Access

I Am First Gen:
Inspiring stories from first-generation Longhorns
I was honored to assume the role of permanent vice president for diversity and community engagement on July 1. During the year I served as interim vice president, it became clear that the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement needed to look at community engagement and student programming in new ways. We still have a team of approximately 400 dedicated, talented staff members working on campus and in communities statewide, helping to improve equity and access to the university in many different ways. But, as you’ll see in this issue of ACCESS, our newly renamed magazine, we have adopted new approaches for our work.

First of all, we’re envisioning our work through six ideas: Academic Creativity and Design, Inclusive Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Community Integrative Health Care, Global Leadership and Social Impact, Community Engagement and Economic Development and University Culture. Second, we are focused on positively impacting the growth of Austin—to help redefine the gentrification that has been taking place over the past decade and to play a role in developing the future leaders and entrepreneurs who will be driving change. We are aligning with President Gregory L. Fenves’ goals to unlock potential, foster social mobility, improve public health and benefit society.

With change comes challenges. But DDCE staff are thinking creatively, developing new partnerships and learning from those beyond the walls of UT. We want our students and other constituents thinking, “Those folks at UT DDCE made a difference.”

Leonard N. Moore
Vice President for Diversity and Community Engagement, George W. Littlefield Professor of American History
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UT Austin is home to more than 9,000 undergraduates who will be the first in their families to attend college. These are the faces of several first-generation Longhorns who are encountering a unique set of challenges along their academic journey. Turn to page eight to read stories from students, faculty and alumni who are inspiring and uplifting others at campus events hosted by the DDCE’s new First Gen Initiative. |
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The Community Engagement Center (CEC) was honored with the Community Service Award at the Austin NAACP banquet held on Dec. 1 at Hyatt Regency Town Lake. This year’s awards program focused on the city’s challenges with affordable housing—a topic that is often addressed at the center’s community-wide events such as the Front Porch Gatherings. The monthly gatherings (featured on page 14 and pages 30-31) spark constructive dialogues on the issues that matter most in the fast-growing city of Austin.
Including Innovation. Invest. These three words are at the core of our vice president’s “Six Big Ideas” for transforming the DDCE. Read on to learn more about Leonard Moore’s vision and how the division aims to build upon the university’s mission: “What Starts Here Changes the World.”

Academic Creativity and Design
Our academic support programs are designed to provide students the essential skills they need to thrive in the new world of work, such as risk-taking, problem-solving, leading people, emotional intelligence, and cultural understanding.

Inclusive Innovation and Entrepreneurship
We’re helping students and community members break into Austin’s vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem by introducing them to the world of startups, venture capital and career accelerator programs.

Community Integrative Health Care Initiative
As Austin’s new Healthcare Innovation District takes shape, we’re strategically positioned to leverage our expertise and collaborate with community partners.

Global Leadership and Social Impact
Our award-winning global programs give students a project-based academic internship with real-world work experience in three dynamic and rapidly changing cities—Beijing, Cape Town and San Jose, Costa Rica.

Community Engagement and Economic Development
We’re addressing societal challenges in the areas of public education, health equity, affordable housing and economic development through advocacy, collaboration and partnerships.

University Culture
Creating and maintaining a healthy campus culture is a foundation pillar for the DDCE and The University of Texas at Austin to make sure all members of the university community feel welcomed, valued and respected.
A conversation with Leonard Moore, VP for diversity and community engagement

by John Harris
Since assuming his new role as vice president for diversity and community engagement last July, Leonard Moore has already taken the first steps toward moving the DDCE into its next new era of innovation. We caught up with him to learn more about his vision and how he plans to leverage university resources to improve economic mobility for historically underserved students and community members.
Moving forward, what are your goals for the DDCE’s undergraduate programs?

For students, we have got to make sure that all of our initiatives and programs help drive economic mobility. In terms of our community-based initiatives, we’re asking: How can the DDCE help empower low-income communities? Historically, diversity offices have focused on recruiting, retention and multicultural programming. While these are valuable focal points, I believe it’s time to broaden our vision to become more effective.

What are some new developments that are already taking shape?

We have created two new areas in the DDCE: Inclusive Innovation and Entrepreneurship (led by Rubén Cantú) and the Community Integrated Healthcare Initiative. Both of these platforms will put us on the cutting edge of all that is going on in Austin in terms of wealth creation and innovative approaches to healthcare. These offices will ensure that some of Austin’s most vulnerable residents will be able to share in the region’s prosperity.

How does the focus on innovation play into community engagement?

