepreneurship efforts championed by CWU’s Dr. Bill Provaznik since 2008. Provaznik’s efforts have provided a hub for networking and resource-gathering for aspiring and experienced entrepreneurs alike, facilitating workshops, listening sessions, and ongoing conversation across Washington state. In his time overseeing innovation and outreach efforts, Provaznik noticed an ongoing need for a similar program but on a larger, more interdisciplinary scale.

“I got a chance to see the different cities, towns, and rural communities across Central Washington working with the schools and districts, and noticed that while this state has some of the richest people on the planet, there’s also a lot of poverty here,” he said. “It became apparent that the university had a role to play in bringing up the next generation of small business owners and entrepreneurs to help this region thrive.”

In addition to building on the foundation created by Provaznik, BCS draws inspiration from a similar program at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), where President Jim Wohlpart served as provost before coming to Ellensburg in 2021. UNI’s program,



Business and Community Services helps small businesses develop their economic futures, which often include emerging technologies like solar power.

also called Business and Community Services, has developed and matured over a period of 30 years, and currently serves all 99 of Iowa's counties, fielding over 3,000 projects annually.

With Wohlpart and Ogburn's support, it became clear that CWU was both willing and able to undertake a similar approach to the work before us in seven Central Washington counties.

"Once Jim Wohlpart and Rob Ogburn and a handful of other people came on board and started championing this kind of work, things really shifted into high gear," Provaznik said. "Having a dedicated team and support from all corners of campus and community leadership has really put wind in our sails."

Personalized Solutions

The primary objective of BCS is to facilitate economic development across the Central Washington region by leveraging the knowledge, expertise, and resources of the university to directly address the concerns of individual communities. According to Ogburn, that starts with open, honest conversation, plus dignity and respect for the intricacies of each situation.

"We have the opportunity to create dialogue, and we do that by showing up and being small," he said. "We don't solve problems—we don't even necessarily define them—but we are experts in processes and tools, and bringing the right people to the table to have the conversations that need to be had. It's a persistent, and humble approach to inquiry that needs to flourish in order to bring about lasting progress."

The key to the operation is avoiding a one-size-fits-all mentality at all costs. Ellensburg City Manager Heidi Behrends Cerniwey has been involved in evolving the partnership between

the city and BCS since the program's inception, and she sees a distinct advantage in the work being done at a university, as opposed to a private agency.

"Local answers and local solutions take local problem solving and leadership," she said. "Having this effort come from CWU makes a lot of sense, and our countywide conference of governments is very supportive of this unique resource, and understanding of the fact that we need to do economic development work differently, together."

In order to create the kind of sustainable, lasting economic growth that BCS aims to bring about, the temptation to inflate the local economy by bringing in pre-existing businesses must be balanced by nurturing an environment wherein locally minded endeavors have the opportunity to thrive.

"When most people think about economic development, they think about attracting existing businesses," Behrends Cerniwey said. "We need to be more focused on our assets and strengths, growing our own, and making sure they have a sustainable environment here to continue operating in. That's how you get jobs with wages that people can live on, and businesses that have a vested interest in giving back to their community. Fortunately, the Ellensburg City Council has made sustainable economic development a priority."

Once those critical early conversations are had, BCS can then provide support through data collection, networking, training, and a whole host of other options tailored to the needs of the community in question. Provaznik has seen firsthand how drastically each community's priorities may vary from the next.

"We can't go in and start fussing about external markets and increasing competitiveness if the local population is most concerned about trash not being cleaned up," he said. "If that's

the primary issue facing the town government, then that has to be addressed in order to move forward with the bigger picture. Nothing is trivial if it matters to the people living in that community.”

Learning Opportunities

In addition to assisting small, rural communities with economic development, BCS provides an opportunity for CWU business students to expand their skillsets. Last year, BCS employed two graduating seniors, supply chain management major Daizie Jones and accounting/marketing major Miguel Gomez, who performed data gathering and communication tasks as it got off the ground.

Gomez found inspiration in knowing he had a hand in work that could lift up his loved ones in the region.

“I have cousins that are 10 years old, and knowing that the work I’m doing could have a positive impact on them down the line is huge for me,” he said. “They might be able to make their way into some of the biggest industries in the state without having to leave their community behind.”

Jones agreed, pointing to a sense of pride in their work and a newfound perspective on what goes into crafting sustainable growth.

“I feel very proud to be on these projects because we’re making a tangible difference in our community,” she said. “It may not be visible right now, but in five to 10 years, it’s going to compound into a big shift in how Central Washington does business, making it a better place for students to find jobs in the process.”

For Ogburn, involving students in the process is imperative to the success of BCS as a whole.

“Our student employees will enter their careers with a deep understanding of the potential that Central Washington, and really the whole state of Washington, has to offer,” he said. “Having professionals out there who understand how to cultivate meaningful relationships between communities and industry will move the whole region forward.”

As BCS expands and takes on more clients, students from across the university may end up getting involved through research projects or consultation assignments, giving them fresh ways to apply their education to the real world.

Just the Beginning

Only a year into its existence, BCS has already forged critical connections and drawn partners from across the region into the mix through events like last spring’s Economic Development Workshop, which saw participation from entities as far away as the borders with Canada and Oregon. Continued funding for the endeavor has been secured through a \$400,000 Enabling

Partnerships to Increase Innovation Capacity (EPIIC) grant from the National Science Foundation, among other sources of funding.

From where Behrends Cerniwey is sitting, it looks like BCS is off to the strong start that this kind of work demands.

“I think Central is just getting started, and there are a lot of exciting places this work could go,” she said. “It’s so easy to see all the positives at the beginning of a journey like this, and we’re prepared for the challenges that may arise along the way and ready to collaborate in the face of adversity. That’s what will make all the difference in changing the face of business in Central Washington.”

Ogburn is equally optimistic, although he realizes it will take time for BCS to gain momentum in its target market. He and his colleagues won’t feel comfortable measuring their success until they are able to step back and let their community partners take the wheel.

“Our job is to engage with communities on a demand-driven basis in a way that augments their ability to self-sustain,” he said. “Our measure of success is whether or not the community is meeting its own standards of success. We’re here to help them achieve a self-determined and sustainable future based on how they measure success; we bring processes and tools and curiosity to the task at hand. Our goal is to work ourselves out of a job.” ■

BCS Secures \$400,000 NSF Grant

CWU’s new outreach-based, demand-driven economic development organization, Business and Community Services (BCS), secured a \$400,000, three-year grant from the National Science Foundation last summer. The Enabling Partnerships to Increase Innovation Capacity (EPIIC) program supports the growth of inclusive innovation systems through capacity-building efforts at higher education institutions with limited research infrastructure.

EPIIC grants are designed to advance key technologies and accelerate scientific and technological innovation. Executive Director Rob Ogburn says the \$400,000 in seed capital has the potential to grow into millions of dollars in additional funding once the programs BCS supports take hold. ■



The Sky Is Not the Limit

CWU Aviation alum continues to aim high after completing three years with Blue Angels By Robin Burck



Joshua Soltan grew up surrounded by planes, pilots, and all things aviation. His dad served as an Army pilot, and he remembers going to Pensacola, Florida, to watch his first Blue Angels practice and putting on his dad's flight gear to fly planes made out of cardboard boxes.

Little did he know that these experiences planted the seeds that would eventually grow into a career as a Blue Angels pilot.

For the past three years, Soltan has been the lead pilot of the beloved C-130J "Fat Albert" and just completed his final year flying with the U.S. Navy's elite air performance squadron.

As he reflects back on his time in this role, he is reminded of the hard work he put in over the last two decades to get where he is today.

"I was always interested in aviation but didn't have a lot of outlets to go back to it," says Soltan, a native of Spokane who serves as a pilot instructor in the U.S. Marine Corps. "When the door to my baseball career closed, I found another door in Central's aviation program. I looked into it and thought it might be the avenue for me, so I applied and got accepted."

After earning his degree from CWU in 2010, Soltan's career took off rapidly. By the summer of 2011, he had completed The Basic School in Quantico, Virginia, and began his flight training in Pensacola, starting his journey in the same place he is today.

His aviation career has led him through various stages of training, from primary flight training in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 2011, to earning his Wings of Gold as a Naval Aviator in 2013.

By 2014, Soltan was flying with VMGR-152 "Sumos" in Okinawa and Iwakuni, Japan, where he honed his skills across the vast Pacific region.

"I spent three years out there flying all across the Pacific," Soltan says. "That squadron's call sign is the 'Sumos' because we are a large aircraft that carries a lot of things all around the different island chains. They have us working anywhere between South Korea to Alaska—all the way to Australia, and pretty much everywhere in between until you get to India."

Since his time at CWU, Soltan's dedication and passion have never waned. His experiences were not just about flying; they were about understanding the broader implications of his work.

"We carried aid for typhoons that devastated the Philippines, and we would fly down a lot of water and supplies and personnel to help clean up and get them back up and running again," he recounts.

