

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

THE CAHABA PROJECT

Halley Cotton documented her
180-mile float in poetry and photos.

UAB'S HIDDEN JOBS
THE EPIPHANY GRANT
MADAM PRESIDENT

FALL/WINTER 2023

'23
'24

UAB



HOME BASKETBALL SCHEDULE

WOMEN'S

NOV 1	6 P.M.	SHORTER (EXH.)
NOV 6	2 P.M.	ALABAMA A&M
NOV 13	6 P.M.	WESTERN CAROLINA
NOV 25	12 P.M.	VALPARAISO
NOV 27	6 P.M.	JACKSONVILLE STATE
NOV 29	6 P.M.	MISSISSIPPI VALLEY STATE
DEC 3	2:30 P.M.	AUBURN
DEC 12	12 P.M.	SOUTH CAROLINA STATE
JAN 3	6 P.M.	MEMPHIS
JAN 14	2 P.M.	SMU
JAN 21	1 P.M.	UTSA
JAN 31	6 P.M.	FLORIDA ATLANTIC
FEB 3	4 P.M.	USF
FEB 14	6 P.M.	TEMPLE
FEB 17	1 P.M.	RICE
FEB 24	2 P.M.	NORTH TEXAS
MAR 5	6 P.M.	WICHITA STATE

MEN'S

OCT 30	7 P.M.	MOREHOUSE COLLEGE (EXH.)
NOV 6	7 P.M.	BRADLEY
NOV 16	7 P.M.	ALCORN STATE
NOV 25	5 P.M.	FURMAN
NOV 28	7 P.M.	MCNEESE STATE
DEC 1	7 P.M.	SOUTHERN MISS
DEC 17	2 P.M.	MONTEVALLO
DEC 22	2 P.M.	DRAKE
DEC 29	7 P.M.	UNC ASHEVILLE
JAN 7	2 P.M.	SOUTH FLORIDA
JAN 17	7 P.M.	TULANE
JAN 20	2 P.M.	EAST CAROLINA
JAN 28	4 P.M.	MEMPHIS
FEB 8	8 P.M.	FLORIDA ATLANTIC
FEB 18	2 P.M.	NORTH TEXAS
FEB 21	7 P.M.	RICE
FEB 28	7 P.M.	WICHITA STATE
MAR 10	2 P.M.	SMU

UABSPORTS.COM/TICKETS

UAB
MAGAZINE

Vol. 41/2
Fall/Winter 2023

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Charting our Future and Forging Ahead

BUILDING ON OUR UNPRECEDENTED SUCCESS over the past decade, UAB continues to reach new heights in all pillars of our mission: education; research, innovation, and economic development; patient care; and community engagement. And we are setting our sights even higher for the future.

This fall we launched our Blazer Core Curriculum to equip our undergraduates for leadership in the global knowledge economy and train a 21st century workforce for our state. In *U.S. News & World Report*, UAB has a record 22 graduate programs in the top 25 nationally (doubling from 11 in 2013) and is among the top eight percent of universities worldwide. Such world-class educational opportunities reflect our commitment to excellence all around campus, from retiring Provost Pam Benoit—whom we thank for her outstanding service and leadership—to our dedicated faculty and staff in every school and department.

Our most successful era of research funding continues, with a record \$713 million in annual expenditures, and that research is being translated into improved lives for the people of Alabama and beyond. We are treating nearly two million patients annually at the nation's eighth largest hospital, as Live HealthSmart Alabama continues revitalizing neighborhoods and improving health outcomes around Birmingham and now statewide.

Such accomplishments are the product of ambitious goals and thoughtful strategic planning. We are updating our strategic plan for the next five years, Forging Ahead, and developing our Research Strategic Initiative: Growth with Purpose, a roadmap to reach \$1 billion in research expenditures (a funding level attained by only 24 universities nationally), which will increase exponentially our impact on peoples' lives locally and globally. Our Campus Master Plan continues with construction of key facilities such as Altec/Styslinger Genomic Medicine & Data Sciences Building, our Science and Engineering Complex, and, in partnership with Southern Research, a new flagship science building—all of which will help us become the biotech commercialization leader in the Southeast.

We are grateful to our friends and alumni for your support and advocacy—from academic programs to research and patient care to the arts and athletics. We look forward to our continued partnership as we forge ahead to another decade even bolder and more accomplished than our last.

Go, Blazers!

Ray L. Watts

Ray L. Watts, M.D.
President,
University of Alabama at Birmingham



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To decrease hypertension in rural Alabama, UAB is working with 20 local churches to build trust and improve outcomes.

Humans of UAB

A SOCIAL MEDIA STORYTELLING PROJECT

WE LAUNCHED OUR PROFILE SERIES on February 15 with a goal to celebrate UAB's rich community of students, faculty, and staff. Since then, we've profiled 35 individuals from all backgrounds and roles, including the 10 featured here. To learn more about these UAB community members and many others we've interviewed, follow us on Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn.

ANDREA MABRY
Photographer

MAREE JONES
Director of Social Media Strategy



SAMMY MUELLER



"I'm from Atlanta. I wanted a challenge coming here, and I'm excited about that."

—SIDNEE FREEMAN



JOVENT TRISTEZA



JOHN FIELDS



See more profiles
#humansofuab



"That family atmosphere, that feeling of belonging, that feeling of being, that feeling of purpose here. You can see it in the student body, you can see it in the faculty, you can see it in every facet of the UAB community."

—DEJOHN TELLIS-OLIVER



IRADJ SOODHI

"I really followed my heart by making the decision to come to UAB."

—MEGHAN BARTOS



ALEXANDRIA MARTIN

"One of the best things about going to school here is that I got to do so many festivals and markets, which I don't think would have been possible if I had stayed in a college town."

—MIKAYLA HAMMOCK



"If trouble was to arise, please believe me, I'd give my life over to all the people that's out here. That's what I was sworn to do."

—LARRY BAILEY

Campus Life

SPOTLIGHTING THE UAB STUDENT EXPERIENCE

AFTER A QUIET SUMMER, it's always a thrill to see UAB students arrive in mid-August and infuse the campus with energy, enthusiasm, and joy, and the fall 2023 semester start was no exception.

The Student Affairs team works hard to ensure that our students have opportunities to connect with each other and with organizations that allow them to pursue their interests and goals. Our students are passionate about service, one of UAB's strategic pillars, and our Into the Streets event makes service a priority. The team is also focused on fun, from Pops on the Plaza to our signature Blazer Splash event. It's all about making our students feel relaxed and at home.

Two high points this year were the opportunity that first-time students had to run out onto the field at Protective Stadium before UAB Football's first home game and the free Welcome Back Concert featuring rapper T-Pain which had students packed onto the Campus Green.

Just tooting our own horn, but it was a fantastic start to the fall season.



OPPOSITE: The Marching Blazers rehearse their fall show.

TOP: Students cool off at Blazer Splash, a unique UAB tradition that features water slides, squirt guns, and thousands of water balloons.

LEFT and ABOVE: More cooldowns came from Pops on the Plaza, featuring frozen treats and lots of laughs outside the Hill Student Center. Miss UAB Emma Terry and friends pose for a photo at Connect Fest, where students can learn how to get involved with more than 100 student organizations.



ABOVE: Rapper T-Pain brought his biggest hits to screaming fans at the Welcome Back Concert.

ABOVE RIGHT: Students continued one of UAB's most meaningful traditions by serving across Birmingham during the Into the Streets event.

RIGHT: First-time students wait in the tunnel before running out onto the field at Protective Stadium before UAB's first home game.



LEFT: Students spend time together at Connect Fest on the Campus Green.

BELOW LEFT: Students, families, volunteers, and Student Housing employees orchestrate a smooth and seamless Move-In Day.

BELOW RIGHT: With classes in full swing, sidewalks around campus are full of students.



Trailblazers

NEWS AND NOTES FROM AROUND CAMPUS



GROWTH WITH PURPOSE IN RESEARCH EXPENDITURES

Continuing the university’s momentum after celebrating a decade of growth, President Ray Watts and his senior leadership team are working collaboratively to establish a road map to multiply the positive impact of UAB research on people’s lives and reach \$1 billion in total research expenditures, up from the record \$774.5 million in fiscal year 2023. This ambitious goal “will be accomplished with careful planning and consideration, investment in our people and infrastructure, and your hard work,” Watts said in a letter to researchers. “This growth will ensure that UAB continues to drive innovation in the research space and provide novel treatments to our patients and beyond.”

To that end, UAB has engaged Huron Consulting Group and Urban Impact Advisors to assist in developing a research growth strategic plan. The process will involve reviewing and evaluating the university’s existing portfolio, assessing the

current landscape to identify growth areas, and providing priority recommendations.

Over 21 weeks, the process will first “Define the Future” by identifying UAB’s capacity (people, space, and technology) to achieve growth goals; prioritized strategic funding opportunity areas required to achieve research growth; opportunities to enhance the research organization; resources required for success; and an optimized path for competitive growth in UAB’s clinical trials portfolio.

The next step is to “Develop the Path Forward,” in which the vision will be summarized in a strategic plan, highlighting near- and long-term investment priorities, road map timing, and key metrics and milestones to measure progress toward these strategic goals, Watts said.

Learn more about the Research Strategic Initiative: Growth with Purpose and other key initiatives at uab.edu/president/initiatives



UAB research has increased more than \$247.5 million in the past five years

“

This growth will ensure that UAB continues to drive innovation in the research space.”

—PRESIDENT RAY WATTS

CONSTRUCTION
UPDATES

SOUTH SCIENCE HALL &
EAST SCIENCE HALL

Just before classes started for the fall 2023 semester, UAB celebrated the opening of South Science Hall and East Science Hall, the first phase of the new Science and Engineering Complex, which will feature two L-shaped buildings overlooking a central courtyard. With its world-class amenities and collaborative atmosphere, the facility will be attractive to renowned researchers, faculty members, and students from across the country and around the world. This influx of exceptional minds will further bolster UAB’s research capabilities and contribute to its position as a leading institution in science and engineering.

South Science Hall and East Science Hall provide administrative space and more than 138,000 gross square feet of classrooms, instructional space and laboratories for the Physics, Biology, and Chemistry departments in the College of Arts and Sciences. The facility will empower the Department of Physics to prepare students of all backgrounds for the fourth industrial revolution through advanced materials, advanced computation, and advanced photonics. It will also allow the Department of Biology to house its entire research operation in two large labs, each capable of accommodating approximately 60 people—driving innovation collaboration and discovery.

A few weeks before, UAB broke ground on the second phase of the Science and Engineering Complex, initiating construction on Frances and Miller Gorrie Hall, which will face the South Science Hall and East Science Hall and be home to the School of Engineering.

The sophisticated technology and design of Gorrie Hall will be on display in prominently featured “showpiece” spaces throughout the nearly 116,000-square-foot facility. These advanced labs, research suites, and common areas will form the core of students’ college experiences and the heart of UAB Engineering for years to come.

Read more about Frances and Miller Gorrie’s contributions to UAB on page 22.



ALTEC/STYSLINGER GENOMIC
MEDICINE & DATA SCIENCES
BUILDING & THE MARNIX E. HEERSINK
INSTITUTE FOR BIOMEDICAL
INNOVATION CONFERENCE CENTER

Located at Seventh Avenue South between 19th and 20th streets at the former site of the Kracke Building and Pittman Center for Advanced Medical Studies, the project is funded through dollars from the state of Alabama, Jefferson County, and UAB donors Altec/Styslinger Foundation and Marnix and Mary Heersink. The 175,000-square-foot building will bring together researchers, equipment, and staff from many different disciplines. UAB broke ground on the project in April 2022, and construction is expected to be completed in early Fall 2024.

STUDENT ORGANIZATION FACILITY
A new home base operated by Student Affairs for UAB’s registered student organizations will open next semester. It will be located at the northwest corner of 14th Street South and 11th Avenue and will feature 12,800 square feet of space for small, medium, and large multipurpose rooms, a warming kitchen and an administrative suite. Construction began in January and projected completion is December 2023.

UAB EARLY LEARNING CENTER
A new facility for the UAB Early Learning Center will be located at 10th Avenue South and 11th Street near the Education and Engineering Complex. It will feature an 18,500-square-foot facility with a 9,700-square-foot exterior playground. The new building will house 224 students, enabling a 100% increase in enrollment for children of UAB employees. Construction began in January 2023 and projected completion is January 2024.

14TH STREET PARKING DECK
A new 405,000-square-foot parking deck at 14th Street South and Seventh Avenue will provide more than 1,150 new parking spaces. Construction began in December 2022 and projected completion is March 2024.

**BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH &
PSYCHOLOGY BUILDING**
Announced earlier this year following Stage 1 approval from the University of Alabama System Board of Trustees, this 225,000-square-foot new building will be located between Volker Hall and the Hill Student Center on University Boulevard. It will house the research-intensive departments from the Marnix E. Heersink School of Medicine and the College of Arts and Sciences’ Department of Psychology and will provide the flexibility necessary for investigators from various fields and disciplines. The project is supported by \$152 million in federal funding. Construction is expected to begin in 2024 and will complete in summer of 2026.

UNITY PARK
This renovation of the green space at the corner of University Boulevard and 18th Street South, adjacent to the School of Nursing, was completed this spring. Updates include multiple seating areas, a lawn for outdoor gatherings or instruction, and space for outdoor artwork.

COOPER GREEN MERCY HEALTH
The new five-story, 211,000-square-foot facility will be built on the site of the former Cooper Green parking deck. The overall estimated cost is \$120 million, and completion is expected in early 2025. The current building will continue to provide clinical services until the new building opens.

UNIVERSITY EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT
UAB Hospital began expanding the UED in June 2023 with interior construction in the North Pavilion, which will create nine new exam rooms and temporary waiting room space. In August 2023, UAB Hospital began installation of two leased mobile treatment units that will provide 16 additional treatment spaces for patient care and are anticipated to be fully operational by the end of the year. Long term, the \$73 million expansion will provide 66,030 new square feet, 59 new exam rooms and additional imaging capacity for emergency clinical care.

17
major university
construction projects
completed or
underway since 2013



Innovative labs in the
Science and Engineering
Complex will allow
Biology to expand
research courses to all
undergraduates

34
major projects for
the UAB Health
System since 2013

CORE MATTERS

The Blazer Core Curriculum, which launched this fall, is the first complete overhaul of UAB’s core curriculum requirements since the university was founded in 1969. The curriculum focuses on providing competencies critical for the 21st century to better equip students to meet their lifelong goals, including opportunities to develop as innovative thinkers, dynamic communicators, insightful researchers, and reflective global citizens. Freshmen starting in the fall 2023 semester will follow the Blazer Core Curriculum; students in previous class years and transfer students will follow the requirements of the traditional core curriculum, although they can opt to switch to Blazer Core if they choose.

Chris Minnix, Ph.D., director of the Blazer Core Curriculum, says the curriculum has three distinct advantages: choice (there are roughly twice as many core courses available to students today compared to the previous curriculum), innovation (the City

as Classroom courses connect faculty and students with local communities in teaching and learning), and impact (a series of flags show students how their academic work includes other key institutional priorities).

Minnix was named director in 2021 after a five-year process that was borne from the Forging the Future Strategic Plan. Provost Pam Benoit convened a committee that was chaired by Alison Chapman, Ph.D., professor and chair in the Department of English, and Suzanne Judd, Ph.D., professor of biostatistics in the School of Public Health. The resulting draft was shaped by faculty and student input and ultimately became the Blazer Core Curriculum.

The Blazer Core Curriculum will continue to grow, and courses can still be added, Minnix explains. “I think that we will continue to see significant innovation from faculty, staff, and students.”

Read more about the Blazer Core Curriculum at uab.edu/core-curriculum

41 credit hours make up the Blazer Core Curriculum



Top-ranked programs

UAB graduate programs in the schools of Health Professions, Nursing, Engineering, Education, Business, Public Health, Medicine and the College of Arts and Sciences are all highly ranked in the 2024 *U.S. News Best Graduate School Rankings*. In fact, 22 UAB graduate programs are top 25 nationally in *U.S. News and World Report* doubling from 11 in 2013. Some highlights:

- SCHOOL OF HEALTH PROFESSIONS**
- #1 Master’s in Health Administration
 - #8 Physician Assistant Studies
 - #11 Master’s in Healthcare Quality & Safety

- SCHOOL OF NURSING**
- #10 Master of Science in Nursing
 - #13 Doctor of Nursing Practice

UAB Hospital was once again named the best hospital in Alabama by *U.S. News & World Report* in its 2023-2024 Best Hospital Rankings. UAB Hospital also claims the No. 1 ranking as the best hospital in the Birmingham metro area.

In addition to the hospital’s local and statewide distinction, eight adult specialties are ranked among the best in the nation, and UAB Hospital was ranked as “high-performing” in 17 of 21 assessed adult procedures/conditions.

Ranked programs include rheumatology at No. 10 and obstetrics and gynecology at No. 13. Other ranked specialties are ear, nose and throat at No. 15; rehabilitation at No. 19; cardiology/heart surgery at No. 39; diabetes and endocrinology at No. 44; geriatrics at No. 47; and gastroenterology/GI surgery at No. 50.

Read more about UAB’s most recent rankings at uab.edu/news

LIVE HEALTHSMART INITIATIVE CONTINUES TO GROW

UAB’s Live HealthSmart Alabama (LHSA)—launched in 2019 and focused on signature pillars of good nutrition, physical activity, education, prevention, and wellness to reduce chronic disease in Alabama—marked two significant milestones in May. First, the recognition of a \$250,000 gift from Birmingham’s Coca-Cola Bottling Company UNITED, Inc. that will be used to create Community Leadership Academies in the communities of Bush Hills, East Lake, Kingston, Titusville, Central City, Druid Hills, Evergreen, Fountain Heights, and Norwood.

The LHSA Community Leadership Academy will pilot in these nine communities—with one, Kingston, located near Coca-Cola UNITED’s headquarters—and will

identify, nurture, and develop an initial cohort of residents as they aspire to become community leaders.

LHSA also celebrated the completion of major community improvements in Bush Hills, a project that is the culmination of a yearlong partnership with Bush Hills Connections, Inc. and was led by BL Harber International.

“As residents of Bush Hills, we are striving to build a sustainable foundation from within in collaboration with our valued partners. Every community—no matter the economic or social status—has assets that can be identified and mobilized in community work,” said Joatrice Thompson, president of Bush Hills Connections.

LHSA continues to expand its model across the state.

Learn more at uab.edu/livehealthsmartal



2,300 Birmingham City School students graduated from the Healthy Happy Kids program in May 2023

NEW LEADERSHIP

Shadi Martin, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate and International Education, Dean of the Graduate School and Chief International Officer

Martin was named to her role in June 2022, and in the past year she has led the Graduate School and the departments in the Office of Global Engagement, which include INTO UAB, Education Abroad, International Student & Scholar Services, International Faculty and Staff Immigration Services, and the UAB Passport Office.

Most recently, Martin oversees the newly organized UAB Graduate School and Global Affairs, a merger of the UAB Graduate School and the Office of Global Engagement. This integrated unit demonstrates UAB's continued emphasis on innovation, collaboration, and forward-thinking, and is a direct result of UAB's Forging the Future, the five-year strategic plan launched in 2018.

Christopher Shook, Ph.D.
Dean of the Collat School of Business

Shook was named dean in March, 2023 and began his new role on July 1. He was previously dean of the Gordon Ford College of Business at Western Kentucky University and has been a professor and chair at Auburn University and a faculty member at the University of Texas at Arlington and Northern Illinois University. Prior to joining Western Kentucky University in 2019, he was the Sprunk and Burnham Endowed Dean at the University of Montana College of Business.

Shook received his bachelor's degree in accounting from the University of Northern Colorado, and a master's in business administration from the University of Mississippi. He earned his doctorate in business administration from Louisiana State University and a Certified Public Accountant certificate from the Colorado State Board of Accountancy.



Shadi Martin, Ph.D.



Teresa Taber Doughty, Ph.D.



Christopher Shook, Ph.D.

Teresa Taber Doughty, Ph.D.
Dean of the School of Education

Taber Doughty joined UAB in April 2023 after being named dean in January. With more than 30 years of experience, she served as dean of the College of Education at the University of Texas at Arlington since 2016. She also spent 17 years at Purdue University as a special education professor and associate dean in Purdue's College of Education. Prior to Purdue, Taber Doughty taught children with disabilities in Alabama and Georgia before becoming a faculty member at Georgia State University and Oglethorpe University in Georgia.

She led UTA's College of Education in meeting successfully its strategic goals as part of a leading research university (Carnegie R1) focusing on scholarship, program, and enrollment growth, service to the university and community, social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

“
UAB continues
to recruit and
retain experienced
leaders to advance
our world-class
academic programs
and research
opportunities.”

—PRESIDENT RAY WATTS

LANDMARK ANNIVERSARIES

**75 years of the
School of Dentistry**

Prior to the establishment of the School of Dentistry in 1948, Alabamians who sought dental education were limited in their choice of programs in the South.

In 1947, the Alabama legislature appropriated \$750,000 for the operation of what is now the UAB School of Dentistry. Less than a year later, Joseph F. Volker, who was the dean of Tufts College Dental School, was selected as the first dean. In 48 days, Volker, while still serving in his position at Tufts, selected the school's first class, recruited faculty and staff, furnished laboratories and offices, and outlined a new curriculum. On Oct. 18, 1948, 52 freshmen, all U.S. veterans, began their first day of classes, taught by a handful of full-time and volunteer faculty. By the early 1960s, Volker had established the UAB School of Dentistry as one of the leading dental programs in the nation.

Today, the School of Dentistry is the only dental school in the state and is consistently ranked among the top-funded schools for dental research. It currently treats 64,000 patients a year in the UAB Dentistry Clinic alone.

Dentistry continues to advance oral health in Alabama. Community rotations and volunteer outreach pave the way for third- and fourth-year dental students to further their clinical education and serve patient populations across the state. And the school's faculty, residents, students, and staff spend hundreds of hours each year performing oral health screenings, health services delivery, and oral health education.

In 2022, the school announced its plans to develop a satellite dentistry clinic in Dothan to recruit, educate, train, and retain dentists to help improve the dental health of those living in the Wiregrass region. This first-of-its-kind model will help address the shortage of dental health providers in rural Alabama.

**50 years of the O'Neal
Comprehensive Cancer Center**

The O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center is the only National Cancer Institute-designated Comprehensive Cancer Center in Alabama and in a four-state region. In 2022, it celebrated its 50th anniversary.

“I am proud of and humbled by our outstanding team of clinicians and investigators, all of whom came to UAB with the same goal: to shape the future of cancer care. They have set the stage for a very bright future at the O'Neal, a future that will relieve the cancer burdens and cancer disparities for all people in Alabama,” said Barry Sleckman, M.D., Ph.D., director of the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center.

The O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center offers patients a full array of treatment options from multidisciplinary clinics filled with experts from across cancer fields to the latest state-of-the-art technology. The center is home to a faculty of roughly 400 clinicians, scientists, and clinician-scientists, many of whom are internationally and nationally recognized for their expertise in oncology. In 2021, the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center served 9,700 new cancer patients and enrolled 439 participants in clinical trials.

Just four years ago, the center became the beneficiary of a \$30 million naming gift from the O'Neal family and shareholders—UAB's largest single gift at that time—enabling it to transition to the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center at UAB. The Center has been continuously funded by the NCI since its inception, and was just awarded its latest renewal, a five-year Cancer Center Core Support Grant of \$27,477,570, receiving the highest impact score in the center's history. This prestigious federal grant renewal provides support for UAB's cancer research program through 2026.

**Five years of the
All of Us program**

Over the past five years, more than 675,000 Americans—including 25,000-plus from Alabama—have agreed to join a groundbreaking National Institutes of Health initiative that aims to gather health data from a million or more people living in the United States.

The All of Us Research Program, launched in May 2018, was designed to create a new kind of cohort study. It is something like the Framingham Heart Study, but not restricted to one part of the body, and on a scale never seen before. All of Us intentionally oversamples communities that have often been missing from such studies. More than 50 percent of people enrolled in All of Us are from racial and ethnic minorities, and 80 percent of participants are from groups that are underrepresented in biomedical research.

“Many of the studies that have been done to date have been in people largely of European ancestry, and we have learned that what you can tell from one population does not necessarily apply to others,” said Bruce Korf, M.D., Ph.D., associate dean for Genomic Medicine for the UAB Marnix E. Heersink School of Medicine. Korf is the contact principal investigator for the All of Us Southern Network, which includes institutions in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

At its fifth anniversary, All of Us can boast five accomplishments and anticipate growth in the years ahead: making precision medicine possible, producing genomic results at unprecedented scale, seeing the million-participant goal is within reach, celebrating that engagement efforts are bearing fruit, and anticipating “deep dives” and pediatric enrollment.