I really believe UT understands the critical role it plays in the city of Austin. And what makes Austin unique is that we are the only major city in America with a declining African American population. We also are experiencing an economic boom. We just have to make sure everybody gets a cut of that. People talk in positive terms about technology boomtowns in California, but they don’t talk about how hundreds of thousands of low-income and working-class people have been pushed out of San Francisco and out of Oakland. From the outside looking in, it appears that some of the California universities could’ve done more to minimize the gentrification. I want UT to help redefine gentrification instead of being complicit in it.

Could you give an example of how you would approach this endeavor?

On the plane, I overheard a venture capitalist telling someone that money’s growing on trees in Austin. You talk to a lot of folks, and they say, “Show me that tree so I can get some of it.” The challenge is getting low-income residents to capitalize on the wealth that’s moving into this city. For instance, let’s say you have a small solopreneur, one guy who cuts lawns. How can we work with him to help him start a landscaping business? How do you help the woman who does nails in East Austin? How do you help her scale up to put two or three more stylists in the community so newcomers moving in can get their nails done? I’m not talking about trying to create seven- or eight-figure businesses. That’s beyond my level of expertise, and that’s beyond what the DDCE can do. But we can take some of these skilled people in low-income neighborhoods who have the determination, who have the drive.

How do your students help drive your ideas?

Teaching every fall semester keeps me grounded and helps me keep my finger on the pulse of the student body. Students’ needs are changing, and students are demanding change. I think it better positions the university if we know about the students’ concerns so we can address them before things bubble up and we have a controversy.

Where do you see the DDCE within the next few years?

I like to look at things in five-year increments. In 2023, I want to see that we have helped more underrepresented students enter Austin’s entrepreneurial ecosystem. We also need more students getting the global experiences they need to thrive in the job market. As for community engagement, we’ll be leveraging our resources to assist more nonprofits and low-income entrepreneurs in Austin. We’ll also focus on giving scholarships to residents in underserved communities so they can finish a vocational/trade school certification or an associate degree. These are all very straightforward, measurable goals.

“I believe it’s time to broaden our vision to become more effective.”
Hogg Foundation Takes New Direction in Improving Mental Well-being

The change highlights the need for access, resources in historically underserved areas in Texas

by Ike Evans

Five rural Texas counties and about a dozen communities in the Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area will benefit from the Hogg Foundation’s new focus on community mental health. Recently the foundation announced two new initiatives, totaling $15.5 million in grants: Collaborative Approaches to Well-being in Rural Communities (WRC) and Communities of Care (COC). Both initiatives align with the foundation’s new strategic plan to transform how communities promote mental health in everyday life, with a focus on historically marginalized populations.

“These initiatives are about more than just delivering additional mental health services,” says Dr. Octavio N. Martinez Jr., executive director of the foundation and senior associate vice president for diversity and community engagement. “They’re about leveraging community assets to deal with complicated issues of power and health disparities. It’s about mobilizing energy around mental health and community resilience to address fundamental issues of fairness and stigma.”

Grantees will build on an existing collaborative composed of diverse community partners who will assess the current environment and plan strategies to improve community resilience, mental health and well-being.

These efforts mark a significant shift for the foundation as they move upstream to address root causes that contribute to health inequities.

“We are learning alongside our grantees, creating a shared vocabulary and body of knowledge about community well-being that can be replicated broadly,” says Tammy Heinz, a leader of the WRC initiative and a program officer and consumer and family liaison for the foundation.

WRC is co-led by Rick Ybarra, program officer, and COC is co-led by Vicky Coffee, program manager, and Stephany Bryan, program officer and consumer and family liaison.
Last spring, the DDCE launched its new First Generation Longhorn Initiative to support students who will be the first in their families to earn a college degree. We celebrate these students and encourage them to take advantage of the initiative’s many offerings—from scholarships for study abroad to professional development workshops and networking events. We caught up with several college graduates who navigated college life on their own, learning much about themselves and others along the way. Though their stories are unique and varied, they all have common threads of sacrifice, hard work and hope for the future.
Pictured here are several faculty, students and alums who are participating in the DDCE’s First Gen Initiative.

This effort also became a top priority for the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost when it launched the First-Generation Commitment Working Group in spring 2018.
Embracing New Experiences

Carmel Fenves, first lady of UT Austin, will never forget the day her parents dropped her off at UC Davis. While watching them drive away, she wondered to herself, “What now?”

“I’m the kind of person who doesn’t like a lot of surprises, so the earlier I can get somewhere to scope it out, the more I feel comfortable and prepared,” Fenves says. “But I didn’t really have that opportunity when my parents drove me to college and left me with my luggage.”