Soltan's missions—from providing humanitarian aid in Nepal after a devastating earthquake to conducting joint exercises with allies in South Korea and Australia—showcased the global impact of his role.



CWU Aviation alum Josh Soltan piloted "Fat Albert" from 2022-24.

All of Soltan's hard work culminated in the biggest opportunity of his life in July 2021, when he was selected as a Blue Angels C-130J demonstration pilot, a role that would significantly advance his aviation career.

The C-130J, nicknamed "Fat Albert," carries the team's maintenance and support equipment to air shows across the country. The plane also performs aerobatic maneuvers at every air show, with Major Soltan serving as the lead pilot.

For Soltan, the Blue Angels are more than just a team of elite pilots; they represent the heart and soul of the Navy and Marine Corps.

"Representing over 800,000 active-duty, reserve, and civilian men and women currently serving worldwide in the Navy and Marine Corps is quite the task to take on," he says. "It is my job now to represent them, and I can't let them down."

Soltan is the second Central alumnus to have been selected for the Blue Angels, joining Lt. Cmdr. Craig Olson ('91), who flew two separate tours with the Navy Flight Demonstration Squadron in 2002 and 2007.

Continuous Improvement

The transition to the Blue Angels required a level of precision and self-awareness that pushed Soltan to new heights as a pilot and as a leader. But the Blue Angels are not just about precision; they are about teamwork and personal growth.

"Pilots make mistakes all the time, whether they are willing to admit it or not," Soltan explains. "The process to correct those mistakes is what matters."

This concept is discussed in the exhaustive Blue Angels debriefs, which can last for over an hour. The debrief sessions focus on identifying errors of all magnitudes, from stuttering in standard briefs, being off a flight track, missing a proper verbal call or response, omitting a procedural checklist item, heading, airspeed, altitude, and more.

This accountability exercise fosters an environment of honesty and continuous improvement.

"These errors are human, and being truly honest with yourself about making an error in front of each other can be a freeing but



Soltan still has big plans for his career after completing three years of service with the Blue Angels.

very unnerving endeavor,” Soltan says. “But we are also encouraging of the things we do right. This makes for an honest and forthcoming environment which facilitates our precise, practiced, and risk-mitigated flying.”

He adds that the ability for pilots to be hyper-critical of their own performance is a learned process, but once they have adopted the Blue Angels way of doing these things, “it becomes a part of who you are and makes you better at noticing the smallest of details.”

Through this rigorous process, Soltan has learned valuable leadership traits, including the importance of accepting criticism and finding creative ways to ensure mistakes are not repeated.

“Acceptance of the smallest critique from my fellow teammates and finding a creative way to ensure it doesn’t happen again is a leadership trait I have tried to adopt,” he says. “From a scuff on my boot to poor attitude during the day, I have learned a great deal about myself and others on how to become a better human being and an even more supportive teammate.”

From advancing his aviation skills to accelerating his own personal growth, the last three years have shaped Soltan into the pilot and person he is today.

This fall, he finished his final air show performances with the Blue Angels. In November, Soltan flew over Pensacola for the last time in his blue suit that he will never put on again—a ritual the Blue Angels call a “Drop Salute.”

“We have one show that we call our End of Season Show, our Homecoming show, and it’s the last time the 2024 Blue Angels fly and the last time I will stand in front of a crowd and do anything show-related,” Soltan said last summer when he was in Seattle for the annual Seafair celebration.

Now, it’s time for Soltan to pass the baton to the next team, confident that he has done his best to uphold the legacy of the Blue Angels.

“Our names on the planes are taken off, and by the time you land, the 2025 team is taking over,” he says. “Then you can kind of take a breath and think ‘OK, I’ve done the best I could and now it’s on to the next thing to continue that legacy.’”

Flying Into the Future

Most Blue Angels pilots hold their role for two years, but two pilots fill three-year terms; Soltan’s role as the lead C-130J pilot and the narrator on the F18 side, who is the number five pilot.

While his term with the Blue Angels is now complete, his service with the Marines will continue. He already has his new assignment, and he will soon be heading back out to the Pacific to join a C-130J squadron in Hawaii.

“I am going to go back out to do the same stuff that we were doing in Japan a few years back, so it’s kind of coming full circle,” Soltan says. “I am pretty excited to be an instructor pilot back with the fleet and working with new co-pilots coming through and getting them all worked up so that they can replace me.”

Although one of the most rewarding chapters of his career has come to an end, Soltan’s future aspirations continue to soar.

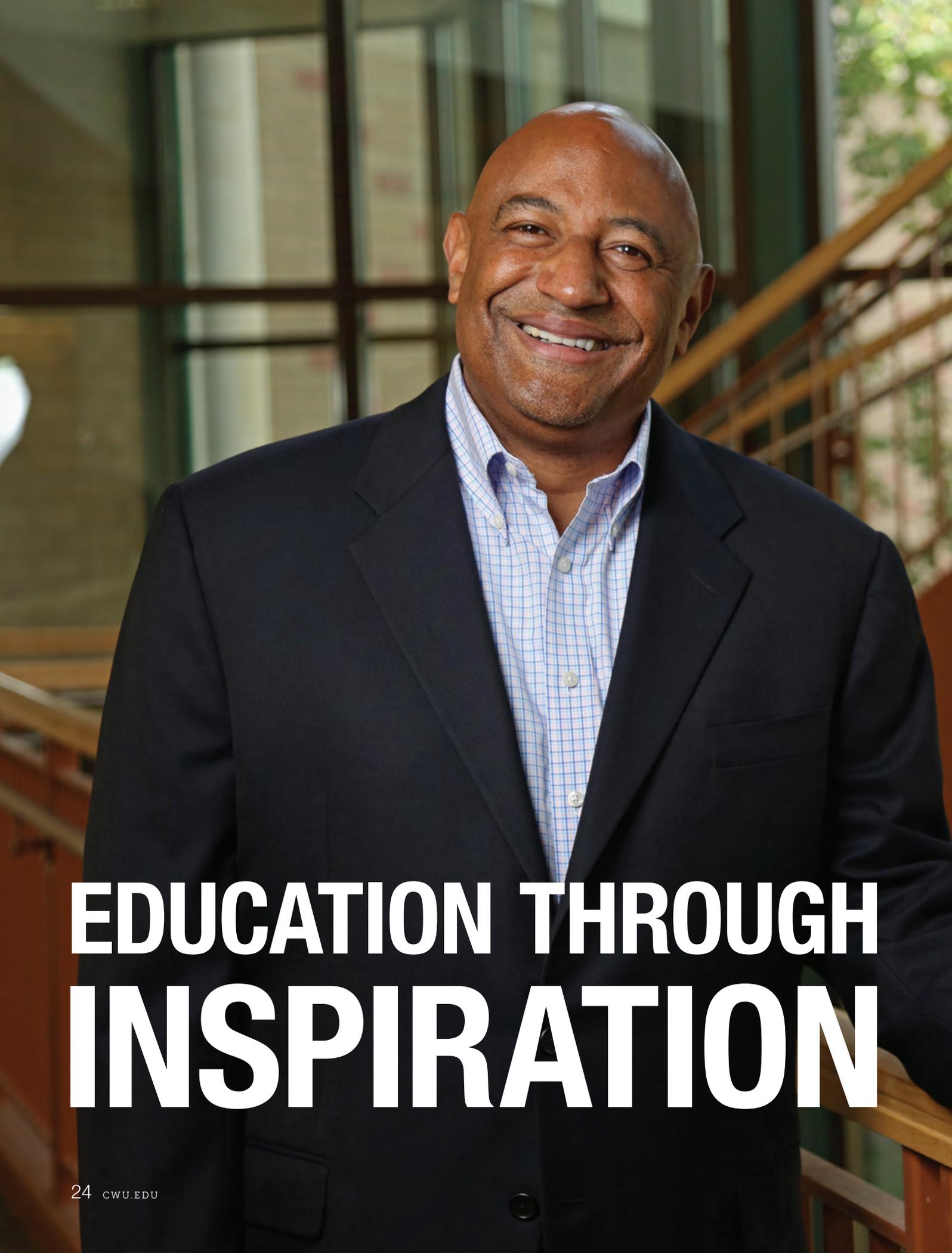
“I try not to limit myself and say I am only going to do one thing because there are so many opportunities out there,” he says. “I realize after doing this job that you really can broaden yourself by keeping an open mind with what’s coming at you.”

Whether it’s continuing in the Marine Corps, transitioning to the airline industry, or pursuing something entirely new, Soltan knows one thing for sure: his journey is far from over, and the sky is not the limit.

And through it all, his connection to his alma mater remains strong, as evidenced by his decision to donate his Blue Angels gear to the CWU Aviation department at the end of the 2024 season.

Soltan wants to help inspire the next generation of aviators and push students to reach for the stars when they are planning their futures.