Catching Fire

A CONVERSATION WITH COACH TRENT DILFER



Before the start of the season, we sat down with UAB’s new football coach to ask him about the new conference, Protective Stadium, and his favorite Birmingham restaurants.

BY JULIE KEITH
PHOTOS BY
JENNIFER ALSABROOK-TURNER

JULIE KEITH: What will the new American Athletic Conference mean for the program this year and in future seasons?

COACH DILFER: Well, it’s massive. If you look at the landscape of college football as the PAC-12 dissolves, the American is poised to be the next Power Five conference, but even before that it was a premier conference, and the level of competition in all sports is much higher than Conference USA was. You have great coaches, great players. And then just the visibility of the program, to be on a platform like ESPN every single week to highlight our players and this great institution—it’s just a great opportunity for the school.

JK: What should fans look for on the field? Any players to watch?

COACH: I think an exciting brand of football, I think aggressive defensive schemes.

Offensively we’re very versatile—you can’t really put us in a box offensively. We’ll run it, we’ll throw it long, we’ll throw it short, we’ll run it inside, we’ll run it outside. We have a lot of creative coaches on the offensive staff and a lot of talented players. I think off the get-go our quarterback, Jacob Zeno: he’s a mature guy, he’s been through the fires of the football journey and has been hardened by them and he’ll be better because of it. Jermaine Brown, we call him “Skull,” a number-one, fantastic, multipurpose back. Isaiah Jacobs, a new addition to our team, is a dynamic back, a big back with a lot of skills. And for receiver I’d probably go with Tejhuan Palmer. We have a lot of really talented receivers, but Tejhuan is the guy who has playing experience and has made big plays for this program, and he’s the guy you’re going to want to look out for on offense.

And then defensively, we think we have maybe the best defensive player in the

conference in D-Mac (Mac McWilliams). His ability to be a shutdown corner and future NFL player is big for us. And then his brother Fish McWilliams, a premier defensive tackle. And then we’re really looking for Jackson Bratton to step it up, he was a transfer to us from the University of Alabama a couple of years ago and should hold down the middle of the defense as an inside linebacker.

JK: Why is Birmingham such a great football town?

COACH: It’s just a great town in general, I’ve fallen in love with this city and the people. But specifically for football, it’s the heart of SEC country and SEC football is as big as it there is in the country right now—I’d argue that SEC football is bigger than the NFL, and we’re right in the heart of it. Although not an SEC program, we’re still a premier Group of Five program and you have people who just

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If you look at the landscape of college football as the PAC-12 dissolves, the American is poised to be the next Power Five conference.”

—COACH TRENT DILFER

love football. Football means more in this part of the country.
I think you have a lot of people in Birmingham who may be “Roll Tide” or they may be “War Eagle,” but they care about the City of Birmingham and they know that good football is good for the city and good for the institution, and so you have a natural fan base there. And you have a bunch of students and a bunch of faculty who deeply care about this program and who understand the impact that football can have, and I think that’s one of the reasons that football is so big here.

JK: When you recruit players to UAB, what do they want to know about Birmingham and what do you tell them?

COACH: Early on I told them I didn’t know much because I’d just moved here! But typically, a young person wants to know a lot
(continued on next page)

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First-year students ran into the field at Protective Stadium before UAB Football’s first game of the season



WATCH
OUR VIDEO
INTERVIEW
with Coach Dilfer

about the campus vibe. They understand that even as a football player, it’s a holistic school experience. They ask about the stadium, and we’re very fortunate to be able to play at Protective. They really enjoy Legacy Pavilion, our facility, and the ability to practice in a premier training facility. And then when I tell them about Birmingham, I tell them about the people. They don’t really care about the foodie scene like I do, but they do care about being treated well, and I’ve told them that I’ve been treated nothing but spectacularly by the people of Birmingham and they can expect the same thing, and I haven’t lied to them yet.

JK: What do you like about being a new program in the AAC?

COACH: I love the bunker mentality, the chip on your shoulder. You know football is hard, and you’re always looking for inspirational things to keep you going, and when people doubt you, it becomes very inspirational. Young people want to hear good things said about them, and when they don’t, they can either pout or they can use that as fuel to the fire. As a coach you want to be able to use that as fuel to the fire, and we’ve done that.

You know, I don’t know enough about college football to tell you whether we’re better than other teams, but I know that I want to coach these guys, I like this group, I wouldn’t want to coach another group and I’m kinda licking my chops to be the underdog this year.

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I love young people who want to pursue it and who are willing to do things in life that are difficult.”

—COACH TRENT DILFER

JK: What is your favorite Blazer tradition?

COACH: We rehearsed Blazer Walk for spring ball and it was a very cool scene, so I’m hoping it becomes even bigger. Our kids are excited about it, our players are excited about it, we planned the whole game day routine around it, so we’re really excited about Blazer Walk. It’s been really epic in the past and we’re looking for it to be even better.

JK: You often use the hashtag #firebreathersonly on social media. What gets you fired up?

COACH: You know, I’m just passionate about seeing young people reach their potential. I love young people who want to pursue it and who are willing to do things in life that are difficult, that are maybe counter-cultural, to reach their best. I get really, really excited—fired up—about seeing a young person push through adversity, about handling success well, about supporting others on that journey. I get really fired up when they’re encouraging one another and lifting each other up. I tend to be very positive in my approach to coaching, and I look for players and coaches who are positive as well.

JK: Do you have a favorite Birmingham restaurant yet?

COACH: Oh yeah, I have multiple. I’m going go with two and I’m going to hurt some feelings here because I do have others, but my two go-to spots have been Bamboo on 2nd and La Fresca. Those are the two near my house and I’ve become very good friends with many of the patrons, management, bartenders, and the support staff. Unfortunately, I frequented them too often when I first got to Birmingham and put on 30 pounds, but since then I’ve been able to temper my enthusiasm for eating out. But those are my two spots and it’s pretty safe to say you’ll see me at one of those during the week.

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You know,
I’m just passionate about
seeing young people
reach their potential.”

—COACH TRENT DILFER

JK: How does Protective Stadium compare to other stadiums?

COACH: I think it’s one of the better stadiums I’ve been in. I think it’s the perfect size, it’s really well laid out, I love that it’s in the heart of the city and easily accessible for a lot of different neighborhoods around the Greater Birmingham area with great freeway access.

From a players’ and coaches’ standpoint, it’s got great visuals—the way it’s set up, it doesn’t distract you in game. And obviously the technology in the stadium is state of the art. For my family—I have a lot of family at games—the amenities are great. It’s a fantastic stadium and we are so fortunate to have it.

JK: What’s the best thing fans can do to support the team?

COACH: Be loud, loud, loud, loud, LOUD when the other offense on the field and be quiet when our offense is on the field—that’s like rule number one to fan etiquette. But you need a lot of people there. I think the excitement, the anticipation of great things happening—make it a go-to spot on your weekend. You’d be surprised how a college football player feeds off that energy. I’m convinced the best thing about college football is the pageantry and what I mean by that is just the general atmosphere and that atmosphere comes to full effect on game day. So the best thing is people being there and being loud when the other offense is the on the field—it’s a distinct advantage for the Blazers.

Basketball tips off in the AAC

Basketball excitement has returned to Bartow Arena as the Blazers have begun their inaugural season competing in the American Athletic Conference (AAC). The new conference brings new opponents to Birmingham and renews old rivalries with former conference foes.

Women’s basketball takes the court this season with nine returners and five new faces who all look to make a statement in this first AAC season. The women’s first home conference matchup is with Memphis on Jan. 3, continuing a rivalry that began back in the 1979-80 season. Including the matchup against Memphis, the women will play 18 conference games with nine at home.

This year, women’s basketball will be recognizing women trailBLAZERS in our community who have helped to blaze the way forward for other women in their industries. If you’d like to nominate a trailBLAZER or learn more about this initiative, visit uabsports.com/trailBLAZER.

Men’s basketball has a new look for its inaugural season in the American

Conference. The Blazers brought in nine new players including four from the transfer portal, four from the JUCO ranks and one high school player. The Blazers and Andy Kennedy are tied for fifth nationally with 78 wins over the last three years, and they hold a 33-4 record at home during that span. Two especially big games this season include Memphis for the Bartow Classic and 2023 Final Four participant Florida Atlantic.

Be sure to mark your calendars for the Bartow Classic on Jan. 28, one of the program’s signature annual events. Your attendance can make a big impact, since \$2 of each single game ticket sold will benefit the Gene Bartow Memorial Fund for Cancer Research at the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Don’t miss the season. Get your tickets for both men’s and women’s basketball at uabsports.com/tickets or by calling the UAB Athletics Ticket Office at (205) 975-UAB1. And keep up with all things UAB Athletics at uabsports.com and by following us on social media @uabathletics.



Green & Gold Moments

CELEBRATING TRANSFORMATIVE SUPPORT

BY WALT LEWELLYN AND EMMA LANG

A NEW HOME FOR UAB ENGINEERING

As faculty leaders envision the transformative impact of a new facility, others see opportunities to honor individuals who made this era possible.

THIS JULY, half a century after engineering students first began taking classes at what was then known as the Birmingham Extension Center, the UAB School of Engineering held a groundbreaking ceremony for its new home: Frances and Miller Gorrie Hall.

After years of being housed in different buildings across campus, the school's various departments will be centrally located in this 116,000-square-foot facility near University Boulevard and the Campus Green. Gorrie Hall's construction represents the second phase of the university's new Science and Engineering Complex, with completion currently expected in 2025.

"Gorrie Hall will bring the bulk of our engineering research and academic programs together under one roof and dramatically advance education, research, and innovation," UAB Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Pam Benoit, Ph.D., said at the groundbreaking ceremony. "It will foster collaboration campus- and community-wide like never before, as we train future engineers, entrepreneurs and a 21st-century workforce for our state."

As faculty leaders envision the transformative impacts that Gorrie Hall will have in the years to come—significantly enhancing the student experience, spurring

faculty recruitment, catalyzing innovation, and preparing the next generation of leaders in engineering—community partners and alumni alike see a chance to honor the individuals who made this next chapter of UAB Engineering possible.

AN "EXCITING TIME" FOR THE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING

With state-of-the-art teaching labs and research suites, as well as modern common areas designed with students' needs in mind, Gorrie Hall will offer dynamic new opportunities to students, faculty, staff, and the greater Birmingham community.

"This is an exciting time for the school," said Jeffrey Holmes, M.D., Ph.D., Dean of the School of Engineering. "Truly transformational research often happens at the interfaces between disciplines, and UAB Engineering is uniquely positioned to pursue such interdisciplinary research."

Holmes, whose own interdisciplinary research focuses primarily on cardiovascular biomedical engineering, is eager to see the collaborations that Gorrie Hall will promote.

"We are building creative, innovative programs at those interfaces, in areas like tissue engineering and regenerative medicine, neuroengineering, built environment and health, and advanced materials," Holmes said. "Frances and Miller Gorrie Hall will accelerate those efforts by bringing the majority of our people together in one place—adjacent to collaborators in math, computing, and the sciences—where hallway conversations with colleagues from many different disciplines can seed the next great discoveries."

Much of that collaborative innovation will take place in "showpiece" labs located throughout the facility, including a 2,000-square-

foot testing lab that will house the equipment needed to conduct compression, bending, tensile, and impact testing on materials ranging from concrete and steel to gels and foams—and the Design and Rapid Prototyping Lab, where current and prospective students alike will design and build prototypes to solve problems for industry clients.

Gorrie Hall's "showpiece" spaces also include multiple resources dedicated to students' academic success, career preparation, and college experience. A student success center, located in the heart of the facility, will offer individualized peer tutoring, mentoring, and internship counseling to students, while across the hall, the study commons will provide a bright, supportive environment for completing coursework, collaborating on group projects, and more.

"UAB Engineering prides itself on providing a high-quality, hands-on education that prepares students for careers as engineers who build and shape the world around us," Holmes said. "The new building will transform the engineering student experience by providing high-tech facilities where our students can bring their ideas to life and student-focused spaces that support student success through advising, tutoring, mentoring, career counseling, and participation in our guaranteed internship program."

HONORING A PROUD HISTORY

School alumni, the Birmingham community, and the local engineering industry have rallied behind Gorrie Hall to make this \$84 million project a reality. Along the way, they've paid tribute to some of the civic and faculty leaders who made the school what it is today, beginning with the facility's namesakes: Frances and Miller Gorrie.