The first in her family to attend college, Fenves can relate to the many students at UT Austin who are feeling lost and overwhelmed at such a large university. She’s open to sharing her own experiences to help students realize that they, too, can overcome their challenges with a lot of work and perseverance.

“I was self-conscious about my reading ability,” says Fenves, who later became a successful textile artist and small-business owner. “Anything that was project-oriented, I could throw myself into, but reading and keeping up with the assignments was challenging.”

Fenves often appears at First Generation Initiative events to encourage students to seek out the resources and opportunities that will help them succeed. But most of all, she wants them to enjoy their time in college.

“It’s so important to just be open,” she says. “I came from a family that was very supportive. They encouraged me to try new things and experience whatever the campus had to offer. That’s what I went for—to learn new things, meet people and grow. It’s really a growth period in your life, and you won’t have anything like that ever again.”
Family Matters

When Matt Thibault embarked on his first semester at UT Austin, his excitement was overshadowed by a relentless pang of guilt.

“The first big challenge at UT that I had to overcome was the guilt of leaving my family behind,” Thibault says. “I had to realize that they were supporting me every step of the way. Even though I wasn’t with them, they were the ones who pushed me to get here. The success of earning a degree was not my own; it was also a gift to them.”

A first-generation college graduate (B.A., Sociology ’18), Thibault is determined to make a better life for himself and his family, who live in a small town just south of San Antonio.

“My first motivating factor for going to college was seeing my parents struggle to take care of my sister, who has disabilities,” he says. “The one thing I could do to help them was school—and I could do it well. I want to be the kind of person who works hard to take care of others and stand up for those who can’t advocate for themselves.”

“The first big challenge at UT that I had to overcome was the guilt of leaving my family behind.”

After joining the UT Austin chapter of the Association of Latino Professionals for America, Thibault realized that many of his fellow students were facing similar challenges.

“It’s easy to feel that you don’t belong here,” Thibault says. “That’s why it’s so important to join a group and discover that a lot of people have stories like yours. Don’t isolate yourself and feel that you’re the only one dealing with these challenges. There are plenty of students who share your story and your passion.”
Finding a Home Away from Home

Tiffany Tillis vividly recalls the first of many challenges she faced as a first-generation college student on the sprawling University of Texas at Austin campus. Without guidance from her parents, she had to find a way to map out her college career.

“Registration was probably the most intimidating experience of my entire freshman year,” says Tillis, who received all three of her degrees from UT Austin (B.A., ’03; M.Ed., ’08; Ph.D., ’17). “I came in feeling like I was the only one who didn’t know how to navigate this system.”

Now the director of the Longhorn Links and Gateway Scholars programs, both housed within the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence (LCAE), Tillis is passionate about guiding students through the same obstacles she faced as an undergraduate. Her best advice is to find a home base on campus as soon as possible.

“It’s so important to connect with smaller communities,” Tillis says. “The Gateway Scholars program helped me navigate this place and be successful. It made such a difference in my life, and that’s the reason why I’m doing this work now.”

“I came in feeling like I was the only one who didn’t know how to navigate this system.”

Looking back at her experiences, Tillis is especially grateful for the Multicultural Engagement Center (MEC), where she found her community and discovered her career path.

“I found my fit at the MEC, where I learned so much about life and how to be a good citizen,” says Tillis, who is also a founding member of the DDCE’s Fearless Leadership Institute, a leadership program that supports the total well-being of women of color. “That was where I fell in love with UT, and it’s part of the reason why I started my professional career.”
Growing up, Nong Xiong rarely ventured far from her tight-knit Hmong-American community in Wisconsin. She never really considered pursuing higher education until a teacher connected her with a program that helps students prepare for college.

“Upward Bound pushed me to think of what I would get out of college that I wouldn’t get anywhere else,” Xiong says. “My parents expected me to get married and raise a family, but Upward Bound helped me ask questions and seek answers.”

She quickly discovered her passion for education and decided to pursue a degree in English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Although the campus was just three hours away, she felt like she was living on another continent. Depressed and homesick, she would make the journey home every weekend just to surround herself with the comforts of home.

It wasn’t until she studied abroad in South Korea for an entire academic year when things started to shift. She soon learned how to embrace the independence of college life and seek new opportunities for growth. She also found support from friends, mentors and advisers in a TRIO program much like the DDCE’s Gateway Scholars program here at UT Austin.

“I had an amazing adviser who supported me in ways that I really needed,” Xiong says. “I was reluctant at first to attend all of those mandatory events and to meet up with my adviser. But looking back at it now, that was a defining experience for me.”

