For millennia, dogs have been by our sides. How have all these years of selective breeding affected their behavior and abilities? A Georgia State researcher is investigating our best friends’ brains to find out.
With financial support of the Burning Bright campaign, the university has:

- Increased scholarship awards by 50 percent
- Awarded 11,000+ micro grants averaging $900 since 2012
- Received $14.5 million from State Farm to create 50 scholarships annually for underserved high school students
16 NEW TRICKS

A Georgia State researcher is using neuroimaging techniques and behavior tests to find out how the differences in dogs’ brains contribute to the differences in their behavior.

DISEASE DETECTIVE 8

Jennifer Lind (M.P.H. ’12) addresses health crises at the national and community levels.

22 CLOSING THE DISTANCE

An English professor and an alum are helping young refugees navigate one of the most daunting parts of life in a new country — getting into college.

28 THE BLACK NEW SOUTH

Associate professor, author and political historian Maurice Hobson studies the complexity of black life in Atlanta and its broader lessons for the rest of the nation and globe.

GEARiNG UP 12

Nate Simon (B.I.S. ’16) is in charge of the athletic equipment, from the players’ helmets to end-zone pylons, that keeps the Panthers on the field.
IT’S BEEN MORE THAN A YEAR since we kicked off construction to transform Turner Field into our new football stadium. And while the difference within the gates is dramatic, beyond it, more revitalization is in the works.

Alongside our development partner, Carter, we are now engaged in a multiphase movement to revitalize the area around the stadium. We just built a new digital billboard adjacent to the stadium alongside the Downtown Connector where more than a million eyes see it every day. Construction on a 676-bed student housing complex is underway just north of the stadium. The privately owned building is the first of several planned student and family residences in the area, and it’s breaking up the vast asphalt parking lots once used by Braves fans.

These are just two of the more visible projects that promise to transform Georgia State Stadium’s surrounding area. The land includes sections of Summerhill, a neighborhood beginning the next stage of its next evolution.

Work is underway to convert vacant, historic structures along Georgia Avenue into a thriving retail and restaurant corridor. Once reenergized by eateries, shops and community staples, that strip — a stadium cross street and a main drag in the area — will be an anchor for a larger vision: a mixed-use redevelopment of Summerhill that serves residents and visitors alike.

Many of these businesses should open later this year and by spring 2019, including a barbecue joint, an “own-premise” brewery (one that crafts and serves its suds on-site) and an ice cream shop, among others.

A sister site for East Atlanta Village java haunt Hodgepodge Coffeehouse is also slated to start service in the near future. Opening a new shop at the corner of Georgia Avenue and Ralph David Abernathy Boulevard was a no-brainer for owner Krystle Rodriguez (B.A. ’06), who says the location made her feel an instant connection with the university.

The later phases of Summerhill’s makeover plan will bring additional housing and retail hubs, business offices and more.

The latest addition to our growing footprint, our new 8,000-seat Convocation Center will host commencements, concerts, conferences and other large events. The Convocation Center will also become the home court for Panthers’ basketball, replacing the Sports Arena with a modern facility worthy of our winning program.

Gov. Nathan Deal signed off on a $5 million bond to fund the building’s design, and it’s expected to be complete by 2022.

Amid the dust and construction in the area, the positive impact of these projects is already palpable.

According to the Atlanta Police Department, Summerhill’s crime rates have declined, and the implications are significant. A reputation for safety will be a critical part of drawing crowds to the new businesses in Summerhill and to Georgia State events, such as football games and concerts.

At the same time, as residents of each of the stadium-adjacent boroughs become more familiar with the university, our employment and enrollment rates in those communities are on the rise.

After winning the AutoNation Cure Bowl at the end of the 2017–18 season, we’re gearing up for our second football season at Georgia State Stadium and are optimistic about another victorious year. That optimism fills the air beyond the stadium gates, too, because our neighbors are racking up wins right next to us.

Sincerely,

Mark P. Becker
President
ALLIE’S COMEBACK

I can’t recall when I’ve been more touched by an article. Benjamin Hodges did a masterful job encapsulating the remarkable story of Allie Armbruster. The piece was mesmerizing and inspiring ... beautifully crafted to elicit the responses I and every other reader surely had. It was a long article, and I was compelled to read every word. Thank you for your outstanding magazine!

Barbara Johnston (B.A. ’69, M.Ed. ’71, S.Ed. ’74, Ph.D. ’87)

I loved Mr. Hodges’ story, “A Life Worth Fighting For.” I couldn’t stop reading it. I felt so absorbed by her life and struggle. It was very well written, and I couldn’t put it down. What she’s doing is amazing, and I hope she stays clean for life because she’ll be doing some incredible things.

Analy Navarro (B.B.A. ’16)

I really enjoyed Mr. Hodges’ article about Allie Armbruster. I was recently at a Georgia Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Collaborative meeting, and a bunch of us Panthers were talking about it. There are so many sides to this dilemma, and your article addressed several of them in such a fine way.

William Trivelpiece (M.S. ’07)
Drug Intelligence Officer, Office of National Drug Control Policy and Atlanta- Carolinas High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area

BABU’S BIG MOMENT

Babu the Chihuahua strikes a pose for photographer Clay R. Miller during a photoshoot for this issue’s cover story. Read more about Babu and her contributions to a National Science Foundation–funded study on dog behavior on p. 16.
IN SHOW BUSINESS, virtual production is what filmmakers use to blend the physical world with digital elements. It’s what makes the characters in movies such as “Avatar” and the recent “Star Wars” installments possible. It’s also how video games such as “Call of Duty” and “Halo” manage to look so realistic.