After decades at the helm of Brasfield & Gorrie, one of the nation's largest privately held construction firms, the Gorrie family's legacy is built into Birmingham's foundations. It's in the steel and glass of the Regions Center, the limestone of the Hugo Black United States Federal Courthouse, and the brick and concrete of many buildings across UAB's more than 100-square-block campus, including the Collat School of Business, the Women & Infants Clinic, and Kirklín Clinic.

"UAB is the lifeblood of Birmingham," Miller Gorrie—who has also volunteered his time with the Department of Civil, Construction, and Environmental Engineering's Board of Advisors, as well as many other leadership committees at UAB—said at the hall's groundbreaking ceremony. "I can't even imagine a Birmingham without UAB."

In addition to the Gorrie family and Brasfield & Gorrie, other vital industry partners have joined in the campaign to support Gorrie Hall, including Alabama Power, which employs the greatest number of SOE graduates, and Vulcan Materials Company, which supported the original Engineering Building fundraising campaign back in 1961.

With dozens of classrooms, laboratories, suites, offices, and more spaces yet to be named, Gorrie Hall has also provided alumni and other supporters with opportunities to

(continued on next page)



Provost Pam Benoit, Dean Jeffrey Holmes and the Gorrie family at the groundbreaking.

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**UAB is the lifeblood of Birmingham.
I can't imagine a Birmingham without UAB.”**

—MILLER GORRIE

recognize the “founding faculty” who shaped the school into what it is today, as well as a chance to make school history themselves.

Grateful alumni have driven fundraising campaigns to honor the legacies of beloved professors like Jack Lemons, Ph.D., who served as the linchpin of the Department of Biomedical Engineering for more than half a century, and Dale Feldman, Ph.D., who recently retired after nearly 40 years of service to UAB.

“Dale’s soft-spoken demeanor, combined with his fresh approaches and unflinching scientific ambition, fostered an idyllic atmosphere for young biomedical engineering graduate students to flourish,” remembers Ken Solovay (’91), one of Feldman’s former students. “I loved every minute of my time at UAB, with Dale lighting a fire in those of us that were looking for a spark.”

PAYING IT FORWARD

Other graduates, like identical twins Melody and Mellany George, have made commitments to name spaces in Gorrie Hall as a way to give back and commemorate their time at their alma mater.

“If I can help anybody, even just a little bit, have a positive college career and help them stay in school and stay focused, that would accomplish my goals,” said Mellany, who has enjoyed significant career success alongside her sister since earning their Master of Science in Materials Science and Engineering degrees.

UAB is the only engineering school in Alabama to guarantee internships for students

“Even after we’re gone, this is something that’s going to still be around for a long time. My daughter can know that their family has something to do with preserving and continuing education.”

After decades of changing the lives of individual students like the George twins and advancing technological progress through partnerships with organizations like NASA, UAB Engineering is on the cusp of a new era.

Thanks to the support of alumni and community partners, Dean Holmes and other faculty leaders are looking forward to seeing the lasting impact that Gorrie Hall will have on UAB, Alabama, and the local engineering industry.

“The new building will help us honor our commitment to the UAB and Birmingham communities,” Holmes said, “providing space to host workshops and summer camps, build prototypes and devices for UAB researchers and local companies, and assist in improving the lives of our neighbors as part of the UAB Grand Challenge.”



Award-Winning Innovation

This spring, a team from the Department of Computer Science won the Radiance Technologies Innovation Bowl. Competitors tackled the question, “How can geospatial intelligence data be used to monitor, assess, and predict the impact of climate change?”

The UAB team was led by Ph.D. student Saugat Adhikari and assistant professor Da Yan, Ph.D. and the climate change prompt was already related to the team’s ongoing research. Using a combination of satellite imagery, 3D elevation mapping, and artificial intelligence, the team developed a predictive tool for assessing the likelihood and probable extent of flooding in a given area.

“Our model will be much more accurate and minimize incorrect predictions,” Adhikari said. “This is important for resource-stringent disaster response, where rescue needs to be sent to the truly disaster-impacted areas. The expected social benefit is huge, since fast and accurate flood extent mapping immediately after a disaster can save a lot of lives.”

The UAB team will use their \$25,000 grand prize to attend scientific conferences and visit research institutions, fostering innovative collaborations and using advanced technology to further develop their flood mapping tool.

SHOWCASING HISTORY

UAB’S LIBRARIES are home to rich historical collections, such as letters from Florence Nightingale, medical instruments, and documents that trace the history of Heersink School of Medicine. Under the direction of Dean Kasia Gonnerman, UAB Libraries are creating a permanent exhibition area on the second floor of Lister Hill Library.

“We envision that we will offer guided tours, podcasts, audio guides,” Gonnerman said. “We are planning to provide an immersive experience to the gallery visitors.”

This initiative has received a transformative investment from Drs. Dennis G. Pappas Sr. and Jr., a father-and-son physician duo who both specialize in otolaryngology. Pappas Sr. has long been an avid student of medical history, exploring the development of the profession and amassing an enormous and varied collection of otolaryngological artifacts during his 60-year career.

“It’s important to preserve medical history because it teaches what has been done and what the future is going to be like,” Pappas said. “It’s important to know what has happened so you don’t repeat the mistakes of the past.”

In recognition of the Pappas’ generosity, the new space will be named the Dennis G. Pappas Historical Collections Gallery.



Alesia Jones



LONDON DOME EAR TRUMPET, c. 1880

Find this early hearing aid on display in the spring 2024 exhibition.

HONORING A TRAILBLAZER

IN FEBRUARY 2021, one of UAB’s most outstanding leaders, Chief Human Resource Officer Alesia Jones, officially retired. Jones spent most of her more than 30-year career in HR at UAB, overseeing initiatives that still affect countless employees across campus, such as the creation of the OneCard and UAB becoming the first state institution to implement paid parental leave.

In addition to changing employees’ lives for the better and offering her mentorship to young professionals in Birmingham, Jones also made the lead gift to establish the HR Endowed Scholarship in the Collat School of Business (CSOB). “I wanted to find a way to give back because of the career and the field that had been so special to me...and provided the opportunities to work with all of these amazing leaders at UAB,” Jones said.

In 2023, two years after Jones’ retirement, UAB and the CSOB honored Jones’ pioneering achievements and selfless generosity by renaming the scholarship to the Alesia M. Jones HR Endowed Scholarship.

Jones made the initial gift, continues to support it annually, and left a bequest in her will. She also contacted her peers for support, and many helped to ensure the scholarship was quickly endowed.

RIISING TO THE OCCASION

VESTAVIA HILLS HIGH SCHOOL’S Rebels Impact through Service (RISE) program is a semester-long initiative dedicated to fostering service leadership among students. Since the program’s founding in 2018, VHHS students have rallied the community around worthy causes such as UAB’s Adolescent and Young Adult Oncology and Oncofertility Program, raising more than \$1 million over the past five years, including \$230,023 in 2022-2023 alone.

For Dr. Julie Anna Wolfson, director of the AYA Oncology and Oncofertility Program, it’s the RISE program’s vision that sets it apart.

“Their interest in all that we did at the Cancer Center and their quick understanding of the plight amongst adolescents and young adults with cancer was remarkable,” Wolfson said. “Their insightful questions have always shown clearly that they understand and believe in our mission. They selflessly take that understanding and compassion and work tirelessly to support us to fix these disparities and seek solutions to these problems. Our program wouldn’t exist without them.”



Vestavia Hills High School students in the RISE program celebrate their fundraising achievement.

Ever Faithful

Ever Loyal

HIGHLIGHTING ALUMNI ACHIEVEMENT

BY EMMA LANG

THE ADVOCATE

From hurricane-ravaged New Orleans to the streets of Baltimore, Allison Crandle has used her empathy and UAB education to support victims and witnesses of crime.

THE COURTROOM is silent but for the pair of shuffling feet as the young woman takes the stand to testify before the jury.

The stress feels palpable—the emotional weight of the trial cracking down like the gavel. If not for Allison Crandle, the victim might have felt helpless and unprepared. But long before the victim put her hand on the Bible to swear an oath before the court, Crandle guided her through the process to come.



Crandle serves as a victim witness coordinator for the United States Attorney’s Office in the Northern District of Texas. She became interested in criminology and forensics while studying at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and graduated from the College of Arts and Sciences in 2004 with a degree in criminal justice.

The young woman, a survivor of human trafficking, trembles before getting on the stand to testify.

At 16 years old, she was targeted through social media by a deceptively kind man. After encouraging her to smoke a fake joint, he provided her with a second—this one laced with heavy drugs.

She awoke in a hotel room to a man who abused her.

By the time she was rescued and the case went to trial, she was petrified to relive the story. Amid her fear and anxiety, Crandle was there to soften the process.

“She told me her hands were nervous, so I gave her a pop socket to fidget with. Halfway through her testimony, the judge asked what the popping noise was,” Crandle said.

Crandle serves as a victim witness coordinator for the United State’s Attorney’s Office in the Northern District of Texas.

Crandle’s thoughtfulness is one reason she’s so impactful. Former colleague Frank Burch remembers that trait well.

“She’s able to stay calm really well because of the experience she’s had dealing with victims of trauma and abuse,” Burch said. “Anytime a victim was crying over the phone or in court, she settled them down.”

For Crandle, the ability to soothe a survivor in crisis came from years of practice. Interning for the Department of Justice US Probation and Pretrial Services System during her senior year gave her the opportunity to learn the ins and outs of the justice system.

“UAB gave me the tools that I needed to be successful,” Crandle said, crediting her education with teaching her “how to network and ...land internships before I graduated so that I would have some type of experience under my belt.”

Crandle’s empathy and logistical skills have always put her face-to-face with survivors. After graduating from school, Crandle served victims of natural disasters with the Small Business Administration.

“Hurricanes, wildfires, mudslides, flooding—I was all over the country, going everywhere,” Crandle said. “I enjoyed helping people get back to where they were before the disaster.”

Crandle stayed busy in those first years after school with Hurricane Katrina. Once recovery was underway several years later, Crandle knew it was time to go back to the Department of Justice.

Crandle started as a victim witness assistant in Baltimore, Maryland, before eventually becoming a victim witness coordinator in Dallas, Texas. Through these positions, Crandle helps victims and witnesses of crimes navigate through the judicial process.

“My job is to prep them for trial,” Crandle said. “If they’re going to have to get on the stand, I show them the courtroom and make them feel comfortable.”

She not only helps ease the emotional stress of her clients, but also prepares them for what to expect once they’re in front of the judge.

“If there are witnesses in the case, they might be getting threats not to testify,” Crandle said. “I would temporarily move them to a hotel, but we also have resources to permanently relocate them as well. We always want to make sure all witnesses are kept safe.”

“

UAB gave me the tools that I needed to be successful, teaching me how to network and land internships before I graduated so that I would have some type of experience under my belt.”

—ALLISON CRANDLE

“We meet with the attorney and address the questions that the defense might ask just so they’re not caught off-guard,” Crandle said. “I always tell them if they need a focal point, they can look at me because the defendant will be looking their way.”

She also manages the necessary logistics to move her clients through the process. Crandle operates a Victim Notification System that sends letters and emails to each victim with an update on the status of their case. She also books hotels for victims for their court appearances and ensures their expenses are reimbursed.

In Baltimore, Crandle oversaw an Emergency Witness Assistance Program to assist witnesses who were impacted by the city’s wide-spread gang-related violence with relocation.

Although Crandle mostly serves victims of white-collar crimes in Dallas, she also helps survivors of human trafficking and child exploitation.

“There’s a lot of business headquarters in Dallas, so fraud and embezzlement are prevalent here,” Crandle said.

Before, during, and after the trial, Crandle serves victims and their families by helping them locate resources to get back to a normal life.

“Being able to offer others support in navigating through a difficult chapter of their life, by informing them of their rights, assisting with resources, and just being a consistent face during the process is why my job is meaningful and fulfilling to me,” Crandle said.

2023 ALUMNI RISING STARS

The National Alumni Society established the Rising Star Awards in 2017 to honor five young alumni who excel personally and professionally while serving the university and community. Meet the winners who are blazing a path for future generations of UAB graduates.

Brittany Dionne

Brittany Dionne has been a voice for her community for more than a decade. Since graduating from the UAB College of Arts and Sciences in 2011, she has served as a journalist and spokesperson for the residents of Birmingham.

In August 2023, after four years working as a reporter and weekend anchor for WBRC in Birmingham, Dionne was promoted to weekday evening anchor.