“It would be great if a future CWU graduate achieves a commission and becomes a naval aviator and Blue Angel one day again,” Soltan says. “Maybe they could go beyond that and aspire to become an astronaut and go back to the moon or even beyond that to piloting/commanding a shuttle to space.” ■



EDUCATION THROUGH INSPIRATION



Recently retired business Professor Andy Parks reflects on what it means to live your purpose

By Savannah Tranchell

When Andy Parks was diagnosed with early-stage prostate cancer in 2007, he knew it was time for a change.

He wanted his life to go beyond the reach of the corporate business world. He wanted to leave a legacy.

Now, looking back on his career as the Milton Kuolt Professor of Business at CWU, one thing is certain: his legacy is secure. Not just at Central, but across the state.

One of the hallmarks of Parks' legacy is his ability to build relationships. He's a connector—one of those individuals uniquely gifted at bringing others together to achieve a common goal.

He does that through his passion for teaching, continuous learning, and emotional intelligence.

“Teaching was always in my bones, even in my corporate life,” Parks said. “One of my biggest joys was teaching my team, my customers, and clients.”

Parks joined Central in 2017 after nearly two decades in sales, management, and marketing at the Coca-Cola Company. After his cancer diagnosis, Parks began reflecting on his life and what he wanted to leave behind. He took early retirement from Coke and joined the faculty at Central, teaching business classes on the west side of the state.

While he's just as comfortable in the classroom as he is in the board room, Parks' true passion lies in working with non-traditional students and business professionals.

“Those students bring a level of experience and a level of humility into the classroom. They've faced a lot more challenges in their lives,” he said. “Then they are immediately able to apply course material to their workplace and see its impact.”

Parks first was introduced to emotional intelligence concepts while working with a life coach following his diagnosis. Emotional intelligence—EQ, for short—refers to a person's ability to be aware of, manage, and express their emotions and the emotions of others.

“They introduced me to mindfulness, self-awareness, and emotional regulation. It was very integral in my healing journey,” he said, noting that EQ became essential to his academic journey as well.



Photograph courtesy of WERE.

Retired CWU Business Professor Andy Parks, far left, helped build the Leadership and Professional Development program for Washington Employers for Racial Equity (WERE).

After arriving at Central, Parks was working with recent graduate Elizabeth Fifield ('18) on an eight-week EQ training course when they realized how beneficial the skills were to everyone in the business world. They co-developed and launched their first EQ course in May 2020.

Following the shooting of George Floyd that summer, Parks was asked to serve on a College of Business task force to develop racial equity training. That became an EQ-based anti-racism course.

"You do a lot of introspective deep thinking and soul searching around your biases to help you understand how and where you may be triggered, and use that insight to develop empathy and compassion for those different than you," he said.

Since then, Parks has taught EQ courses for professionals, executives, and Central's own staff and faculty. The College of Business is also beginning to offer an EQ professional development workshop with its faculty and pulling it into the graduate program.

"Andy laid a foundation of emotional intelligence for the college and the university, and now that's something we're able to build on," said Faiza Khoja, dean of the College of Business.

Relationship Building

One of Parks' more pivotal relationships was with the Washington Employers for Racial Equity (WERE), a coalition of Washington-based organizations committed to developing a talent pipeline for people of color.

During his four years working with WERE, Parks served as co-chair of the Black and Indigenous Employee subcommittee and the Black Talent Development Task Force, as well as facilitator and lecturer for its Leadership and Professional Development program.

Shirline Wilson, executive director for WERE, met Parks while conducting a listening tour when she started her position.

"I loved his vision, his ideas and his steadfast commitment to equity," said Wilson, who also served as a mentor in the

Leadership and Professional Development program. She described the experience as "transformational."

Like Parks, Wilson is passionate about emotional intelligence and the critical role it plays in creating more diverse workplaces.

"As a manager and coach, I would often use emotional intelligence skills to help people prepare for broadening responsibilities or working in cross-racial contexts," Wilson said.

But, through her work with Parks, Wilson learned more about the self-compassion aspects of EQ and the impact of communication styles on relationships.

"The workforce is diversifying, and these skills are incredibly important because we've got to get better when working across different perspectives," she said. "Since we're going to be working in a diverse context anyway, why not have all the tools and all the skills available? We have a widening gap between who has resources and who doesn't have resources. To solve the tough societal issues, we have to be able to see and work with difference."

Even with Parks' retirement, WERE is excited to continue its partnership with CWU and the Leadership and Professional Development program, which brings together mentors and mentees from across the state. Wilson hopes to see 50 participants when the third cohort launches in February—an increase from 24 in its first year.

Eyes On the Future

While his work with WERE focuses more on adult learners, Parks is equally passionate about helping traditional students find their place in the corporate world. In the past two years, Parks was instrumental in securing a \$120,000 grant from the KPMG U.S. Foundation's Reaching New Height Programs to build a partnership focused on helping students of color become more successful in business.

Since then, Parks has helped build a program for KPMG that reaches across academic lines and includes students and faculty from other state universities. The program consists of three components:



Parks proudly served as the Faculty Marshal at the 2024 west side commencement ceremony in Kent.

1. An on-site experience at KPMG for job shadowing, mentoring, and mock interviews;
2. An online, module-based course focused on EQ and professional development to help students have successful internships; and
3. An intern and leadership summit, held at KPMG in May.

In addition, Central was able to use some of the funding to help sponsor a conference for students of color at Green River Community College in April.

Partnerships like the one with KPMG are win-wins for all involved. They help corporations find talented new employees while setting up students for success post-graduation—especially students of color.

“Students of color are going to come up against unique challenges because of their ethnicity,” Parks said. “I wanted to help prepare them for what I felt they would most likely face as they go into the corporate world. Not only did we teach leadership skills, but we wove in the context of bias and how to navigate that bias and the stress it creates in the workplace.”

Parks approached all of his work in a practical, humanistic way that was relatable to colleagues and students alike.

“For him, it was all about the students. He opened doors for them,” Khoja said. “Our KPMG partnership was very much about how to get students, especially first-generation students of color, exposed to role models. It’s about charting a path for students from where they are to where they should be going. Those relationships and initiatives that he built have taken Central to the next level and will continue to help us grow.”

Ben Krauss joined the College of Business as the new Milton Kuolt Professor of Business this spring, and he is already busy leaning into Parks’ work, continuing and growing the partnerships he created.

“I’ve told Ben that we want to grow it—not just with KPMG, but add on more partnerships,” Khoja said.

As part of that growth, the college created the Office of Inclusivity and Readiness, which will offer emotional and

Tradition of Excellence

During his seven years at CWU, Andy Parks received multiple honors, including the Faculty Excellence in Service, a President’s Diversity Award, and a Faculty Excellence in Professional Service and Teaching award. Other accomplishments include:

- In 2023, he received his most prestigious recognition: the Reginald Wilson Diversity Leadership Award from the American Council on Education (ACE).
- In June, Parks served as Faculty Marshal for Central’s west side commencement ceremony in Kent. “That was one of my all-time honors,” he noted.
- In July, he was recognized for his service to the university and awarded emeritus status by Central’s Board of Trustees.

cultural intelligence training for faculty, staff, community partners, employers, and students, while preparing students for professional careers.

The Next Phase

While Parks may be retired, he’s far from done. This fall, he took time off to travel with his wife of 35 years, Adele. Then it’s back to work.

He is already planning to rework his EQ curriculum to incorporate integrated attachment theory, which looks at the impact of workplace relationships based on early childhood experiences. Meanwhile, both Central and WERE are hoping to bring him back to continue to cement his impact on current and future business leaders.

“I feel very blessed. I’m very grateful. I’ve done what I was put on this earth to do, though that doesn’t mean I’m finished living by any means,” Parks said. “My ultimate legacy and purpose is to show how compassion and corporate America can coexist, and through my time at Central, I was able to live that out.” ■

A woman with curly hair, wearing a denim jacket, is sitting and holding a clipboard. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

Mental Health Now Top of Mind

CWU works with partners to bring back counseling master's program and community clinic

By Tara Roberts

When prospective students call the Central Washington University graduate admissions office, they ask about one program more than any other: mental health counseling.

Young people have witnessed the growing demand for mental health care, especially in underserved areas like Eastern Washington, said Heidi Perez, associate professor of psychology and chair of the CWU Department of Psychology.

“Students know that it’s a big need within the community, especially as they’re seeing things like the lasting effects of COVID-19 on individuals’ mental health, anxiety, and depression,” she said. “They just want to serve and support and help.”

CWU and local partners are striving to meet the needs of both students and the community by restarting two programs that prepare future professionals: the mental health counseling master’s degree program and the on-campus community counseling clinic.

Renewed Focus On Counseling

Central launched a counseling graduate program in the 1970s and it eventually became a mental health counseling program. However, it went on hiatus in 2023 due to a lack of faculty—an unexpected perfect storm of people retiring or moving on to other jobs, Perez said.

But local healthcare leaders knew it was important to bring the program back. In May 2024, Comprehensive Healthcare gifted nearly \$770,000 to the CWU Foundation to support the first two years of reopening.

The Comprehensive Healthcare Fund will cover hiring faculty members, administrative staff, and graduate assistants, as well as some operational costs.