Now a graduate student studying educational leadership and policy at UT Austin, Xiong is helping students at the LCAE—many first generation—overcome similar challenges she faced as an undergraduate. In the future she hopes to pursue a Ph.D. and continue making a difference in students’ lives.

“I want to be a source of access and inspiration for first-gen students,” she says. “If I could’ve been involved in a first generation initiative like this, I would have been more connected with my school and with myself.”
Thanks to the DDCE’s new Austin Future Global Leaders Initiative, 100 middle school students in the Neighborhood Longhorns Program will soon receive free passports. The students will participate in a yearlong academic program before embarking on a trip to Beijing, China in the summer of 2020. The initiative, led by Devin Walker, director of the Global Leadership and Social Impact program, aims to empower young scholars to develop a global mindset and prepare them for the global workforce.

We raise our horns to Milly Lopez, director of institutional partnerships, who recently received the Texas Diversity Council’s Diversity FIRST Leadership Excellence Award. Among her many duties, Lopez takes the lead in managing collaboration and engagement efforts with 400-plus partner organizations, both on and off campus. Pictured here is Lopez (third from the left) with members of the National Diversity Council and the Central Texas Advisory Board at the Oct. 18 awards luncheon.

Social and economic equity was the topic of the Community Engagement Center’s Front Porch Gathering event held on Oct. 16. Director of Inclusive Innovation and Entrepreneurship Rubén Cantú (sixth from the left) shared thoughts and ideas for helping underserved residents enter Austin’s robust tech and startup industry.
ON THE JOB

This fall, the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence partnered with the University Co-op on a new College-to-Career internship program that offers on-the-job learning for students of all disciplines at the large retail store with a unique business model. The program is part of the DDCE’s new Academic Creativity and Design Initiative to prepare students for the new world of work.

NEW SEMESTER, NEW LOOK

Little Longhorns were in for a big surprise when they arrived at a newly remodeled campus on their first day of the fall semester. Over the summer months, new classrooms were added to the UT Elementary School campus and existing classrooms were renovated. Updates include new floors and outdoor decks, freshly painted buildings, a covered sports area and modernized classroom technology.

BOOKING IT

DDCE staff members Virginia Cumberbatch and Leslie Blair presented their newly published book “As We Saw It: The Story of Integration at the University of Texas at Austin” at a standing room-only panel event at the Texas Book Festival on Oct. 28.
COLLECTING THE PAST
Sarah Rung fell in love with history the moment she set foot in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History at the young age of 7. It was a family vacation to Washington, D.C., she would never forget.

“I loved everything the museum stood for,” Rung says. “I was mesmerized by all the amazing objects inside and wanted to explore it all. I decided that I had to come back again soon.”

Ever since that fateful trip, Rung has been exploring museums, art exhibits and libraries in Austin and other major cities across the nation. In fact, she even spent her sweet 16 at the LBJ Library and Museum on the UT Austin campus.

“They had a Beatles exhibit, and I love their music, so I couldn’t think of a better place to celebrate my birthday,” Rung says.

Fascinated with Vietnam-era politics and pop culture, Rung often visits the exhibits at the LBJ Library and Museum, an iconic 10-story building that houses a wealth of documents, photos and recordings from President Lyndon B. Johnson’s political career.

“I fell in love with the pop culture of the ’60s and later discovered an interest in the domestic issues and policies that were formed during that period,” Rung says. “I feel very fortunate to have the LBJ Library right here on campus because I’ve always been very interested in the Lyndon Johnson presidency.”

Now a junior at UT Austin, Rung has taken her love of history to the next level. With her sights set on becoming a museum archivist, she is getting hands-on internship experience at the LBJ Library and Museum and, most recently, at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. During the summer of 2018, she worked alongside researchers and archivists in the museum’s Archives Center. Her experience in repository work galvanized her desire to continue following the path she set for herself long ago.

“Aspiring Museum Archivist Pursues Her Passion at the Smithsonian”

by Jessica Sinn
“I love the Smithsonian’s mission for sharing history with the world,” says Rung, who is majoring in history and earning a certificate in museum studies. “It’s really hard to be prosperous in the future without learning from the past. Historians provide the resources for us to learn from our mistakes and find better ways to succeed in the future.”

When she wasn’t assisting researchers in the reading room or processing archival items, Rung was interviewing museum workers to learn more about their daily operations—and even writing blog posts for the Smithsonian’s website. With help from her faculty mentor in UT Austin’s Museum Studies Bridging Disciplines program, she published several posts about her work processing collections.

“It was wonderful having a faculty mentor reviewing my posts and helping me along my journey,” Rung says. “Now I can say that I’ve been published by the Smithsonian, which is a great addition to my resume.”