Dionne isn't just concerned with her own career growth; she advocates for her team, facilitating training workshops to help improve content development execution. She has also successfully implemented digital marketing strategies to grow social media platforms that have exceeded company goals.

Dionne is a Birmingham native and former member of the Marching Blazers. She received an ABBY award in 2021, was nominated for an EMMY in 2022, and won the award for Best Anchor from the Alabama Broadcasters Association earlier this year. Dionne is currently pursuing an MBA from the UAB Collat School of Business.

Valencia Wells, O.D.

If there's one thing Valencia Wells, O.D., has, it's vision. She's known since she was in eighth grade that she wanted to pursue optometry as a career. She not only achieved that goal, graduating from the UAB School of Optometry in 2009, but also has owned and operated her own comprehensive eyecare clinic, Morris Avenue Eyecare, since 2013.

Shortly after becoming an optometrist, Wells put her knowledge to the test by traveling to Belize, where she and the optometry team treated approximately 800



Brittany Dionne



Jose O. Maximo, Ph.D.



Valencia Wells, O.D.

residents. She's carried that commitment to service with her ever since.

Wells also shares her expertise and works to increase public awareness of several optometric issues. She has been featured on *Good Day Alabama*, *CBS 12 News*, and *Talk of Alabama* to promote Children's Eye Health Month, Glaucoma Awareness Month, and Diabetic Eye Disease Awareness Month. Each summer, she promotes science, technology, engineering, and math to young minority women by organizing hands-on optometry workshops through the Girls Impact STEM program. She also hosts a Birmingham Promise apprentice and Summer Kids intern.

Wells was selected as a 2021 Top 40 under 40 and Woman to Watch by the *Birmingham Business Journal*.

Jose O. Maximo, Ph.D.

Apart from the everyday research Jose O. Maximo, Ph.D. conducts, he commits his time to helping others.

While pursuing a doctorate in lifespan and developmental psychology in 2018 at UAB, Maximo worked in a lab dedicated to the study of autism spectrum disorders. He now works in a lab that researches the use of multimodal brain imaging techniques to study the neuropathology of psychosis spectrum disorders, like schizophrenia, and how psychotropic drugs affect the brain.

His care for others doesn't stop there. He has an unwavering commitment to diversity and inclusion, working as a career coach for the UAB Neuroscience Roadmap Scholar Program, which he was enrolled in as a student. Through this position, he mentors underrepresented graduate student trainees to ensure their success.

Maximo juggles these positions well with 27 peer-reviewed publications, 66 research presentations, and 21 awards over the course of his college and professional career. He also teaches part-time at Jefferson State Community College, where he serves as co-advisor for the Latino Student Association.

Davina Patterson

Davina Patterson chose UAB because she was interested in dentistry. She also wanted to honor her twin sisters, who aspired to attend UAB before their death from cancer at age 17. After one year of school, Patterson's interests changed from dentistry to healthcare management, with a specific passion for healthcare advocacy on behalf of rural and minority populations.

Since graduating from the UAB School of Health Professions in 2009, Patterson has taken seriously the task of impacting others. She serves as the executive director of the Disability Resource Network, where her career is centered on helping people with significant disabilities live independent lives.

In an article for *Authority Magazine*, Patterson said, "I work for Disability Resource Network because I wanted to be a part of an organization that empowers people with disabilities. Disability is diversity and people with disability should receive reasonable accommodations."

Patterson's role made history. She not only works at the first center for independent living in north Alabama, but also serves as the first female director of an independent living facility in the entire state.

Patterson received the 2023 *Huntsville Business Journal* Inaugural Top 40 Under 40 and 2020 40 Under 40 Honoree for 256 *Magazine*.

Valentine Nwachukwu

Valentine Nwachukwu taught himself to code at age 12. Through his curiosity, drive, and determination, Nwachukwu grew to become a computer scientist and visionary business leader.

After holding positions at Boeing, Amazon, and Northrop Grumman, Nwachukwu now impacts the technology industry as CEO and president of Zaden Technologies.

"His unique combination of deep technical expertise and business acumen has driven the development of pioneering solutions that are reshaping how software development



Davina Patterson



Valentine Nwachukwu

teams operate, particularly within the defense sector," Zaden Technologies COO Jason West said.

At Zaden Technologies, Nwachukwu offers DevSecOps Infrastructure-as-a-Service—a process that automates the integration of security at every phase of the software development lifecycle. This allows him to facilitate speed and quality that elevates the success of various defense contractors and numerous industries.

But his achievements go beyond his professional life. Nwachukwu is the founder of Zedge Records, a record label focused on promoting African artists. As a first-generation Nigerian immigrant, Nwachukwu invests 10 percent of Zedge Records' profits to help bridge the wealth gap in African communities.

Nwachukwu graduated from the UAB School of Engineering and Honors College in 2014 and was featured on the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list in 2022.

Valentine Nwachukwu, Valencia Wells, O.D., Brittany Dionne, Davina Patterson and Jose O. Maximo, Ph.D. at the Alumni Awards Dinner ceremony.





BEHIND — THE — SCENES

BY SHANNON THOMASON

PHOTOS BY
JENNIFER ALSABROOK-TURNER,
ANDREA MABRY, AND SHANNON ROBINSON

People say UAB is like a city, and they're not wrong. With a geographic area of more than 105 city blocks and more than 28,000 employees—not to mention many thousands of students, patients, and visitors on our campus and in our buildings around the clock—keeping things running smoothly requires careful organization and a herculean effort every day.

Many hands keep UAB running. Some roles receive much attention, while others may be mostly unsung. A range of specific skills, responsibilities, and shifts are often necessary, and finding and retaining employees who have particular training and an ability to work all hours of the day and night is no easy task.

While a single magazine story can't begin to describe all that UAB people do to keep this institution running, we wanted to highlight how some of our employees get the job done, from food service in UAB Hospital to the Steam Plant operation to putting on exhibitions at Abroms-Engel Institute for the Visual Arts.

Here's to the many committed Blazers who keep the wheels turning and the flame burning.



MEALS THAT HELP HEAL PATIENTS

Nutritious meals are a huge part of healing. When a patient in UAB Hospital orders a meal from the menu, the dedicated food services staff rely on a carefully designed system to deliver the best experience they can. Workers can prepare up to 3,600 meals in a day for patients and staff, every day, year-round—but not without challenges.

You can win people over with food, says Associate Vice President of Food, Nutrition and Guest Services John Brad Morrow, but you can also get them frustrated.

Meals are served room-service-style to patients, but few hotels, even with 1,000 rooms, would feed their customers breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The magnitude of the task boggles the mind. For instance, a diabetic patient must eat before dialysis or risk blood sugar dropping. Someone who fasted prior to a procedure is now ready to eat. People with allergies need food prepared with extra care. Staff need something they can grab and go.

Two kitchens provide patient service: one at the main UAB Hospital campus with 200 full time employees, and a second at UAB Highlands with 100 full time employees. A third kitchen feeds staff and visitors in the North Pavilion cafeteria. Highlands is a hybrid kitchen, cooking for the cafeteria and patients.

The main kitchen for patients is in the West Pavilion and serves 900 meals daily plus snacks. Ingredient prep plays a big part; just like at home, it saves money to perform tasks like slicing beef into tips rather than purchasing pre-sliced.

Overall, it is a massive operation, with an executive chef, a food service director, a management team, and
(continued on next page)



It takes a team: food is cooked and plated on the tray service lines, then delivered to patients by runners with trolleys. Food preparation, including slicing vegetables for salads, helps the kitchen run efficiently.



supervisors over everything from the call center to sanitation to the tray service lines where the food is cooked, plated, and prepared for delivery. It's a fast-paced job, and some of the roles are physically demanding. Like many businesses, food services can struggle with staff shortages. Capable and willing applicants can get training on the job.

Workers who take patient orders by phone are called diet clerks and are skilled in dietary and nutritional information as well as customer service. Meals are delivered on trollies manned by runners, and the clock is ticking to make sure each tray is fresh. If the timer runs down, that food is returned to the kitchen and the meals are remade. It's a long distance from the West Pavilion to the Women and Infants Center or the North Pavilion, which does create some time challenges.

"With six million square feet in the hospital as a whole, and typically with as many beds as we have now, it is unprecedented that we have just one kitchen at the main campus," Morrow said. Work with a consultant is underway to look at a strategic expansion plan to further improve food services.

Each patient's diet plan is driven by a clinical nutrition team. Medical records provide a patient's restrictions or allergies. The system,

informed by a dietician, will dictate what a patient can and cannot have. If the order has too much sodium, too many calories or a problematic ingredient, it literally can't be ordered. Pleasing people with their favorite flavor preferences, even for something as simple as a nutrient shake, is no small task.

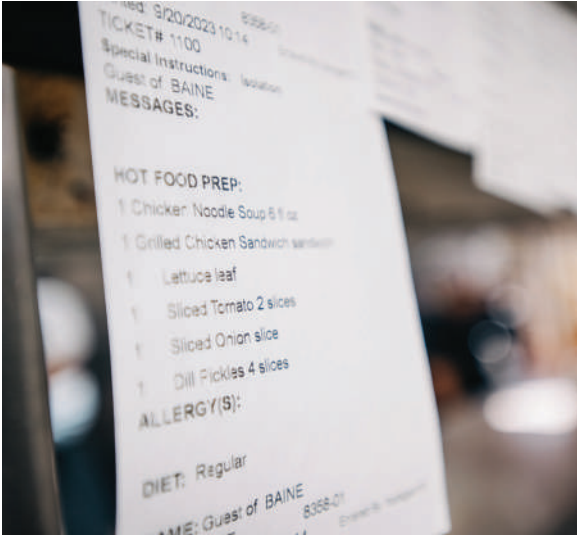
"If a patient really wants a Caesar salad and it is not on the menu, we try to accommodate those when and where possible," Morrow said. "Right now, we have a patient who has been here for some time and his favorite thing is cheese pizza. We have provided a pizza for him that we can feed him as often as he wants. It's pretty awesome."

Here in the South, it's no surprise that the No. 1 food patients like to order is fried chicken.

"People love what they love, and we want people to be happy with what they are getting," Morrow said. It won't be deep fried, but prepared in air fryers. The calories and sodium in food served to the general population is also carefully considered.

"Our goal is to come up with healthy alternatives, and we also want to provide a level of education," he said. "Let's get you home and then you can have the diet you want—even though you need to pay attention to your health care."

UAB Hospital's workers prepare everything from fresh bread to desserts. The computer system keeps track of food allergies, dietary restrictions, calorie counts and more, to ensure meals are custom-designed for each patient's needs. The average length of stay at UAB is likely longer than what most would prefer, due to level of acuity at the hospital, so having a rotating menu with variations and choices is extremely important.



300
FULL TIME
EMPLOYEES



3 KITCHENS

3,600

2 CAFETERIAS

MAXIMUM NUMBER OF MEALS
PREPARED IN A SINGLE DAY

6 MILLION

SQUARE FEET HOSPITAL AREA SERVED



STEAM THAT POWERS CAMPUS

A simple process—which works much like the pressure cooker your grandmother may have used to cook green beans—provides heat and hot water across UAB's campus.

That is the analogy Matt Winslett, director of Utilities Management, uses to describe the UAB Steam Plant. Heating water in a lidded pot increases pressure, along with the boiling point of the water inside, and cooks the beans a lot faster. This principle is known as Boyle's Law.

However, this simple process uses a lot of complicated equipment.

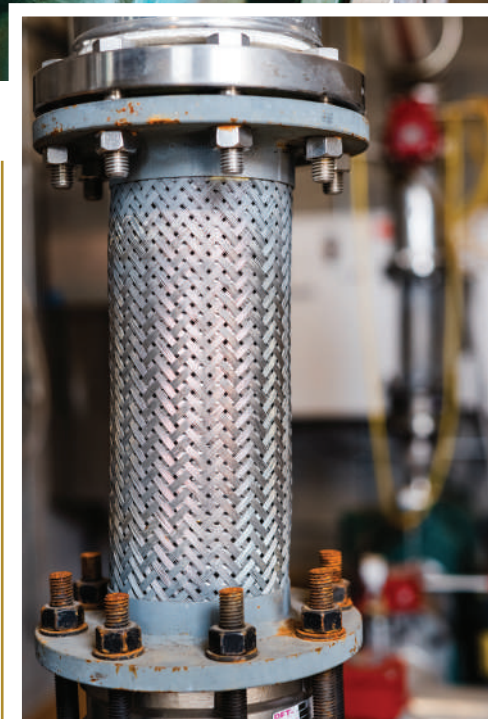
UAB started operation of its own single district steam plant in spring 2013. It sits at the corner of Sixth Avenue South and 13th Street, across from Bartow Arena. Inside are four massive, water-tube boilers. Powered by natural gas, the boiler sends steam through nearly four miles of pipe to 45 buildings across campus and provides critical sterilization, humidification and dehumidification for operating rooms, research areas, and more.