“We’re confident in this partnership that develops a pipeline to significantly impact the workforce shortage we’ve seen over the years in community behavioral healthcare,” Comprehensive Healthcare CEO Jodi Daly said at the time the gift was announced.

The fund allows the CWU psychology department to hire more quickly than usual, Perez said. The department began the hiring process this summer, with plans to have faculty on board in the fall. Once the faculty is in place, the program can begin recruiting students. The goal is to welcome a new cohort of 12 students in 2025.

In the meantime, Professor of Psychology Sara Bender—the interim mental health counseling program coordinator—is revamping the curriculum to “make it the best possible program for students,” Perez said.

Bender said she’s felt supported by the university and community, and she is committed to getting the program off to a good start.

“I believe that we need competent, ethical, and compassionate mental health practitioners in our community, so this program is really important to me,” she said.

CWU psychology student Zaire Preston hopes to help fill a growing need for mental health professionals across the state.

The curriculum updates reflect emerging best practices within the counseling profession, including an increased attention towards “telemental health,” Bender explained.

She’s also working to align the curriculum with Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards, which correspond to most states’ licensure requirements for counselors. The program will prepare students to serve in a variety of behavioral health jobs.

A robust graduate program will not only draw new students to Central; it will also tap into the pipeline of undergraduate psychology students who are eager to continue their education.

“There’s a resurgence of passion for the work,” Bender said. “And there’s a need.”

Community Clinic Reopens

Another cornerstone of Central’s mental health education program is the Community Counseling and Psychological Assessment Center (CCPAC), commonly referred to as “the clinic.”

The CCPAC closed in late 2022 due to loss of staff and the mental health counseling program’s pause. Thanks to funding from Kittitas County, it recently reopened with a mission to serve Ellensburg youths from ages 12 to 17.

The Kittitas County Commission voted late last year to earmark \$333,392 generated through the county’s one-tenth of 1% Mental Health and Chemical Dependency Tax to support the CWU clinic for the next two years.

Unlike many programs, Central combines in-house and external clinical training for mental health counseling students, Bender said. The students start with practicums in the CCPAC, where they are closely supervised by faculty, and are then placed in local clinical settings.

“This format honors students’ professional development, allowing them immediate access to faculty guidance and peer support at the beginning of their clinical training while serving the community in-house prior to expanding their professional network while placed in the community,” she said. “That supportive process is really important.”

Students in Central’s school psychology graduate program also gain practical experience in the CCPAC as they work toward their three-year education specialist (Ed.S.) degree.

School psychologists are distinct but complementary with school counselors. They primarily focus on disability evaluation for students with behavioral, social, and emotional challenges, while determining which special education services those students need. Their work also includes a mental health component, and Perez noted that school psychologists often report feeling unprepared for that part of their role.

While the CCPAC was closed, school psychology students trained directly in local school districts. Now, they will supplement their school-based practicums with their work



Community Health of Central Washington CEO Jodi Daly shares a laugh with CWU President Jim Wohlpart on the Ellensburg campus last spring.

in the clinic, said psychology Professor Heath Marrs, the program coordinator for the school psychology program.

“When you have an on-campus training clinic, it just provides a different level of supervision, a different level of training, and kind of a different approach,” Marrs said. “It’s really going to be great in helping us further develop that mental health service provision role of the school psychologist.”

Perez added that the Ellensburg School District will refer patients to the clinic.

“Hopefully, we can serve some students that the school district isn’t able to serve or that maybe need more ongoing care,” she said. “I think it will provide a new layer of support for those students.”

Marrs said he’s seen a similar model work successfully in the CWU Reading Intervention Center, where school psychology students gain experience evaluating and tutoring elementary-aged students.

Treating local middle and high school students at the CCPAC “will be really great because it allows our students to gain that training, but at the same time, they’re delivering those services that we just don’t have enough of because the demand is so high as the needs have increased,” he said. “It’s a great opportunity to combine top-level training, while also providing that service to the community.”

Reigniting Hope

The first step in reopening the CCPAC was hiring a dedicated clinic director, which is a new role. Michele Gurtler started in July and comes to CWU with extensive experience in mental health services and serving Central Washington communities.

Gurtler, who worked in behavioral health services at the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic for the past 32 years, said she's seen more kids struggling to manage their anxiety in the past 10 years, especially during and after the pandemic.

Directing the CCPAC gives her the chance to continue serving children while giving future professionals the practical experience they need to effectively support the kids and communities who need them.

"The need for mental health therapists is huge. Lots of places are looking; they always have openings," Gurtler said. "I want to turn out some good-quality therapists and some good-quality school psychologists who are ready to go and work as soon as they graduate."

Kittitas County Commissioner Brett Wachsmith, who helped facilitate the funding resolution for the clinic, said he hopes the county's investment lays the groundwork for long-term success and expansion.

"It's exciting to see the possibility of teaching and educating students here, and hopefully having the ability to retain them and their talents here locally, as opposed to just educating them and then they move on to different parts of Washington state or elsewhere," Wachsmith said. "It's just an exciting time to see where this goes."

Since the Comprehensive Healthcare Fund and Kittitas County funding are both two-year commitments, Perez said the psychology department is looking for ways to sustainably support the mental health counseling graduate program and the CCPAC over the long term.

"We're building them in what we hope will be the best version possible," she said. "I'm hopeful that we can continue in that vein."

If the programs are able to continue, they have potential to exponentially help the people of Washington and beyond.

"Our programs serve so many of the local agencies who already have trouble filling their job openings. We just have such a huge need in the community that is already unmet," she said. "Even one new counselor makes a big difference." ■



Juan Serrano is now giving back to his hometown of Yakima as a school psychologist.

Central Grad Serves His Community

Many students who earn master's degrees in mental health counseling or school psychology at Central share a common goal: using their training to help their hometowns. That was the case for Juan Serrano ('24).

"Especially being Latino, Mexican, and bilingual, seeing the need for bilingual support in this community, I really wanted to give back to the community that I grew up in," he said.

Serrano graduated from A.C. Davis High School in Yakima and earned his associate's degree at Yakima Valley College before transferring to Central in 2019. He completed a bachelor's in psychology and then continued directly to the school psychology master's program, graduating in May.

This fall, he started a position as the lead psychologist for two elementary schools in the Yakima School District.

Any school psychologist can provide excellent service, he said, but having a background that resonates with the community helps the families he serves feel represented.

"For example, I work with a lot of Latino families, and a lot of families that migrate from Mexico. And for them, sometimes they feel a little bit more comfortable sharing with me and connecting with me," he said. "A lot of the time, I'm able to empathize with their own stories, so it makes that process and the trust within the system a lot more fluid."

Serrano said the graduate program at Central helped him become a versatile school psychologist because it offered classes where he could explore his passion for mental health and connecting with many different minority populations. He looks forward to working alongside LGBTQ+ and first-generation students, as well as those who share his Mexican American background.

"I'm really excited to see what kind of impact I make in the next few years," Serrano said. "Hopefully, I'll make Central proud." ■

Construction Management Program Coordinator Warren Plugge, left, works closely with CWU's industry partners to teach his students the skills they need to excel in the workforce.



Building Up the Skilled Worker Base

Construction Management program is developing talented professionals to meet growing industry needs

By Jodie Nicotra

Jon Hylback grew up around big equipment. His parents owned a nursery business, and he and his dad shared a love of operating tractors, backhoes, and other machines. His dad called it “diesel therapy.”

Halfway into his first year of college, where he’d planned to study pre-law, Hylback had a change of heart. He left school and went to work for several years, first at his parents’ nursery, then to the oil fields of Alaska’s Prudhoe Bay. He was working for a dirt contractor in Washington state when he suddenly realized he was tired of running a shovel.

“I walked up to the superintendent on site and said, ‘Hey, how can I do what you do?’” Hylback said.

The superintendent told him he’d need to go back to school, so Hylback pursued an associate’s degree at a nearby community college. Then, on the recommendation of a family friend in the construction business, he applied and was accepted to CWU’s Construction Management (CM) program.

Now a senior, Hylback has had two internships with the same company. The first had him working in a familiar position as an equipment operator; in the second, he experienced what it felt like to be a superintendent.

Hylback’s trajectory is familiar among CM students. Greg Lyman, chair of the engineering technologies, safety, and construction department, says CWU CM students have an “it factor” that makes them highly desirable in the industry.

“A lot of our students come from blue-collar backgrounds, and they’ve been roofers or have had some other kind of hard labor job,” Lyman said. “They work hard while they’re here, and then they get out with their degree, and they’re just killing it in industry because they’ve not only got the bachelor’s degree and all the knowledge; they also have an amazing work ethic.”

Now, thanks to a Career Launch grant from the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), the CM program is poised to become even more instrumental in training the skilled labor force for the state’s growing construction industry. Lyman and his colleagues also envision CM becoming a model for other university departments as they look to produce career-ready graduates.

Using Different Tools

Construction management involves planning, budgeting, quality control, and safety of managing any type of construction project. But it’s more than that, says Warren Plugge, the CM program coordinator at Central.