Rung attributes much of her success to her favorite history professors, Julie Hardwick and Alan Tully, who inspired her to pursue this line of work. She is also grateful for the supportive staff within Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD), who helped her secure the accommodations she needed while navigating college life with POTS syndrome, a condition characterized by low blood pressure and a fast heart rate. Symptoms (often triggered after lying down) include lightheadedness, heart palpitations and fainting.

“I’ve learned that it’s OK to have good and bad days,” Rung says. “During my freshman year, I had a lot of both, but I found a way to be successful by communicating with professors and reaching out to SSD.”

Diagnosed at a young age with POTS and a host of autoimmune disorders, Rung missed long periods of high school due to pain and fatigue. It was during this time that she learned how to proactively reach out to her teachers for help with her studies.

“Growing up with this disorder pushed me toward maturity, which ultimately helped me succeed,” Rung says. “Self-advocating has been a huge part of my life since I was 14.”

Rung advises students with disabilities to look beyond their limitations and take advantage of every opportunity that comes their way.

“During my freshman year at UT, I wouldn’t have imagined having an internship at the Smithsonian,” Rung says. “That’s why it’s so important to not limit yourself and to seek out opportunities.”

Moving forward, Rung plans on returning to the Smithsonian in the summer of 2019 to work in collections management. After graduating in the spring of 2020, she hopes to land a rewarding archivist career in Washington, D.C., or perhaps in Austin, a city that is home to several world-class museums.

“There are a lot of amazing museums in the D.C. area, but I would be happy to end up at a museum in Austin,” Rung says. “UT is so close to some amazing museums. The Harry Ransom Center, the Bob Bullock Museum and the Blanton are some of my favorite places to visit.”
Bahareh Sharafi, a junior majoring in health and society, has always had an interest in learning the Spanish language. When she heard that the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence was offering a new study abroad program in Costa Rica, she couldn’t wait to immerse herself in a culture she has been studying for years.

“I am interested in understanding the mindsets of people in different countries who are creating stable and functioning societies,” says Sharafi, who participated in the first cohort of the Socially Responsible & Ethical Student Leadership program in June 2018.

During her month in Costa Rica, Sharafi soaked up the country’s many natural wonders, including its tranquil beaches and majestic volcanoes. But her most cherished experiences had little to do with the popular tourist sites.

“My most memorable moment in Costa Rica was when the entire group came together for our last meal at the end of the trip,” Sharafi says. “I was looking around and truly appreciating every single person in that room. It was the people who shaped my experience.”

Of all the lessons she learned abroad, Sharafi’s biggest takeaway came from her experiences working alongside local environmental conservation group leaders and community members.

“I believe this experience has served as a catalyst for me to become a better leader,” Sharafi says. “I have grown to allow myself to give power to others for that is what true leadership encompasses.”
Mehraz Rahman, a Plan II Honors and marketing senior, is proudly serving as UT Student Government (SG) vice president. This fall, she and SG President Colton Becker are working to make UT Austin a safer, more inclusive place for the entire campus community. We caught up with this talented UT Outreach-Austin alumna to learn more about her advocacy work and how her mobilizing efforts fall right in line with her campaign motto, “Let’s get started!”
What made you decide to run for office?
I originally had no intention of running until Colton, my running mate, asked me to run with him. Initially, I faced feelings of impostor syndrome, which I still sometimes feel, and I did not feel like I was qualified enough to run for this position. However, as I thought about it more, I knew that I was sure in my love for this university, which translated into a desire to make this a better and more welcoming place for all students.

What issues are most important, and how do you aim to make a difference?
Before developing our platform, we wanted to make sure that we were taking into consideration the issues that were important to all Longhorns and, in turn, the solutions that would improve the quality of life for every Longhorn. We put together a committee with voices representing all areas of campus. In our platform, we had five areas of focus: student empowerment, interpersonal violence prevention, diversity and inclusion and campus climate, health and wellness, and student life. Beneath each of these areas, we had a few different platform points we wanted to implement and get started on. The issues that I, myself, am working on right now are bringing more reflection spaces to campus and making menstrual products available in campus bathrooms.

“I knew that I was sure in my love for this university, which translated into a desire to make this a better and more welcoming place for all students.”

Last year, you served as a director for SG’s Diversity and Inclusion Agency. Why was this role important to you?
As a Muslim woman of color, I have felt how my external appearance causes some to treat me differently. As someone who has been to countries like Bangladesh, I have seen that many people struggle to succeed more than others simply due to the circumstances they were born into, which has always seemed unfair to me. As someone who has worked with issues of educational inequity, I have seen that the playing field is not level, even in countries like America, where we have many more opportunities than those who live in other places in the world. As a result, I wanted to use my privilege to work to even that playing field a little bit more.