When Alabama Power closed its old Powell Avenue steam plant in 2008, UAB commissioned several studies on how to replace it. After spending two years analyzing 30 different options, the decision was made to build the university's own plant. A condensate return system was one reason; the capture of hot condensate, left over from the steam and returned to the boiler for re-use, makes it much more efficient.

Two boilers are always online together; in case one fails, another can immediately back it up. Water comes in at a prescribed rate, based on how much steam is required, from three possible sources. The boiler heats the water to 435 degrees Fahrenheit steam and 140 pounds per square inch. The pressure alone sends it through the pipes out across campus, and by the time it reaches a building, it's at about 350-375 degrees Fahrenheit.

The state-of-the-art system has backups to backups, with systems fed by two different Alabama Power Company substations. The

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Each of the four boilers can convert 80,000 pounds of water into usable steam per hour. The water comes from three sources: drinking water, lake water, and on-site well water. The steam pipe runs underground at depths of 3 to 20 feet. Powered by natural gas, the boiler sends steam through nearly four miles of pipe to 45 buildings across campus. Workers in the pipe fitter department take care of the steam distribution lines.



LEFT: Boiler Operator Craig Stillwell takes live boiler parameter readings, which are manually done “hands-on” to keep everyone aware of the status of the boilers that are in operation. Water is heated to 435 degrees Fahrenheit steam and 140 pounds per square inch, which sends it through the pipes. By the time it reaches a building, it’s at about 350-375 degrees Fahrenheit. At least two operators from the team of 12 are always on the job to monitor the state-of-the-art system and listen for alarms. Half learned their trade in the military.



sophisticated operations interface boasts some of the finest controls and monitoring equipment, and “looks like something you can control the space shuttle with,” Winslett said. The sealed control room is quiet and calm, with workers looking out through an observational window and always listening for the sound of alarms. In case of power failure, fly wheels that work off momentum will hold the 480-volt electrical load for up to three minutes until diesel generators can come online. The use of fuel oil as a backup can be cumbersome and expensive but was necessary for 48 hours during Christmas 2022.

“It is really high tech and really well thought-out to keep the place online, because it can never go down,” Winslett said. “It must run every day of the year; it is a 24/7, 365-day operation. It is safe and efficient, and meticulous records are kept of everything.”

A crew of 12 operators oversee the boilers, with two or three people there around the clock. At least half are former

military, trained in the Navy or Air Force, says Instrument and Control Technician Mark Willard, while the rest earned their know-how at other facilities. It’s becoming more and more difficult to find workers skilled in the trade, Willard says. He and one other worker oversee instrument control work. A boiler mechanic maintains up to 140 boilers in individual buildings on campus and handles provision of domestic hot water for washing and other uses. Along with the team putting the steam out, a pipe fitter department takes care of the steam distribution lines.

The system has never gone down, thanks to the redundancies.

“We have had emergencies when it was going down, but we were able to save it,” Winslett said.

A boiler has been lost only a couple of times in 10 years, something he credits to Willard, “an amazing technical mind,” Winslett said. “He knows everything about this system.”



\$72 MILLION
2013 CONSTRUCTION COSTS

27,000
FT OF STEAM PIPE

161 VALVES

50 MILLION
GALLONS OF WATER SAVED ANNUALLY

45
BUILDINGS
CONNECTED BY
STEAM SYSTEM





ART THAT INSPIRES THE COMMUNITY

What does it mean to be human? For the staff at UAB's Abroms-Engel Institute for the Visual Arts Art, the answer to that question is art.

Contemporary art in a place like Birmingham, Alabama, is not necessarily an easy sell. No one expected AEIVA to be as successful as it has become. But since opening in January 2014, AEIVA has presented 83 exhibitions, had nearly 60,000 visitors, and become a premier destination in the state and region.

"The value of a work of art is only as good as the conversation that it facilitates," said John Fields, AEIVA's Jim Sokol and Lydia Cheney endowed director. "We have always recognized, with contemporary art, specifically, the tremendous opportunity there is to have conversations about the world around us."

Years before an exhibition takes place, the conversation begins between the curator and artist. But what everyone can't wait to hear is what viewers will say when the works are finally on display in AEIVA's three galleries.

Some shows are curated as part of a thematic idea, but most exhibitions are solo with a single artist whose work connects to something relevant in Birmingham on a conceptual level. Rotating exhibitions are presented quarterly, displaying works by legendary artists such as Andy Warhol and Thornton Dial and new artists such as Jaqueline Surdell and Michael Dixon. Most of the featured new artists are making new work specifically for the show and are not from the region.

The ambition of these exhibitions is daunting. "People's eyes get wide when we start talking about what actually has to happen for these works to get here," Fields said.

Although AEIVA's space equals that of larger institutions, they have fewer staff, with a core of five full-time employees who are visual artists themselves or typically have master's or terminal degrees in art.

"We approach every show as if we are in MoMA in terms of the quality and ambition, but we try not to lose sight of how our exhibits intersect with what it means to be Southern," Fields said.

The artwork is on loan, either from the artist or a collector. The first question is how to get the art here. With a 6-foot-wide scale model, they print the artworks to scale and hang them as they would in real life. The team must be incredibly organized up front, choosing just the right amount of work to be included. Storage is an issue, while shipping is the No. 1 expense. They budget almost to the penny.

Handling art includes restrictions in how it travels, via special shipping companies whose employees are trained in proper protocol for handling artwork. There will be a lot of physicality, brain work, and logistics.

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The work "Adoration Garden" by artist Jacqueline Surdell is the most physically demanding piece AEIVA has presented. The piece arrived from Chicago, and UAB Arts Alliance senior stage manager Seth Cain and staff volunteered to help install it. Made with nylon cord and steel spool for this exhibition, the piece is estimated to weigh more than 500 pounds.





Lily Reeves delivered her fragile neon works from New Mexico herself. AEIVA staff once drove nonstop from Philadelphia to Birmingham with a van full of sculptures, because once in their possession, insurance dictated they could not leave the art unattended.

Along with exhibition design and layout, installation is an art form itself, requiring experience and precision, says Fields, who was a student gallery assistant while earning his undergraduate degree at UAB, and still enjoys doing AEIVAs lighting himself.

"We start out with a traditional approach, where everything is evenly spaced and formal, and then once you get it to that point, you can identify opportunities to creatively break those rules," he said.

It is vital to ensure what they present is culturally accurate. Many of the exhibitions AEIVA presents deal with difficult subject matters. Cultural institutions are now realizing they cannot tell other people's story without their involvement. By inviting experts to contribute, community curation helps everyone feel ownership over the exhibitions.

"When we write the text panels, we are trying to make someone think about the world in a way they maybe have not thought of before, while also respecting that the viewer's interpretation will be informed by their personal life experiences," Fields said.

Once the work is on the wall, the public programming kicks in and the conversation begins all over again.

"None of it means anything if no one sees it," Fields said. ■



The AEIVA team plans far in advance, but also must remain flexible until the moment the show opens. For the Michael Dixon exhibition, conversation with the artist started five years in advance. With more than 40 paintings in his show, the staff had to remove three once they arrived because there were too many for the space.

83 EXHIBITIONS SINCE JANUARY 2014

10,000 LBS. WEIGHT OF HEAVIEST EXHIBITION (THORNTON DIAL) **60,000** VISITORS SINCE OPENING

30X 

HOW OFTEN WALLS HAVE BEEN REPAINTED

30-80 NUMBER OF LIGHTS/EXHIBITION





MADAM PRESIDENT

BY MATT WINDSOR | PHOTOS BY ANDREA MABRY

Trailblazing presidents of the Graduate Student Government Association have made the most of their opportunities.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Autumn Massey Sims,
Jazmine Benjamin, and
Sade Williams Clayton

You can pick your friends, according to the popular saying, but you can't pick your family. If you were setting out to be a scientist, you probably would not choose to be born in rural Georgia, down a dirt road, in a family where no one had been to college or very far outside the county. But life is what you make of it—and what others, family and friends in particular, make of you.

The doctor on the other end of the Zoom call, advancing regenerative medicine in a lab at Washington University in St. Louis, is proof of that. She is light years away from where her journey started in the tiny town of Girard—which she describes as “200 people, two convenience stores and one barbecue restaurant.” And her path from Girard to St. Louis has been anything but straightforward.

Sade Williams Clayton, Ph.D., is a Blazer and a trailblazer. She is a 2021 graduate of UAB's doctoral program in Graduate Biomedical Sciences, the first in her family to go to college and the first Black woman to be elected president of UAB's Graduate Student Government. Her example has been an inspiration for the three Black women who have succeeded her as GSG leaders—Jazmine Benjamin, Autumn Massey-Sims, and the current president, Shaurita Hutchins—and a beacon for others looking to succeed without losing themselves on the way.

“I feel as though it is your duty to identify traits in people and encourage them,” Clayton said. “If only someone had looked at me and saw what I was going through and supported me.”

“Being the Graduate Student Government president is always a big responsibility,” said David Schneider, Ph.D., professor and associate dean for the Graduate Biomedical Sciences in the UAB Graduate School. “I interact with the presidents through the Graduate School Advisory Council, and one thing that you can see in Sade, Jazmine, Autumn, and Shaurita is that they always participated, even when they were not leaders and not ‘responsible.’ They have always showed that they cared.”

“A lot of times, Black women get passed over for leadership positions,” said Benjamin. “It's nice to exemplify that we are able to lead successfully.”

The role of president, Massey-Sims explained, “is to talk with students, see what needs to be addressed, and advocate for them to administration.”

“I have been able to follow in the footsteps of people who are themselves tremendous leaders,” Hutchins said. “I feel like we represent what UAB is about—all of us have dealt with so many life events and school events.”

“We are in this together,” Clayton added. “The picture is people holding hands in a chain. That is the bond. We are very similar and also very different. We each have our own story, but we support each other.”



SADE WILLIAMS CLAYTON, PH.D.

President, 2019–2020

*Rita Levi-Montalcini Post Doctoral Fellow
in Regenerative Medicine, Washington University St. Louis*

This summer, Clayton spoke to the GROW at UAB group in the Graduate School for its My Story series. (GROW stands for Graduate Resilience, Outreach, and Wellness.)

“I had to be self-reliant from an early age,” Clayton said. “The only thing I could do is read; I poured myself into places I thought I would never see.” School opened up another world. “I knew that education was freedom,” Clayton said. “I was going to get out of this small town and go to college.”

Clayton was the first high school honors graduate in her family and the first to attend college. “I got accepted to my top choice, the University of Georgia—which was good, because I could only afford to fill out one application,” she said. But the first two years of college were “culture shock,” Clayton said. “I had no motivation, I was isolated from friends, was anxious and stressed, and I struggled in my classes.” She lost her state Hope Scholarship and, unable to pay her bills, “I got kicked out of school,” she said.

Clayton went home, exhausted and defeated. “I tried,” she thought. “It wasn’t in the cards.” But her family was not willing to let that be the end of it. They banded together and paid the \$3,000 bill that would allow her to go back to college. “We weren’t a hugging family,” Clayton recalled. “Acts of service are how we express love. I was driving in the car with my cousin, and she said ‘We got you. We will get you back in that school.’ They believed in me. They were proud of me. I felt like God was giving me a second chance.”

Clayton took every advantage. “I asked for help,” she said. She switched her major to cell biology, which “allowed me to take specialized courses

and enjoy science,” she said. “Developmental biology is what changed my life.” She excelled in her classes, made the dean’s list and decided to go to graduate school. She applied to several programs; during her interview at UAB, she met Maigen Bethea, who was then a second-year student in the Graduate Biomedical Sciences program. “She is also a Black woman,” Clayton said. “When we talked, what I heard was, ‘We’re in this together.’”

Clayton determined to do the same for younger students. “I want to pour into people and love on people,” she said. She also was out to prove that the poor grades from her early undergraduate career did not define her. “I had a 4.0 GPA in graduate school,” Clayton said proudly.

That’s how she met her best friend, Jazmine Benjamin. “High-performing students are asked if they want to be tutors, and Sade was heavily involved,” said Schneider. “She was a really great tutor for the advanced genetics course.”