“The industry is really looking for new and upcoming ideas on how to fit in things like management practices—most importantly, the technology component that we deal with on an everyday basis,” he said. “Not just digital technologies, but materials, processes, and how we work with people.”

CM graduates typically start off as field engineers, project engineers, or safety engineers. As they gain experience, they’ll move up through the ranks, becoming a project manager and then, perhaps, joining company leadership.

Central’s CM program is unique because it offers two different tracks: a general option for commercial construction, and a heavy/civil track focused on building roads, bridges, and other types of infrastructure.

“Even though we have two separate focus areas, you’re still dealing with the basic materials we commonly find in construction, namely earthworks, concrete, wood, and steel. You’re just using them a little differently,” Plugge said.

CM is one of the top five “recruiting majors” across the institution, meaning that it draws students to CWU. Sathy Rajendran, dean of the College of Education and Professional Studies (CEPS), says that depending on their goals and experiences once they start taking classes, students may then transition to their “found” major. The CM program has about 150 students currently enrolled.

Smaller class sizes and a low faculty-student ratio contribute to better outcomes for students. Most CM courses also have accompanying labs where students apply what they learn about everything from estimation, scheduling, and digital technologies to materials like soils and concrete.

“That hands-on experience CM students get really creates a well-rounded graduate that can hit the ground running in industry,” Lyman said. “They’re learning estimating with software they would use in industry, and they’re modeling 3D systems with the same software they’ll see later.”

Another distinguishing factor for the program is its requirement that students find a paid internship. In addition to an hourly wage, companies typically provide their interns with living and vehicle expenses.

“A paid internship is a big deal,” Plugge said. “Companies aren’t just hiring students to be free labor. They’re hiring interns to be functioning members within that company structure, so students become members of the overall process. You’re going to be a key member of the team.”

In the summer class that accompanies internships, students produce weekly reports on their activities in the field or office. By the end, they not only have résumé-worthy experience, but also a portfolio. They also do a presentation on their experience for

their younger peers, which, in turn, stokes excitement for what lies ahead.

For Plugge, the most gratifying aspect about seeing his students complete internships is their newfound grasp of what they’ve learned in the program.

“They come back using the terminology and language of what we’ve been talking about in construction management classes. They’re more knowledgeable about what happens, and they come in and contribute that to the class,” he said. “I think that, for me, is the most exciting thing about what the internship does—it gives students a much more centered focus on what their intent is, as far as their education and this degree.”

In her first internship, recent grad Marisa Robson (‘24) worked for a Portland-based construction company as a project engineer. Among other duties, she served as a liaison between the architects and builders, attended meetings, and estimated material needs for building sites.

“I didn’t know what to expect going into it, but I fell in love with it,” she said. “I was learning something new every day, and I met so many people from all different backgrounds, different areas in the country, and different countries. It was really amazing.”

Robson completed four more internships with the same company. After she graduated, the company hired her as a project engineer.

The construction industry has been traditionally male-dominated, but that may be changing. In 2023, while women still represented only 10.9% of the workforce, that number represented a more than 50% increase from the previous year.

CWU is seeking to diversify the construction management workforce in Washington through its new Allied Construction Careers program.





On-campus capital projects like the North Academic Complex offer students an up-close look at how large buildings take shape.

“People think a degree in construction management means you go out there and swing hammers and build, but there’s so much more to it now, especially with technology,” Robson said.

Nurturing New Talent

The demand for skilled labor is high as the construction sector has shown continuous growth over the past two decades. By 2027, industry earnings are expected to top \$2.2 trillion. Perhaps because of this steady growth, the industry has struggled with a shortage of skilled labor.

In response, the construction industry has taken on a greater role in supporting its up-and-coming workers, from offering scholarships and other financial support to providing leads for jobs and internships.

“It’s so easy to get financial assistance, and there are so many construction companies that want to help support students,” Robson said.

The 16-member Industry Advisory Council (IAC) plays an active role in the CM program, providing insights on industry trends and job needs and helping with program advocacy and accreditation.

“We’re here to guide the program to continue to grow and just produce the best students and also share what the industry needs from the students,” said David Kennedy, chair of the IAC.

IAC members also coach student teams preparing for the annual Associated Schools of Construction competition, held in Reno, Nevada. The competition is often the highlight of a CM student’s junior or senior year.

“We do prep sessions, working with students through real-world problems, hearing their presentations and providing mentorship to help them craft their message and learn how to show up in those settings where they’re pitching a true project proposal,” said Chris Lang (’09), vice chair of the IAC.

The industry-university connection delivers a mutual benefit to both students and companies. As a result, the CM program boasts a nearly 100% job placement rate.

Working Across Disciplines

Earlier this year, CEPS, which houses the CM program, received a \$160,000 Career Launch grant from WSAC, as part of the Career Connect Washington initiative. By 2030, the initiative aims to have 60% of young adults participating in a program that supplements classroom experience with real work experience, such as paid internships and apprenticeships.

The grant will help the college develop two certificates: one in internship readiness and one in career readiness. Each certificate aims to prepare students for success in the workplace, covering topics like emotionally intelligent leadership, project management, and other high-level skills.

For a program to be eligible for the grant, it needed to include a requirement that every student complete a paid internship or apprenticeship. CM was one of the few programs at Central that fit the bill.

That’s where Rajendran got the idea to use CM as an anchor degree for a larger Allied Construction Careers program.

“I wanted to go with the construction industry as a whole, not only supporting the construction management majors, but the multiple majors within the university that send students to the construction industry,” he said. “We said ‘one industry, one application, multiple degrees, multiple pathways, multiple student population targets.’”

In Rajendran’s vision, Allied Construction degrees will also include programs like safety management, risk insurance, business administration, engineering technology, and IT management.

“We call it a ‘college of choice,’” he said. “We want to be the top program in our discipline in whatever we do, whether it’s an electrical program, construction, IT, or public health. That is our ultimate goal. We want to have construction industries come to Central and have it be like a supermarket, where we have everything you need in one stop.” ■

Angela Gonzalez has overcome tremendous adversity on her way to becoming a high school teacher.





No Challenge Too Great

By David Leder

First-generation immigrant begins teaching career after moving to U.S. just eight years ago

If you had asked Angela Gonzalez eight years ago where her life was headed, she probably wouldn't have been able to say.

The 2024 CWU graduate had just moved to the United States after spending the first 16 years of her life in Colima, Mexico. Even though she didn't speak a word of English, she and her mother decided to go through the legal immigration process and join her stepfather in Grandview, Washington.

But when immigration officials in Ciudad Juarez didn't allow her mother to cross the border, Gonzalez was on her own, sent to live with a stepfather she barely knew.

"It all happened really fast," she said. "I was looking forward to living in the United States with my mom and her husband, but it didn't work out that way. She had crossed the border illegally with her family 15 years before, and she chose to tell the truth, which meant she had to stay behind."

As difficult as it was to be separated from her mother when she was still a child, Gonzalez decided to keep forging ahead.

"I didn't want to go ahead without her, but I felt like I had to go," she said. "I needed to go to school and get an education so I could make a better life for myself."

Gonzalez, now 24, tried to make the best of her new situation, but without knowing the language or the culture, she often felt overwhelmed. She had only met her stepfather, Francisco Madrigal, a couple of times, and all of a sudden, she was living under his roof and under his rules, with no clear path forward.

"I never had a father figure before because my biological father left when I was very young," she said. "It was really hard at first, and I didn't know how I was going to get through it."

Fortunately for Gonzalez, the population of Grandview is predominantly Latinx, which helped ease the language barrier. She built a solid support network at the high school and learned how to fit in socially, but she still had to figure out a lot of things on her own.

"At the time, I was really excited to come here, but it was hard being without my mom," she said. "There were times when I felt very alone, but things eventually got better."

Three years after getting stopped at the U.S.-Mexico border, Gonzalez's mom, Zoila Romero, was permitted to join her family in Grandview.

Being reunited with her mother gave Gonzalez the peace of mind she needed to excel at Yakima Valley College (YVC), where she laid the groundwork to eventually become a teacher.

"I have always enjoyed going to school, and I always knew that I wanted to go to college," she said. "I was able to save money by going to community college for the first three years, and then I transferred to CWU after completing my AA in the spring of 2021. That was one of the best choices I have ever made."

Home Away from Home

Gonzalez moved to Ellensburg in the winter of 2022 and quickly immersed herself in campus life and the local community. She double majored in family and consumer sciences (FCS) and Spanish, and went on to earn teaching certifications in both subjects last spring.

During her two-plus years in Ellensburg, she worked at Safe-way and at the Early Childhood Learning Center on campus.

As if two majors and two jobs weren't enough, Gonzalez also served as a translator for the new CWU website—which launched in September 2023—and helped teach Spanish to CWU faculty and staff earlier this year as part of a Human Resources Department initiative called Wildcat Spanish.