What drives your passion for immigration rights advocacy?
My parents are both immigrants from the country of Bangladesh. They are hardworking people who love this country for the opportunities it gave to them and the opportunities they knew it would give their children. I watched how long it took these two deserving people to become citizens, which happened well after I was born and even after my 14-year-old little brother was born. There were difficulties they faced before and after they became naturalized in this country. The American Dream that I’ve been taught in school is inclusive to all people and has relied on immigrants since America’s inception.

What advice would you give an incoming Longhorn?
You belong here, even when you may not feel like you earned it or you feel like you are not enough compared to your peers. The social comparison that comes with being a college student is something that everyone feels. I promise, and it’s something that stings especially hard if you haven’t had the same opportunities as many of those around you. As a woman, as a person of color, as a Muslim person, as someone with immigrant parents, I understand those pressures. You belong here, and you are enough. Don’t let what’s around you or those moments of self-doubt stop you from believing that.

Photo courtesy of the Colton and Mehraz 2018 campaign
Reflections

Lighting the Fire

Photo of Almetris Duren courtesy of the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History
While brainstorming ideas for a documentary project, Vidal Marsh often reflects on his memories from summer camp of sitting around the campfire with his cabin mates, all eyes fixated on the dancing flames as a storyteller shares tales of legends and lore.

Now a filmmaker and TV producer living in Los Angeles, Marsh strives to create that same sense of wonderment by revolving his stories around a captivating focal point. In his new documentary, “Still Overcoming,” that flickering fire is his aunt, Almetris Duren, a dormitory housemother and Dean of Students employee who was a mentor to Black students from 1956 to 1980.

by Jessica Sinn
Documentaries are like campfire conversations. They hold your attention and elevate the whole experience. I want to create a story around the fire that was my aunt.
“Documentaries are like campfire conversations,” Marsh says. “They hold your attention and elevate the whole experience. I want to create a story around the fire that was my aunt.”

The campfire analogy is fitting for a woman who is considered by many as a powerful force on the UT Austin campus back in its early days of integration. Lovingly known as “Mama Duren,” she guided students through their academic journey at Eliza Dee Hall, an off-campus building owned by Huston-Tillotson University located many blocks from the UT Austin campus.

“I look at my aunt in a mythological sense because obstacles were constantly in her way, but she never yelled at anyone or raised her fist,” Marsh says. “She just kept asking, ‘How can I hold you accountable to your word?’ She would also say, ‘I’m looking for fair and I’m looking for right.’ I think those are tremendous tenets to hold onto. I hope we can continue that dialogue.”

Knowing her students were isolated from segregated campus activities, Duren created spaces where they could gather. To keep them from returning home in frustration, she often prepared homecooked meals and helped them get transportation to and from school.

“If you’re not pledging a sorority, competing in sports or joining an academic club, what are you connecting to?” Marsh says. “I understand why she created these spaces. It was her way of having people connect.”

Marsh calls Duren one of UT’s “Hidden Figures,” a term popularized by a recent blockbuster movie about three brilliant African American women who served as the brains behind one of the greatest operations in NASA history. Like those women, Duren kept moving forward against the headwind of oppression.

“In this world, we have survivors and thrivers,” Marsh says. “Most of us are survivors, people who work hard to elevate themselves and are always scratching and clawing to get better and better. My aunt was a thriver. She was not living for herself. Even though she was financially fit, she lived in a dorm for decades. She didn’t need to do that, but she wanted to help people and add to their lives.”

In the film, a few of the first students Duren served, now known as The Precursors, shared memories of their beloved dorm mother who quietly yet firmly demanded fairness and respect. Although she was small in stature, Marsh says she was a giant on campus.

“The Precursors are all thriving people, and a lot of that has to do with the love they have for each other and the connections they are making with others,” Marsh says. “It all comes back to the reverence they have for this small woman who commanded so much respect. I can understand there was a soul in her that her students wanted to become a part of.”

By telling his aunt’s story, Marsh aims to appeal to a wide audience, prompting them to ask questions about how they, too, could make a difference for those who are facing systematic barriers. He hopes the film will spur questions about current issues such as affordable housing, diversity measures in schools and the adverse effects of gentrification.

“This film has to be inclusive because I need to hear all the voices,” Marsh says. “If you want a call to action film, you have to get people of all walks of life to connect to the story. Unfortunately, in our society, viewers are more likely to be mobilized when they see people who look like them.”