Shaurita Hutchins also got to know Clayton in the same way. “My mom had gotten sick in September, just after I started graduate school, and I was having a difficult time,” Hutchins said. “I reached out to her to ask how I could do better in the class and she said, ‘I know you are going through a lot. Grad school is really hard and people aren’t always going to have that grace for you. But just know that you can do this. Grad school doesn’t stop and neither does life, so you have to find a balance.’ Any time I think things are going crazy, I try to put them into perspective: How do I move through this, sort it out, and not let it send me into a spiral?”

“You come in with your own mission that fits in with the scope of GSG. Mine was advocacy work. Community is a big thing for me.”

—SADE WILLIAMS CLAYTON, PH.D.

After a few years of graduate school, Clayton decided she was going to pull back and focus on her studies. But the GSG president at the time, Nirzari Gupta, would not take no for an answer. “She saw that I really enjoyed professional outreach and leadership,” Clayton said. “She encouraged me to be president.”

Each GSG president has leeway to develop their own agenda. “You come in with your own mission that fits in with the scope of GSG,” Clayton said. “Mine was advocacy work. Community is a big thing for me: How can I foster community, to make people feel less isolated and alone?”

She has continued to do that at Washington University in St. Louis, even though she had told herself that she was done starting organizations. Soon after she arrived, she founded Wash U’s first Black postdoctoral association, the WUSTL Black Postdoctoral Association. “I couldn’t help myself,” she said. “Sometimes you have to create the resources you need.”

After her postdoc, Clayton aims to secure a tenure-track faculty position. “I would love to come back to UAB,” she said. “My ultimate goal is to be able to create pathways to make this process easier for underrepresented students interested in research. I could see myself as an associate dean of diversity, equity, and inclusion and vice president of research.”



JAZMINE BENJAMIN

President, 2020–2021

*Doctoral student, Graduate Biomedical Sciences,
studying sodium dependent and independent mechanisms of blood pressure control
in the lab of Professor David Pollock, Ph.D., in the Division of Nephrology*

Although they grew up only about 20 minutes apart in eastern Georgia, Clayton and Benjamin did not meet until graduate school. That is not where Benjamin thought she would end up.

“I was really interested in science and research as a kid,” Benjamin said. She grew up in a military family; they were stationed in Columbus, Georgia, when she was born, but later moved to Augusta. “When I graduated from high school I wanted to be a fashion designer, but I settled on being a surgeon to make money,” she said. “My heart wasn’t in it.”

Still, she majored in biology as an undergraduate at the University of South Carolina Aiken. During one class, a teacher who saw her promise suggested she go to graduate school instead of medical school. “That was my junior year,” she said. “I had to play catchup.” Her choice to enroll at UAB was late in coming, too, “but it’s not one I regret at all,” Benjamin said.

“I met Sade during my first year” in the Graduate Biomedical Sciences program, Benjamin said. “She was a tutor for one of my classes and the lab I joined was right next door to her lab. She would come and ask to borrow something and the friendship developed from there.”

After Clayton became president of the Graduate Student Government in 2019, she recruited Benjamin to join her as chief of staff—a role that Clayton created. “I was her understudy,” Benjamin said.

Benjamin had a particularly difficult task as GSG president. She took office just as the COVID pandemic was at its most frightening in spring 2020 and held the post for two consecutive year-long terms. “They were two very interesting, fast-paced years,” Benjamin

said. “There was a steep learning curve, but I got to see the inner workings of how UAB was able to get safely back on campus and back to some semblance of normalcy. I got to talk to Dr. Faircloth [Michael Faircloth, M.D., director of UAB Student Health Services] very candidly about what was going on in the hospital, in student housing. That is something that I would have been out of the loop on at any other time, and it was comforting that my voice was being considered.”

When she was president, Benjamin kept in regular touch with Clayton. After her time in office, she did the same for Massey-Sims and now Hutchins. “We have kept a contact chain going,” Benjamin said. “If you need to remember someone’s name or the proper channel to go through.”

Benjamin, who is graduating in December 2023, is going on to a postdoc position at Vanderbilt University. She has a long-term goal of being involved in advocacy. “I cofounded the Science Policy and Advocacy Initiative here at UAB” with former Graduate Biomedical Sciences student Adrienne Samani, Ph.D. “I was also a graduate fellow for the Alabama chapter of the Scholars Strategy Network,” founded by faculty members Peggy Biga, Ph.D., in the Department of Biology, and Peter Jones, Ph.D., in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, she said. “I was a graduate fellow for them up until last year and was able to see that from the ground up.”

“As a scientist, almost everything I do will touch on matters of policy,” Benjamin said. “Politics is a little too fast-paced for me, but I am continuously interested in how it works.”

“There was a steep learning curve, but I got to see the inner workings of how UAB was able to get safely back on campus and back to some semblance of normalcy.”

—JAZMINE BENJAMIN *on being GSG president during the COVID pandemic*



AUTUMN MASSEY-SIMS

President, 2022–2023

*MBA student, Collat School of Business
Compensation analyst, UAB Human Resources*

For Massey-Sims, a Birmingham native and full-time UAB employee for the past four years, graduate school is a family affair. “My mom went to UAB for undergrad and for her MBA, and my sister also is in the MBA program,” she said. “My sister works in HR as well, in Talent Acquisition, and my mom works in the School of Medicine.”

It was her mother’s experience that convinced Massey-Sims to go back to school. “I’m a very big family person,” she said. “I saw how having the MBA helped elevate my mom’s career, which inspired me to follow in her footsteps.”

But despite being in a familiar place, Massey-Sims realized she needed more than her employee experience to make graduate school a success. “I started during the pandemic, so I was really looking for ways to connect and be around other students, find out what was going on around campus and get help navigating the pandemic,” she said. “I had been very involved as an undergraduate student and I was looking for organizations specifically for graduate students.”

That led her to GSG. “We’re an organization that represents the entire graduate student body—every student is a member,” Massey-Sims said. “All students are invited to all of our meetings and there is an open floor. We have a monthly meeting with the provost. The administrators are always really helpful and if they do not know an answer they will provide you with a contact who can help.”

When Massey-Sims first joined GSG, she was a senator from the Collat School of Business. “The number of senators is based on enrollment,” she explained. “That changes annually. But even if you are not a senator, you are still a part of the GSG family.”

“We’re an organization that represents the entire graduate student body—every student is a member. All students are invited to all of our meetings and there is an open floor.”

—AUTUMN MASSEY-SIMS

“They have really paved the way for me to come in. To be a part of this group and legacy with Shaurita is quite something.”

—AUTUMN MASSEY-SIMS
*on following Sade and Jazmine as GSG President
and preceding Shaurita*

Massey-Sims presided over the return of GSG to in-person events. One of the highlights of her term, she says, was creating two new positions—a health and wellness officer and an international student liaison. During her term, the GSG also restructured its senate “to make sure we are getting more people from a variety of schools and backgrounds,” Massey-Sims said, and “rolled out a new allocation model for student group funding.”

Following Clayton and Benjamin in the GSG presidency has been “phenomenal,” Massey-Sims said. “They have really paved the way for me to come in. To be a part of this group and legacy with Shaurita is quite something.”

Massey-Sims says that her long-term career goal is to eventually become director of human resources in an organization. “It would be lovely if that organization was UAB,” she said. “I have been a student, alumna and now employee here. It would be an honor.”

FINDING HER PATH

The current GSG president looks back and forward

SHAURITA HUTCHINS

President, 2023–2024

*Doctoral student, Graduate Biomedical Sciences, studying rare disease
genomics in the lab of Elizabeth Worthey, Ph.D., director of the UAB Center
for Computational Genomics and Data Science*

Hutchins hails from West Point, Mississippi. After graduating from Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans with a degree in biology in 2010, and a master’s degree in biological sciences from Mississippi College in 2012, she worked as a researcher at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, first in the center’s cancer institute and then in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior.

She credits her lab’s principal investigator, Eric Vallender, Ph.D., with “setting us free,” Hutchins said. “He was very empowering to allow me to explore learning and programming,” she said. Vallender also “inspired me to apply to UAB,” Hutchins said. “He knew some people who had been here and felt it was a good place for me. And he was right.”

Hutchins had her graduate school interview at UAB in March 2020. “A week later, everything shut down, including my job,” Hutchins said. “I got accepted and had to decide if I would come or not.” Hutchins went home to visit her mother, who was struggling with an illness that would eventually lead to her death. “She was very supportive of me going to graduate school,” Hutchins said. “She said, ‘You need to go study.’”

Hutchins started classes in fall 2020, “when everything was remote,” she said. “People in my year, we always look at that and say, ‘We survived it, so we can survive anything.’” The lost time around COVID helped spark an intense desire to surround herself with a support system, Hutchins adds. “I just wanted to do anything and everything—meet people, explore Birmingham and create my family here,” she said. Hutchins’ lab mate encouraged her to join the Informatics Club, which remains a ruling passion for her, she says, and she became part of the Black Graduate Student Organization and Student Advocacy Board. After she was nominated for professional development and leadership chair with the GSG, Hutchins talked with Benjamin “about what GSG does and I said, ‘This is right up my alley.’”

“Jazmine was very encouraging,” Hutchins said. That was important to her, because “for a lot of us incoming students, especially the 2020

cohort of GBS students, Jazmine was someone we all looked up to as a student leader, who encouraged others to get involved. I look at her and say, ‘If I can be a grad student like that, I will have done a good job.’”

As Massey-Sims was finishing her term as president, she encouraged Hutchins to consider taking on the role. “Autumn was saying, ‘Shaurita, we need someone,’” Hutchins recalled. “‘You have the skills and I think you should do it.’” Her best friend, Hailey Levi, was nominated for vice president. “We didn’t plan that,” Hutchins said. “But we were talking about it and said, let’s go for it. And thankfully we have a lot of returning officers, so there is a lot of continuity.”

During her term as president, “the number one priority is student advocacy,” Hutchins said. She would like to create a GSG Emergency Fund to assist with non-medical emergencies. She also would like to make “tangible improvements in access to mental health for graduate students a priority.” Another priority is to make sure that graduate students “feel part of a community,” Hutchins said, “to create this environment where students feel they can speak about issues, where they are a part of something bigger.”

Hutchins said that her goal, post-graduate school, “is to go into industry for a little bit.” Long-term, “I really want to be part of shaping the ethics of using big data in genomics,” she said. “I see being in public health policy and shaping those conversations and making sure that all people are adequately represented. I think there’s a path there.” ■

“[I would like] to create this environment where students feel they can speak about issues, where they are a part of something bigger.”

—SHAURITA HUTCHINS



*A River Runs
Through It*

THROUGH IT THROUGH IT

BY HALLEY COTTON

PHOTOS BY HALLEY COTTON & ANDREA MABRY

W

hen I first thought about kayaking

the whole of the Cahaba River, the idea was a passing fancy; a *wouldn't-it-be-nice-if* sort of dream. But then I saw a glimmer of opportunity when filling out a grant proposal for a poetry fellowship with the Alabama State Council on the Arts. What if I were to kayak the entire river and produce a sort of multimedia travelogue of photography and poetry? I pitched the project and promptly forgot about it. Then in an unexpected turn of events, I got the grant.



The Cahaba River is 194 miles long, spans five counties, and provides drinking water to 60 percent of central Alabamians. It springs out of the ground between Trussville and Springville and oxbows its way across some of the most biodiverse landscape on the continent before meeting up with the Alabama River just outside of Selma. A gem of ecology, the river is captivatingly gorgeous and home to many rare and endangered species. It's also radically different from beginning to end. The Upper Cahaba is shallow and rocky as it crosses the trace tailings of the Appalachian Mountain range, while the Lower Cahaba widens out into deeper and sandier stretch through the Coastal Plains region.

In November 2022, I began mapping out a float plan that would take me 180 contiguous miles, navigate five dams, and somehow come to terms with late spring weather in Alabama. I had figured the trip would take me anywhere from 9 to 14 days, but I didn't know for sure because I'd never done anything like this before. I'd never overnighted on a kayak trip, though I had done some weekend backpacking to the middle of nowhere. As soon as I had my plan, I had to wait for the perfect moment. The timing had to be just right as I was dodging thunderstorms and watching water levels. On May 25th, I set out on rushing flood water from the Grant's Mill kayak launch; 11 days later and battling a powerful headwind, I finally crossed from the Cahaba into the Alabama River at the Old Cahaba Archeological Park in Selma.



The draw of the river is magnetic; it pulls people together.