"I just loved living in Ellensburg and being part of the CWU community," she said. "It's so close-knit, and you really get to know your professors and classmates. I'm very thankful for all of the people I met there. I feel very lucky."

One mentor who stood out during Gonzalez's time at Central was World Languages Professor Andrea Herrera-Dulcet. In fact, Gonzalez doesn't know where she would be without her.

"Andrea is an amazing professor, but she was also a huge supporter for me personally," she said. "She was always there for me, and she helped me find the resources I needed inside and outside of the classroom."

Herrera-Dulcet said she felt a special connection with Gonzalez, in part because of everything she had been through before arriving at CWU.

She was inspired by how hard Gonzalez worked to improve her standing in life, and she felt like lending her student a helping hand was the least she could do.

"It's very admirable what Angela has been able to do, but it has not been easy for her," Herrera-Dulcet said. "Everything she has achieved in life, she has earned. When she sets her mind to something, she does it, and that's what really stood out to me."

Herrera-Dulcet made clear that Gonzalez is more of an anomaly than a typical success story. Unlike many young migrants, she managed to navigate an unforgiving immigration



Photograph courtesy of Angela Gonzalez.

Gonzalez now lives in Yakima with her dog, Hubert, after graduating from CWU last spring with teaching degrees in Spanish and family and consumer sciences.

system and clear all of the required hurdles to create her own destiny.

“It’s very easy to get lost through the cracks,” Herrera-Dulcet said. “The system is designed to not help people who are vulnerable, and most of them do end up falling through. Angela is extremely strong, but it would be nice if people like her didn’t have to fight so hard.”

As resilient as Gonzalez proved herself to be, she still experienced moments of uncertainty where she felt like giving up. Herrera-Dulcet said she would come to her crying and feeling lost, only to pick herself back up again.

“I believe Angela’s ability to keep climbing the mountain, no matter what’s standing in her way, is her true strength,” Herrera-Dulcet said, likening Gonzalez to a movie hero. “I don’t want anyone to think that what she has accomplished is achievable for everyone. Angela is a force to be reckoned with.”

Next Chapter

Now that Gonzalez has finished her dual degrees at CWU, her teaching career is beginning to take shape.

Shortly after completing her teaching practicum at Housel Middle School in Prosser last spring, she was hired as a Spanish teacher at East Valley High School near Yakima.

There have been some ups and downs this fall—most notably, being so close in age to her students—but she has found a way to persevere, just as she has done during every other chapter in her life.

“Some days are difficult, I’m not going to lie,” Gonzalez said. “I’m a brand-new teacher, and there are going to be challenges that come with that. But I feel very fortunate to have gained so much knowledge from my mentors and professors at CWU. They helped give me the confidence I need to keep improving as an educator.”

One element of Gonzalez’s character that has always remained true is her belief in herself. She built a strong teaching foundation during her five years at CWU and YVC, and she feels strongly that she has the power to impact her students’ lives in a positive way.

“I have already met some students who remind me of myself when I was in high school,” she said. “They don’t speak English and they don’t feel like they can talk to anyone. But I tell them, ‘I know how you feel. You are not alone, and I am here to support you.’ Sometimes, that’s all they need to hear.”

Gonzalez has worked with some of her East Valley colleagues to help them relate better to monolingual students who may feel marginalized in their new surroundings. She also encourages her students to find ways to include their new classmates who may feel excluded or vulnerable.

“All they want is for someone to show them kindness,” she said. “Even if it’s just a smile—those small gestures mean so much to students who are finding their way in a new school. I know from experience how hard it can be to fit in, and I want to show others that they really can make a difference.”

Even though she still has a long way to go in her teaching career, Gonzalez already feels like she has reached the top of the mountain. She has overcome so much since moving to the U.S. eight years ago that it’s hard not to feel a sense of accomplishment.

But she isn’t done yet. She’s going to continue fighting so people like her can discover their true potential—and, most importantly, find happiness.

“I just want to bring some awareness that people like me do belong,” Gonzalez said. “Our journeys in life may be different than yours, but we’re just trying to make the most of the opportunities we have been given. We just need people to help show us the way.” ■

Re-envisioned Multicultural Center Begins to Take Shape

By David Leder



Construction of the CWU Multicultural Center in Black Hall will begin this winter, thanks to a \$6 million appropriation from the Washington State Legislature. These renderings from Opsis Architecture show what the new space will look like when it opens in early 2026.



Central Washington University students will soon have a Multicultural Center (MCC) on the Ellensburg campus, thanks to help from the Washington State Legislature, university administrators, and the Associated Students of Central Washington University (ASCWU).

The design portion of the project—a renovation of the first floor of Black Hall—got underway last summer after ASCWU leaders and the Executive Leadership Team agreed on a path forward.

The Black Hall renovation was made possible by a \$6 million appropriation from state lawmakers in 2023, but additional funds were needed to build a stand-alone facility. That led ASCWU and university leaders to work on a potential compromise last spring.

“While ASCWU and the university’s government relations team advocated effectively to secure \$6 million from the state to enhance our infrastructure for multicultural programming, the university is not in a position to borrow additional funds for a stand-alone building in the foreseeable future,” Student Engagement and Success Vice President Margaret Ortega said.

She added that the renovation of the Diversity and Equity Center (DEC) offers an immediate-term solution to the enduring need CWU students have for enhanced space to host and provide multicultural programs, services, resources, and activities. In the end, both sides decided to move forward with the Black Hall renovation instead of risking forfeiture of the state funds.

“We are very pleased that we were able to agree on a solution that meets the needs of both students and the institution,” Ortega said.

CWU’s design partner Opsis Architecture has been leading the design portion of the project, and the company held a series of meetings with CWU staff and faculty last spring. Among the goals for the renovated Black Hall space will be to enhance space for multicultural programs and improve visibility and functionality for the College of Education and Professional Studies.

The construction portion of the project will begin this winter, with a targeted opening date of January 2026.

ASCWU leaders have been advocating for years to build a MCC on campus, and the renovated first floor of Black Hall will give CWU students from all racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds a central location to celebrate their individuality.

The vision for an enhanced DEC was guided by engagement with the ASCWU Board of Directors and Equity and Services Council student leaders. ASCWU President Malik Cantu said he and his colleagues have appreciated being involved in the planning of the MCC since the beginning.

“CWU students started the conversation through activism for marginalized voices, trying to ensure that those voices had a space they could call their own to help them in their educational journey,” he said, adding that students have been trying for years to convince the CWU administration and Board of Trustees to commit to building a MCC.

“We are excited to finally see a step like this moving forward,” Cantu added. “While students will continue to advocate for more, we are grateful to see the work of many student leaders of past and present begin to come to fruition. We hope that the renovation of Black Hall will mark a new point of advancement, collaboration, and service for students.”

By adding approximately 10,000 to 13,000 square feet of space to the existing DEC, Central will have one of the largest multicultural gathering spaces among the state’s six public higher education institutions.

The enlarged DEC will be nearly twice the size of the existing Black Hall location, and it will provide spaces specifically designed for multicultural programs, student organizations, and events. Plans also include a reflection room, a kitchen to prepare food for student organization events, comfortable gathering places, and space for intersecting academic programs. Each of the amenities has been designed to support building community and creating a sense of belonging.

Ortega noted that while some students have expressed disappointment that the MCC will not ultimately be a stand-alone facility, she is glad both sides were able to agree on a solution that meets a longstanding need for the CWU community.

“The MCC will be an engaging, visible, and dynamic place that will offer exciting opportunities for students to build friendships, celebrate the many cultures that comprise our university community, and nurture meaningful opportunities to learn and engage with one another,” she said. ■



Erin Murray has never been one to back down from a challenge, establishing herself as one of the strongest women in the world.

Alumna Erin Murray has overcome mental health challenges to win two World's Strongest Woman titles

Growing up, Erin Murray didn't view herself as an athlete; she leaned into her academic and musical abilities instead.

When it came time to choose a direction for her future, Murray decided she wanted to attend college and double major in mathematics and French horn performance. Her dream was to teach calculus, a testament to her intellectual inclinations.

However, life had other plans. During her second year of college, Murray faced severe mental health challenges that led her to seek treatment for an eating disorder. The program she enrolled in introduced her to a new form of therapy: empowerment through movement.

"We did various forms of martial arts every day as a way to focus on and appreciate our bodies for what they could do instead of what they looked like," Murray said. "I was quickly drawn into the challenge of training and pushing myself physically. I continued to train martial arts when I returned home from this camp, and my fitness journey spiraled from there."

Murray began doing CrossFit, a high-intensity workout program that involves a variety of functional movements. Her love for the strength aspects of CrossFit steered her towards power-lifting, which

Tapping Her Inner Strength

By Robin Burck

led her to return to school at Central Washington University to pursue a degree in exercise science.

“While at CWU, I coincidentally became friends with Zack McCarley and Pat Castelli, who—unbeknownst to me at the time—were two of the best weight class strongman athletes in the world,” said Murray, who grew up in Wenatchee. “In 2015, they were invited to compete overseas and were putting on a fundraiser to raise money for the trip. I jumped in to support my friends, and the rest is history.”