His hope is to carry on his aunt’s legacy by motivating people to uplift and support others around them. Whether that means smiling and making eye contact with a stranger on the street or championing a campaign for human rights, he wants his viewers to come away from the film with the desire to make a difference.

“My goal is to make an impact in the community,” Marsh says. “I would love that our stars are the people who, like my aunt, come from the community and want to make a change.”
Looking back at one of the first Black college athletes to take the field against the all-white Texas team

by John Harris

USC fullback C.R. Roberts broke a school record for yardage in a single game in the Trojans’ 1956 bout against the Longhorns. Photo courtesy of University of Southern California Athletics
It was Sept. 22, 1956. The University of Texas had admitted its first Black undergraduates that semester. Everyone knew what the game meant. A Black University of Southern California running back was facing a Texas football team that would not welcome its first Black player for another 13 years.

Tension hung over UT’s football stadium as C.R. Roberts, one of three Black players on USC’s roster, played a major role in the Trojans’ 44-20 win over the Longhorns. Despite carrying the ball only 12 times, not to mention facing incalculable athletic and societal pressure as a Black athlete prior to integration in the South, Roberts achieved an incredible feat. Only a freshman at the time, he rushed for 251 yards and three touchdowns, establishing a USC single-game record that stood for 20 years and creating a legacy for future generations of Black student-athletes.

Roberts was a civil rights warrior in shoulder pads. He was the Colin Kaepernick of his day who took a stand for Black college athletes without uttering a word or kneeling in protest. He made a difference simply by playing in a setting where Blacks were rarely granted the opportunity to compete.

His success, along with that of other Black college football players such as USC’s Sam Cunningham, who rushed for 135 yards and two touchdowns in a 1970 win over the University of Alabama’s all-white lineup, motivated predominantly white colleges in the South to finally open their doors and welcome Black student-athletes. UT admitted its first Black football letterman, Julius Whittier, in 1969, the same year the Longhorns fielded the last all-white national championship team in the history of college football. Whittier debuted one year later. As a senior tight end in 1972, he caught every UT touchdown pass that season.

In the new documentary “Breaking Down Barriers: The C.R. Roberts Story,” Col. Leon Holland, UT Austin alumnus and member of the Precursors, described the moment when Roberts scored his second touchdown in the 1956 game.

“The crowd became more and more concerned, but using racial terms was somewhat unsettling,” says Holland, who was among the first group of Black undergraduates to attend UT Austin. “Instinctively, we began to pull for USC.”

Roberts vividly recalled the events from that day in a 2012 first-person report posted on the USC Football website.

“For me, the after-game excitement made this the best trip we took all year,” Roberts said. “Every Black hotel worker in Austin must have come to my room to see us that night. The hallway outside our room was packed with people all night long. They had come from far and wide just to see us. Everyone was so proud just to see us staying in the hotel that I don’t remember ever going to sleep. My roommate Lou Byrd and I just talked to everyone all night.”

Roberts, who went on to play in the NFL and the Canadian Football League, was honored by the Precursors at UT’s Building a Legacy Celebration Dinner and Awards Ceremony during Black Alumni Homecoming Weekend held on Sept. 14-16. He was also recognized at the USC-UT football game that weekend—received a much warmer welcome.

Today, Black student-athletes account for more than half of all college football players at Football Bowl Subdivision schools. To help boost personal and professional success for these athletes, the African American Male Research Initiative annually hosts a national Black Student-Athlete Summit in February at UT Austin.

Texas Men’s Basketball Head Coach Shaka Smart (left) with a student athlete at the 2016 Black Student-Athlete Summit.
On the Scene

Two law school-bound undergraduates from UT Austin and Huston-Tillotson University show their school pride. They were among several participants in the monthlong College to Career PreLaw Undergraduate Scholars Program administered by the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence.

Adaptive Sports Night has become a fan favorite over the past few years. Hosted every October by Services for Students with Disabilities, members of the university community meet local athletes and sample a variety of sports adapted for people with disabilities.

Several Black alumni from the class of ’68 returned to their alma mater to reflect on a pivotal time in UT Austin history and its relevance to modern-day struggles for students of color at a panel event held on Sept. 14 as part of Black Alumni Weekend. From left: Rodney Griffin, Camilla Hall Jackson, Arleen Lawson.
Leonard Moore (right) shared his vision for using inclusive innovation to impact Austin at a community-wide event on Nov. 8. The event featured a presentation by Oye Wad-dell (left), executive director of Hustle PHX, an incubator that provides mentoring and support for inner-city entrepreneurs.

UT Austin President Gregory Fenves and Vice President for Student Affairs Soncia Reagins-Lilly joined students and family members at the annual Black Family Day event on Oct. 27. The event is hosted by Afrikan American Affairs, a student agency in the Multicultural Engagement Center.