This whole trip was triggered by a whim, yet it was life changing. The draw of the river is magnetic; it pulls people together. What started as a solitary project quickly grew into a community-oriented endeavor. I blogged my way through preparation for the trip and at every step found support and encouragement for the adventure. So many people sought me out to share with me their own experiences with the Cahaba, offering up their stories and their excitement.

Even though I'm mostly off the river now with fall semester in full swing, I'm working to bring the Cahaba into my classroom with a pilot of one of the new Blazer Core Curriculum classes: Writing in Birmingham. We're currently partnering with the Cahaba River Society to update and repackage the curriculum for their Shane Hulsey CLEAN Environmental Program. My own introduction to the Cahaba was with a middle school trip with the Cahaba River society as a part of CLEAN. So, everything feels full circle.

I'm writing about the trip more in detail at TheCahabaProject.substack.com. ■





EPIPHANY

A project
that
reaches
**body,
mind,
and
soul**

BY

MATT WINDSOR AND ANDREA MABRY

PHOTOS BY

JENNIFER ALSABROOK-TURNER AND ANDREA MABRY



The two-story, red-brick Butler Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, standing barely a mile from the campus of Tuskegee University, looms large in the history of Macon County.

A state historic marker outside the church explains that several thousand people—far too many for the sanctuary—gathered here in June 1957 for the first meeting of the Tuskegee Civic Association’s (TCA) “Crusade for Citizenship.” In an effort to prevent Black registered voters from actually voting in local elections, the state had redrawn the town’s political boundaries. At that meeting, the Rev. Kenneth L. Buford, minister of Butler Chapel and vice president of the TCA, urged listeners to boycott white businesses and to challenge the boundary legislation in court. After a boycott lasting three-and-a-half years and a landmark Supreme Court decision in 1960, Tuskegee’s original voting boundaries were restored. The TCA’s model of ongoing mass resistance, historians say, was an inspiration for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Along with ministers and local business leaders, university faculty from Tuskegee’s famed Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) played a major role in changing Macon County. The president of the TCA was Charles Gomillion, a sociology professor and dean of students at Tuskegee Institute. (Gomillion eventually earned his Ph.D. in sociology from Ohio State University in 1959.)

Today, Butler Chapel AME Zion Church is a gathering place in another fight against a threat to the Black community of Tuskegee: an unseen killer known as hypertension, or high blood pressure. And just as in the late 1950s, the effort is a partnership between churches and universities—including Tuskegee and UAB.

A GENERATIONAL HEALTH ISSUE

Black people in the United States have some of the highest rates of high blood pressure in the world. Although high blood pressure is a problem for many Americans, Black adults are particularly hard hit. About 55 percent of Black adults have high blood pressure, they are more likely to have severe high blood pressure, and they develop high blood pressure earlier in life compared with other groups. High blood pressure leads to heart attacks, strokes, heart failure, kidney disease, and vision problems.

This is an issue that crosses generations. “Most people think of hypertension as a cardiovascular disease risk factor that only impacts adults,” says Shakia Hardy, Ph.D., assistant professor in the UAB School of Public Health’s Department of Epidemiology. “But 20 percent of Black adolescents have elevated blood pressure.”

After college, and before she decided to go to graduate school, Hardy returned to her hometown in rural North Carolina to work for the local Head Start program.

“There were so many preschoolers with obesity and young parents with hypertension,” Hardy says. As a health and nutrition specialist, she directed meal and activity plans for seven Head Start centers and advised families “who experienced generational transmission of cardiovascular disease risk factors,” she says.



MAKING AN IMPACT

Hardy enjoyed the work, but “I felt the impact of our program was limited by the lack of evidence-based strategies and resources to address the social determinants of health that influenced health behaviors,” she says. Having grown up in a small town, “I know first-hand how lack of access to health care, fresh foods, and physical activity spaces in rural communities can impact health,” Hardy says.

This is a problem that is not limited to the rural South. In 2022, the American Heart Association launched a major effort to address the impact of social determinants of health on cardiovascular health. The program is known as RESTORE. It has funded programs at UAB and four other institutions nationwide to explore new approaches to the issue.

Each of the RESTORE projects looks “upstream” of the hypertension to the underlying causes and aims to test new ways to prevent people from progressing to hypertension in the first place.

“This focus on hypertension prevention in RESTORE is pretty unusual,” says Andrea Cherrington, M.D., professor in the UAB Marnix E. Heersink School of Medicine’s Division of Preventive Medicine and principal investigator at UAB for RESTORE. Hardy is co-principal investigator at UAB.

“We are usually focused on trying to improve hypertension control,” Cherrington says. “In this case, we are saying: ‘We know that rates of cardiovascular disease are high and disproportionately higher in African American communities. Why can’t we start further up the line and prevent hypertension in the first place?’”

For all RESTORE projects, “the focus is on taking evidence-based strategies and translating them in a way that takes into account adverse social determinants of health,” Cherrington says. Social determinants of health, according to the World Health Organization definition, “are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life.” For example, Cherrington says, “if you eat healthy, you can prevent hypertension. But in some communities that is easier said than done, especially in rural areas.”



EPIPHANY IN THE BLACK BELT

The UAB project is called EPIPHANY, which stands for Equity in Prevention and Progression of Hypertension by Addressing barriers to Nutrition and Physical Activity. Cherrington and Hardy are working with 20 churches in the Black Belt of rural Alabama. The churches will help recruit participants to test ways to prevent hypertension, but they also will receive “micro grants” of \$1,000 in order to develop and implement their own health-focused projects.

Participants at half of the churches will receive group health education and personal computer tablets to access online cooking shows and exercise classes. People in the other half of the study will receive group health education, access to online cooking shows and exercise classes, plus peer support from a trained community health worker to help set and meet diet and physical activity goals. When the study ends, the participants who did not receive peer support and church-wide grants initially will receive them. “When you go into a resource-limited region, doing nothing for one group is unethical,” Cherrington says.

EPIPHANY, like all RESTORE projects, is what is known as a multi-level intervention. “We have community health workers providing peer coaching for the participants in the EPIPHANY study, and then we have a community-level intervention that trains church champions to initiate programs that focus on some aspect of lifestyle modification,” Cherrington says. “That could be a focus on healthy eating, starting a farmer’s market, a walking group, or something else. But it is based on what the particular community thinks they need and wants to support.”

The UAB and Tuskegee researchers are partnering with two community-based groups to carry out the EPIPHANY study. Connection Health is a community health worker-focused organization established in 2014, the first such nonprofit in Alabama. Connection Health will provide the peer coach training and peer

coach intervention at the individual level of the study. The Rural Alabama Prevention Center, located in the Black Belt, was already implementing a similar church-based program in the area. “We said, ‘How can we partner with you to augment that program and continue the dissemination?’” Cherrington says. “Identifying and working with community partners is crucial—they are trusted members of the community and many times are already doing the work.”

Cherrington also is the principal investigator for a large, NIH-funded center, known as ForgeAHEAD, focused on cardiometabolic diseases that are particularly problematic in the rural South. ForgeAHEAD and EPIPHANY both operate on the strengths-based model. “It acknowledges that there are resources and strengths in every community,” Cherrington says. “The interventions we carry out in partnership with the community play on those strengths and recognize the expertise within community organizations. If you want to know what is in the community and what is not in the community, you have to ask.”





PARADES AND HYPERTENSION

On a recent Friday night, the EPIPHANY team was in Camden, Alabama, about an hour and a half southwest of Montgomery, for a parade. As the Wilcox County High School band marched through the streets before their big game against the Central High (Hayneville) Lions, EPIPHANY staff marched as well, handing out fliers on blood pressure control and prevention to the crowd. Later, during the game itself, they offered free blood pressure checks.

Their work emphasizes the challenges of preventing hypertension. “So far, we have screened over 1,800 participants, and enrolled 167,” says Lanisha Hall, program coordinator at UAB for the EPIPHANY project. Mainly, that is because the people screened already have high blood pressure. “Some people are surprised, but most people are just unaware of their blood pressure numbers,” Hall says. “Though our target population is those people

who do not have high blood pressure, this supports our goal to reduce health disparities in the African American community.”

The difficulty in finding participants is not dispiriting, Hall emphasizes. “It’s an honor to be a part of this program in the Black Belt, to share health information and resources in the community,” she says. “My passion is working with the community and being able to educate individuals who are unaware of what blood pressure is, what their numbers are, and how just a few simple lifestyle modifications may make a significant difference.”

PROVIDING A VOICE

Projects begin with asset-mapping exercises at the individual and community levels. “We want to understand, what is already there?” Cherrington says. “It is not always creating something new—sometimes we just need to connect people. Our role as a university is advocating and providing a voice or a platform to advocate for things that are needed. These might be resources or grants.”

EPIPHANY and ForgeAHEAD, Cherrington notes, are not just helping communities through research, but by attracting more resources. “We do a lot of work to try and employ individuals within rural communities outside of Birmingham to help build capacity for the work that they are doing and to partner with community organizations,” Cherrington says. “They are already doing the work. The Rural Alabama Prevention Center is already there doing the work. We can create additional opportunities through partnership.” And by measuring outcomes, “we can also help them advocate for additional dollars,” Cherrington adds. “That’s how it should work. We are helping bring the resources to the community. A necessary component of our success is engaging people with intimate knowledge of their communities and then by also providing meaningful contracts to community organizations we are providing workforce development through our support of these organizations.”



BUILDING THAT PIPELINE

EPIPHANY also is intentionally built to support young investigators. “A lot of my staff are in graduate programs, which is fun,” Cherrington says. “They can use what we are doing as part of their own studies. To me, it is all part of building the pipeline.”

EPIPHANY has already led to a separate grant to Hardy from the National Institutes of Health. The award will fund an ancillary study to EPIPHANY that will focus on Black adolescents.

Hardy’s research for her doctorate, including papers in prestigious journals, established that “adolescence is a critical period in development for prevention interventions,” Hardy says. In a paper published in JAMA Cardiology in 2017, Hardy and her co-authors “highlighted that Black boys transition from normal blood pressure to adverse levels earlier in life than other demographic groups,” she explains. And four years later, in JAMA Network Open, they “showed that racial/ethnic disparities in blood pressure do not exist in early childhood but emerge during adolescence,” Hardy says.

“I am deeply passionate about prevention of cardiovascular disease and race disparities,” Hardy says. “EPIPHANY pairs those passions together by aiming to prevent hypertension among a Black, rural population.” What most interests her about the project, Hardy says, is “learning how we can engage young, Black populations in prevention programs and overcome barriers to healthy behaviors in rural communities.”

As with the main EPIPHANY study, details of the intervention will be based on stakeholder feedback, Hardy says. “We plan to have adolescent peer supporters contact participants at least twice a month to provide education on what high blood pressure is and its consequences, healthy eating, physical activity, stress management, and home blood pressure monitoring techniques,” Hardy says.

The work is especially meaningful to her, Hardy says. “I am a country girl at heart. I am dedicated to doing scientific work that aims to benefit rural communities.” ■



Ending on a High Note

ONLINE STORIES



A MILESTONE BIRTH

MALLORY WAS GIVEN a devastating diagnosis at age 17 when she learned she had been born without a uterus, or Mayer-Rokitansky-Küster-Hauser syndrome. After marrying her husband Nick, Mallory knew their family would have to grow via adoption or surrogacy.

Mallory's sister successfully served as a gestational surrogate for the couple's first child, a daughter. But for their second child, she and Nick embarked on a complex journey to uterine transplantation that ended in May when Mallory became the first UAB patient to give birth via uterus transplant outside of a clinical trial, and her son was the first baby born out of the UAB Comprehensive Transplant Institute and UAB Medicine uterus transplant program.

"The birth of UAB's first uterus transplant program baby is an incredible milestone not just for the patient and the field, but for our multidisciplinary team here at UAB, as this marks our ability as an institution to offer another option for patients who

are experiencing uterine factor infertility," explained Paige Porrett, M.D., Ph.D., the inaugural director for Vascularized Composite Allotransplantation in UAB's Comprehensive Transplant Institute. She is also an associate professor in the Marnix E. Heersink School of Medicine Department of Surgery. "At UAB, we're committed to bringing this emerging therapy forward to patients in need, making it as accessible, safe and simple as possible for women who have never had an option to bear their own biological child."



Watch our video highlighting Mallory's remarkable story, UAB's major achievement, and what this means for women with Mayer-Rokitansky-Küster-Hauser syndrome.

“

The birth of UAB's first uterus transplant program baby is an incredible milestone not just for the patient and the field, but for our multidisciplinary team here at UAB.”

—PAIGE PORRETT, M.D., PH.D.

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