Finding Her True Talent

The influence of her friends introduced Murray to Strongman competitions. The amateur circuit in Strongman is a rigorous pathway, with local shows leading to national competitions and, ultimately, to prestigious events like the Arnold Amateur World Championship.

Murray followed this path with determination, eventually winning the Strongman Corporation Nationals in 2019, earning herself a middleweight pro card.

Since then, she has built an impressive résumé, including a win at the 2021 World’s Strongest Woman competition in the under-73 kg (u73kg) class, along with several significant victories in the past year.

One of the standout moments in Murray’s career thus far was her invitation to compete at the 2023 World’s Strongest Nation competition in the United Kingdom.

“It was incredibly validating to be one of the four women selected to represent America,” she said. “This show was put on by Giants Live, a very well-known organization in Strongman for putting on incredibly competitive and high production level shows, but they had historically only put on contests for men. As the sport grows, we’re finally seeing more and more opportunities for women. This was the first opportunity any woman outside the UK had to participate in a Giants Live show.”

While it was one of the highlights of her career, the competition came at a challenging time for Murray. She was in the midst of training for her most important competition of the year—the World’s Strongest Woman contest—just two weeks after Giants Live.

“I immediately had to fly back and squeeze in one more week of training before competing again for a title I’d been training two years for,” she said. “On top of the physical demand of an international competition right in the middle of my final training block for Worlds, the mental challenge of bouncing back between shows was harder than I’d expected.”

Despite the challenges she faced, Murray emerged victorious.

“A win for team USA in Liverpool for the Giants show straight into a World’s Strongest Woman u82kg title—a goal I’d been working toward for years—solidified me as the first, and so far only, athlete in the sport to win World’s Strongest titles in multiple weight classes,” she said.



Murray (top row, third from right) at the World’s Strongest Nation competition in 2023.

Creating a Persona

Beyond those two career-defining victories, Murray also took first place in several other 2023 competitions, including America’s Strongest Woman competition (u82kg) and the Amateur Arnold World Championship open division, where she earned her heavyweight pro card.

Despite her lifelong struggles with mental health, Murray has developed strategies to manage the psychological demands of competition. From vlogging her contest preparations to varying her training environments, she continually works on maintaining a positive mindset and emphasizes the importance of self-care.

A unique aspect of Murray’s competition preparation is her use of “war paint,” a creative makeup ritual that helps her manage anxiety and transform into a confident competitor.

“The war paint is something I initially started doing to combat the anxiety of competition,” she said. “I’ve always gotten horrendous stage fright and performance anxiety. It was my coach’s idea to create an ‘alter ego’ to take the contest floor, and it not only provided me a calming way to start the day, but it allowed me to transform myself into someone else.”

When Murray isn’t training, she serves as a strength coach for other athletes. Since graduating from CWU in 2017, she has found joy in working with clients at all levels, particularly beginners, to help them discover their potential and build healthier, happier lives.

Murray’s accomplishments not only highlight her exceptional strength but also her determination to challenge the norms and pave the way for other athletes. Her achievements and dedication to empowering others serve as an inspiration to all who face challenges and strive to find their own strength.

“My dream future is one where I can make enough of a living as an athlete and part-time coach to travel to meet and train with people all over the world,” she said. “I want to connect with people and share my story, and be able to represent Strongwoman and strength sports in a way that encourages other people to believe in their own crazy dreams.” ■

Roots Run Deep for CWU Legacy Family

By Robin Burck

A legacy has been flourishing for generations at Central Washington University, where 20 members of one family have walked the halls, celebrated victories, and forged lifelong bonds.

The family’s journey began with Linda Elsner, who attended CWU for one year from 1961-1962. The tradition was solidified in 1986, when Sharryn Walker became the first in the family to graduate. The family’s legacy has since spanned generations, with each member leaving their unique mark on the university.

Sharryn, now a respected professor of literacy at Central, sums up how deep her family’s CWU roots are when she introduces herself to at the beginning of each quarter.

“I am the second oldest of eight, and five of us are Central grads who married Central grads,” she shares. “My husband is the second of six. Three of his siblings attended CWU and one married a CWU grad. Between my husband (Bruce) and I, there are 20 within my family.”

Over the years, the family has collectively supported and contributed to the university in many ways, with their ties to CWU Athletics being particularly strong.

Bruce Walker played football at Central and later joined the coaching staff. His dedication to the sport and the university was recognized with his induction into the CWU Athletic Hall of Fame and through his active role with the Wildcat Athletics Association Board.

“Bruce hosts an alumni football player get-together for his teammates every year in July. He also organizes a former teammate tailgate spot for homecoming weekend,” Sharryn adds, underscoring her husband’s commitment to maintaining these cherished connections.

Mark Bannish, Bruce’s brother-in-law, played football for four years and earned a place in the Athletic Hall of Fame as well. His wife, Shelley Bannish, contributed to campus life as a cheerleader and a member of student government.



Kennedy Elsner, right, and her cousin Alli Roe graduated together in 2024 and joined a long line of Wildcat alumni in their family.

Kirk Elsner, brother-in-law to Bruce and Mark, was recruited to play football and achieved All-American status. His daughter, Kennedy, graduated from Central last spring, along with her cousin, Alli Roe. Kennedy Elsner is now continuing the Central legacy and working for the alumni association, while Alli has also worked several events for the association.

“Working for the alumni association and being able to meet the Wildcat community has been one of my favorite memories made at Central,” Kennedy said.

Despite the many different experiences all 20 family members have had at CWU over the years, one thing remains the same: memories made at Rossow’s and Campus U Totem, The Palace, and, most beloved of all, The Tav. These places are more than just hangouts for them; they are the backdrop to countless memories that have transcended generations.

While the family has created countless lasting memories of their own, they also enjoy giving back to the university to ensure future generations of Wildcats can thrive and make memories of their own.

For this family, CWU is not just an alma mater; it is a cornerstone of their history and a vivid reminder of the profound impact a single institution can have on multiple generations. ■



Governor Appoints CWU Student Trustee

Sophomore music education major Eliasib Alvarado was appointed by Washington Governor Jay Inslee as the student member of the CWU Board of Trustees for 2024-25. Alvarado has been involved in student leadership since high school and was inspired to pursue a leadership role at CWU after seeing the opportunities that were available to create more inclusive practices that better reflected the student body.



Geography Professor Joins CWU Fulbright Scholar Ranks

CWU celebrated its latest Fulbright Scholar last spring when longtime geography Professor Dr. Bob Hickey was awarded the honor. He traveled to Hungary as a Fulbright Specialist this summer, working alongside colleagues to develop a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) curriculum. Hickey joined fellow Fulbrighters Elvin Delgado (2022-23) and John Bowen (2020-21) from the Department of Geography.



Alumna Lachandra Baker operates a business in Ohio called LBB Edutainment.

Business Owner Began DEI Journey at Central

By David Leder

If there was something happening on campus in the early 1990s, Lachandra Baker was usually right in the middle of it.

The leisure services, travel, and tourism graduate served as a residence hall advisor, worked for Dining Services, and participated in several CWU theater productions. She was actively involved in multiple student relations initiatives during her four years on campus, and she was the only student named to the hiring committee for former President Ivory Nelson.

When Baker ('95) chose to attend CWU, the one thing she knew for sure was that she wanted her college years to count.

"When I visited the campus for the first time, I felt like a person, not a number," she said. "I knew right away that 'this is where I want to be; this is where I can make my mark.'"

Three decades later, she realizes how much her experience in Ellensburg helped shape who she is today. Mentors like Keith Champagne, John Drinkwater, Bobby Cummings, Scott Drummond, and Pat McGuire helped her develop the confidence she needed to be successful.

"The relationships I made at Central set me up for the rest of my life," said Baker, a native of Sylvania, Georgia, who now lives in Columbus, Ohio. "The staff and faculty there always gave me a sense of belonging, and they all played a huge role in my growth and development."

Baker spent the first few years after college in the Washington and Georgia hotel industries before transitioning over to human resources in the late 1990s. She moved to Columbus in 2003 to work for Cardinal Health, and that's where her career began to evolve into what it is today.

"I had a business partner at Cardinal Health who helped me understand DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) in a corporate setting, and everything began to click for me," Baker said. "I went to work for the Mount Carmel Health System for a few years, and then a medical startup company, before moving to a company that focused on affordable housing for seniors. Those positions really helped me hone my skills around employee engagement and the importance of DEI in the workplace."

Baker went on to earn two DEI certifications from Cornell University and started her own consulting business, LBB Edutainment—a combined educational and entertainment enterprise that she launched as a side venture in 2018.

She officially left the corporate world in 2022 to focus on her business full time, and it turned out to be the best decision she has ever made.

"My job is both fun and rewarding because I feel like I am really making a difference," Baker said. "I am able to help people think and act differently, and they're seeing the results in their culture and bottom line."

Baker does speaking engagements, hosts online and in-person coaching sessions, and helps clients draw up effective DEI initiatives designed to move their businesses forward.