Queer People of Color and Allies, a student agency within the Multicultural Engagement Center, welcomed new and returning Longhorns with open arms at the annual Bloq Party. The event, held on Aug. 30, featured a resource fair and an array of festive activities.
BEING THE BRIDGE

New director of inclusive innovation and entrepreneurship aims to diversify Austin’s startup landscape

by John Harris
Aside from family trips to Mexico, Rubén Cantú rarely ventured outside his East Austin neighborhood until he came to the Forty Acres and discovered a bold new world.

Cantú’s academic journey is one that students, particularly those coming from underrepresented communities, can relate and respond to in a positive way.

“The university was the bridge that allowed me to expand my mind,” says Cantú, who earned a B.S. in Radio-Television-Film in 2005. “I understood that folks on the other side of the highway had things much easier, but I refuse to be called the exception.”

One of the first Mexican American students to enter the Master of Science in Technology Commercialization program in the McCombs School of Business, Cantú saw himself as an anomaly.

“I don’t want to be the anomaly,” Cantú says. “There’s no reason for me to be the first from my high school to go to UT or the second Mexican to enter my graduate program. That’s unacceptable. We’re going to change that now. And that means instead of just forging ahead, we have to be the bridge.”

Now, in his new role as director of inclusive innovation and entrepreneurship, he aims to diversify this growing field of study. As he moves into this new chapter of his career, he plans to guide students and community members from diverse backgrounds into Austin’s robust startup scene. Emphasizing self-reliance, self-determination and the ability to move without restraints, Cantú hopes to teach them to channel their skills and their passions into an impactful career.

Although UT Austin is home to many innovation centers and institutes, Cantú’s forthcoming Product Prodigy Institute is designed for a different demographic of students. Cantú encourages undergraduates with mid to low GPAs to tap into this resource so they can get excited about starting up their own business ventures. He sees the potential in these students and wants to show them that they are as capable as their high-achieving peers of becoming the next Steve Jobs or Marissa Mayer.

As a career accelerator, Product Prodigy will help students develop leadership skills and learn the fundamentals of entrepreneurship such as product development, market fit, pricing and communications.

“I don’t teach people how to fish,” says Cantú, who is modeling Product Prodigy after the training program he created for social impact tech entrepreneurs at LevelUp, where he served as CEO. “We’re already teaching students how to fish—how to go out and get a job—at the University of Texas. We’re going to teach people how to build fisheries.”

One important lesson Cantú drives home in his teachings is that successful entrepreneurship leads to generational wealth.

“Power is exchanged through education and knowledge, through economic and entrepreneurship development,” Cantú says. “We cannot have this discussion about equality until we discuss the inequity within our communities. And our communities cannot progress until we understand how to build wealth within them. What we try to do at the DDCE is create that new paradigm.”

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MORE DISABILITY ADVOCATES
Read more inspiring stories about faculty, staff and students who are passionate about making the campus a safer, more welcoming place. Pictured here is Erica Matos-Lindsey, an associate academic adviser and liaison for bilingual education in the College of Education who is helping students with disabilities find the resources they need to succeed.

MORE LITERARY EVENTS
Little Longhorns were treated to a special book reading and signing event at UT Elementary School on Oct. 26, the eve of the annual Texas Book Festival. Students of all grade levels met with authors and received signed copies of the presented books. Visit our website to read more about the three bestselling children’s books authors and their interactive presentations highlighting the value of diversity, inclusion and lessons learned from American history.

MORE CELEBRATIONS
Visit our Flickr site to view photos from the Multicultural Engagement Center’s (MEC) 30th anniversary party! We are so proud of this space and its team of staff who are supporting, uplifting and educating the students they serve. From left: Brandelyn Franks-Flunder, MEC director; Brenda Burt, lecturer emerita of African and African Diaspora Studies; and Sugar Ray Destin, Jr., MEC alumnus.
Suchitra Gururaj
Assistant Vice President for Community Engagement and Economic Development

“Serving in the community is one way for our students to understand that their participation at UT stretches beyond these Forty Acres. They are a part of Austin, cultural communities, arts communities and so much more. Getting involved in the community gives students a perspective on the books they read, the labs they take, and the papers they write – and it helps me rest easy knowing that the next generation is ready to lead us after they graduate.”
Taking Flight

An adventurous group of Neighborhood Longhorns learned how to spread their wings and fly at iFLY, an indoor skydiving facility located in North Austin. The event, held on Aug. 2, is just one example of the program’s many activities that motivate students to think beyond their limits and dream big.