"I create a safe space for people to learn, share, and grow in that work," she said. "I create trust with them and I show a lot of empathy. But I also like to have fun and share my own life experiences. My personality and my expertise have combined to create a one-of-a-kind small business that I'm really proud of." ■



CWU's Climate Action Plan Receives Innovation Award

CWU received the annual Excellence and Innovation Sustainability and Sustainable Development Award from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities this spring. Over the past two years, Sustainability Officer Jeff Bousson and his team designed and implemented a comprehensive Climate Action Plan. The long-term initiative resulted in an actionable plan that will make CWU a carbon-neutral campus by 2050.

CWU Receives Nearly \$1 Million for Solar Decarbonization Projects

CWU received a pair of grants totaling nearly \$1 million from the Washington State Department of Commerce last summer as part of the Community Decarbonization 2024 Grant Program. The program will help pay for two initiatives aimed at further leveraging solar power in the campus' journey to full decarbonization. The university's Climate Action Plan features a number of bold initiatives—including a goal of making CWU a zero-carbon campus—that are designed to limit the university's environmental impact, while also benefiting the Ellensburg community.

Music Education Graduate Finds His Calling in Diplomacy

By David Leder



CWU alumnus Ben Harbaugh currently works as a Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. Department of State.



CWU Police Officer, Friend Set New Mountain Climbing Mark

A CWU police officer achieved new heights this summer when he and his climbing buddy summited the state's five tallest peaks in record time. From July 9-12, Lieutenant Marc McPherson and longtime friend Nick Burson climbed Mount Rainier, Mount Adams, Mount St. Helens, Mount Baker, and Glacier Peak in rapid succession. They set a new record for scaling the five peaks in one trip: 3 days, 23 hours and 44 minutes.

CWU Hopes to Offer Guaranteed Financial Aid with State Funding

CWU was chosen by the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) to help develop a framework for providing low-income students with guaranteed financial aid to help them pursue a college degree. With



help from a \$150,000 grant from the Lumina Foundation, CWU will leverage long-standing partnerships with K-12

schools across the region to envision and eventually implement procedures allowing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)-eligible students to receive financial aid without any additional paperwork or application.

Ben Harbaugh has traveled to nearly 60 countries and has lived on three continents. He has worked for the Space Force, served at the U.S. Embassy in Zambia, and he recently started a new position as a Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. Department of State.

The 2017 CWU music education graduate has already built up an impressive list of accomplishments in his brief career, but he always finds a way to bring it back to his hometown.

“Ellensburg is my home, and I love it here,” said Harbaugh, who spent the summer in town with his wife and two young children. “Growing up here and going to CWU prepared me well for everything I’m doing now. I’m very cognizant of place, and I believe it’s important to share my story with the CWU community. My experience in Ellensburg has been integral to the exciting career I’ve just begun.”

Now that he’s rubbing elbows with high-ranking U.S. officials and foreign dignitaries, Harbaugh looks back on his time at Central as being instrumental to his professional development. As a newly minted Foreign Service Officer, he often taps into the diverse knowledge base he developed as an undergraduate.

“It all comes back to CWU,” said Harbaugh. “My general education classes gave me a diverse foundation of knowledge that I draw from and can apply in different scenarios. Most of all, I learned how to learn, and that has been immensely helpful in my career.”

Harbaugh points to one particular experience that helped him realize that he wanted to pivot toward foreign policy: teaching English in Macau, China, in 2016.

“Studying abroad showed me that I might want to work in a different space,” he said. “The experience showed me that some of the things I was good at and truly valued about music—

things like cross-cultural communication and performance under pressure—could be more fully realized in diplomacy. Living in Macau was life-changing for me.”

After graduation, Harbaugh stayed in Ellensburg for two years before moving to Washington, D.C., to pursue a master’s degree in U.S. foreign policy and national security at American University.

As a grad student, he was awarded the prestigious Presidential Management Fellowship, which led to his first jobs with the federal government as a Cybersecurity Program Manager with the Space Force and with the State Department in Zambia, where he helped combat human trafficking for six months.

“The work I did in Zambia includes many of the same responsibilities that I’ll have as a political officer in the Foreign Service,” said Harbaugh, who will begin a multi-year assignment in China next July. “Political officers are generalists, which means we provide political analysis, deliver briefings to senior U.S. government officials, and negotiate agreements with foreign interlocutors to name just a few things.”

Until his departure next summer, he will be back home in D.C., learning Mandarin and the many intricacies of his new job. He expects to relocate to a new country every couple of years, but no matter where his career takes him, he is ready for the challenge.

“CWU provided me with such an amazing foundation that I feel like I can be successful in any environment,” Harbaugh said. “You wouldn’t assume that a music education degree would translate to a career in diplomacy, but there are many crossover skills. I didn’t know it would turn out like this, but I’m really happy with the direction my career has gone—and CWU has been key to my journey.” ■



2024 Graduate Wins Regional Emmy Award for Promo Video

A recent CWU film studies graduate earned a regional Emmy Award at the Student Production Awards ceremony this spring. Gracen Bayer won the Photographer award in the College Craft category for a promo video she created for PULSE Magazine, becoming the first CWU film major to be recognized by the Northwest chapter of the Student Production Awards.

CWU Researchers, Alumni Publish Hypertension Study in National Journal

Three CWU faculty members teamed up with two nutrition alumni to publish an influential study in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*. The paper, titled “Hypertension Prevalence and Related Risk Factors Among Mexican American Adults Are Increasing: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 1999 to 2018,” appeared on the AHA Journals website in late May. The project was co-authored by nutrition and dietetics Professor Dr. David Gee and colleagues Drs. Nicole Stendell-Hollis and Dominic Klyve, along with Central alumnae Dr. Kathaleen Briggs Early ('97) and Sandra Valencia ('17, '18).

The Art of Let

CWU dance professor encourages students to push their limits and ‘keep creating’

By Kimberly Smith

Six dancers echo each other’s movements in front of a stark black background. The size of the group on stage ebbs and flows. One performer pulls another into a one-armed hug, takes her hand, spins her around, and sends her off with a shove on the back.

These are images from one recorded performance of *Inner Discord*, a dance choreographed by Gabrielle McNeillie, an assistant professor in CWU’s Department of Sport and Movement Studies. McNeillie initially developed *Inner Discord* in 2022 before restaging it with a new cast of students at the 2023 Detroit Dance City Festival. The festival judges selected her choreography as one of the pieces to be performed at the annual event last September.

“It’s the same piece if you think about it structurally,” she said, “but completely different movement.”

Set to selected poems from *What Kind of Woman* by Kate Baer, *Inner Discord*—like much of McNeillie’s recent work—uses dance as a medium to examine, in her words, “the shifting perspectives on being a woman, motherhood, gender roles, and how we transition through each.” She doesn’t mind if the core ideas motivating her pieces don’t get through to everyone, as long as her choreography has an emotional impact.

“I hope they feel something,” she said. “I want my work to make people ask questions and for someone in the audience to say that something resonated with them.”

Before coming to teach students in CWU’s dance program in 2015, McNeillie built a career as a professional dancer, training at Rochester City Ballet in New York and working for Carnival Cruise Lines as a dancer and dance captain.

Inspired by her aunt, who ran her own dance studio, McNeillie also knew early on that she wanted to share her passion for dance with others. It was this interest in teaching that led her to embrace choreography as an art form.



Dance Professor Gabrielle McNeillie, center, works with the Orchesis Dance Company on the CWU campus.

ting Go



“I didn’t think about it as much until I started teaching more regularly, and then I had to start choreographing for shows,” she said. “Even just the exercises that you create for class are choreography.”

When developing choreography, McNeillie likes to collaborate with her dancers, allowing plenty of room for flexibility and experimentation.

“I think about the shape or the timing and just keep working from there,” she said. “Sometimes I’m retooling it right up to the day of the show. I see it as a really fluid process.”

With *Inner Discord*, McNeillie asked the performers to read Baer’s poetry and create their own phrasework, which she then helped refine and combine. The ideas the dancers brought back were unexpected.

“Having to fully accept that as it was and continue the process was really interesting and challenging for me—to let my own bias, my own feelings, my own thoughts about what the piece should be or what it might look like go,” she explained.

McNeillie credits one of her mentors, Douglas Nielsen, with teaching her to let go of expectations and keep trying, even after failure. “Make something; throw it away. Make something else; throw it away. Do the next thing,” she recalled him telling students at the University of Arizona, where she received her Master of Fine Arts in Dance, Choreography.

At the same time, she recognizes that it takes time to master the art of letting go.

“You’re being really vulnerable by putting something out there for somebody else to watch,” McNeillie said. “I’m OK with it now, but it’s hard. I see my students go through that whole process.”

The most important thing dancers and choreographers can do is “keep creating,” regardless of audience reception, McNeillie suggests.

“We may hope they get what we were trying to say, but they might feel something completely different,” she said. “We just have to make something else, move on, start over, try again.” ■



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