As the field continues to evolve, new tools are attracting interest and promising to deliver increasingly immersive and novel experiences for viewers. Among the latest tools for virtual producers, three-dimensional (3-D) volumetric capture is emerging as one of the most powerful.

Using a host of video cameras in a controlled space, the technology captures performances — such as a character’s movement over a period of time — to create 3-D video holograms. Once processed, these performances become viewable from every angle. They can be manipulated, replicated and placed in any environment, where they respond to the lighting, effects and other atmospheric factors of any given world. The 3-D holograms are the latest advance in cross-reality (XR) technology appearing in film, gaming, marketing, education and more.

The French technology company 4DViews makes one such volumetric capture system, the HOLOSYS, which took more than 10 years to develop. There are only three of them in the world — one in France, another in Japan and the last at Georgia State’s Creative Media Industries Institute (CMII), which has the largest of the three.
BEHIND THE CURTAIN
Overseen by Candice Alger and James Martin, professors of practice at CMII, Georgia State’s HOLOSYS features 32 cameras in a 30-by-30-foot space that reaches 16 feet high — and is open for business.

Partnering with film studios, video game developers, record labels and technology companies, Alger and Martin use the HOLOSYS to generate revenue and innovate solutions for the latest challenges of virtual production. It takes them 10 hours to process 60 seconds of volumetric capture, and every second of the captured 3-D asset takes up an entire gigabyte of data. (Good thing they have 72 terabytes of storage.)

MOVIE MAGIC
Alger and Martin each have two decades of experience with animation, motion capture and other facets of virtual production. Alger is the former chief executive officer of Giant Studios, the Atlanta-based firm whose proprietary technology helped create “Avatar,” “Iron Man” and “Halo 4” before film producer James Cameron acquired the company. Martin recently finished work on the upcoming feature film “Replicas” starring Keanu Reeves, where he was the lead previsualization artist, coordinating the step between preproduction and principal photography.

The pair envision an exciting future for their studio technology. They talk about XR holograms replacing wax museums, 360-degree virtual fashion shows, photoreal cinematic sequences in video games, crowd sequences in movies populated using libraries of stock characters without having to recruit extras or conduct additional shoots, and much more.

NEXT-LEVEL TECHNOLOGY
“What’s unique about CMII is we have a lot of different tool sets,” Alger said. “We have optical capture, sensor-based capture, animation and volumetric scanning, and we’ve integrated all these tools into different fluid production pipelines. So, we can determine the best approach for each project and make it happen — not just make a technology drive the solution.

Even better, this technology is still in its infancy. As giants like Microsoft and Intel continue to invest millions of dollars in it, producers like Alger and Martin keep pushing the envelope on what they can do with it. And they can’t wait to break out their newest toys.

“Let’s just say we’re researching and exploring some really cool stuff right now,” Alger said.

Once captured and rendered by the HOLOSYS, Pounce’s dancing 3-D video hologram can be animated and placed in any setting, where it responds to the lighting and other atmospheric elements of the environment.
THE DISEASE DETECTIVE

As a scientist with the CDC and U.S. Public Health Service, Jennifer Lind (M.P.H. ‘12) helps address today’s most pressing global health crises and challenges.

By Monica Elliott | Photo by Meg Buscema

When Jennifer Lind joined the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) in 2012, she knew she wasn’t just taking a job. She was taking on the privilege and responsibility to protect the health of the global population.

Lind is the lead scientist for the CDC’s Treating for Two initiative, which aims to improve the health of expectant mothers and their babies by providing guidance about using medication before and during pregnancy.

The 35-year-old pharmacist and epidemiologist is one of Georgia State’s 40 Under 40, a list of the most influential and innovative graduates under the age of 40.

“My work focuses on safer medication use during pregnancy and researching the prevention and control of risk factors for birth defects,” she said.

According to Lind, public health was not even on her radar when she graduated from pharmacy school in 2007. She and her classmates were advised to become retail or hospital pharmacists or to work for pharmaceutical companies. Lind chose retail pharmacy in Atlanta.

“I was working in a community with a lot of chronic disease,” she said. “Many of my patients had multiple chronic diseases, so they were on lots of medications. I felt there had to be a way to stop people from getting to that point — where they’re on 15 medications and you’re just trying to keep them functioning. I wanted to change things on a higher level.”

That’s when Lind began researching jobs and decided to get a master’s degree in public health at Georgia State.

When she took her first course in epidemiology, which addresses the incidence, distribution and control of diseases, Lind knew she had found her calling. With the encouragement of Regents’ Professor Richard Rothenburg, Lind applied to the
CDC’s Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) program. She got accepted and joined the ranks of a group of CDC officers known as the “disease detectives.”

When disease outbreaks or other public health threats emerge, EIS officers investigate, identify the causes, implement control measures and collect evidence for preventive actions.

While Lind likes being able to make a difference on a large scale, one-on-one patient interaction remains important to her. She volunteers at a clinic in Dekalb County and also serves in the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS), which puts her on the front lines during crises.

“I have my day job, where I’m able to do great things on a national scale, but at the same time, I’m able to get involved on the ground when public health emergencies pop up.”

During the 2013 Ebola outbreak, the PHS sent her to work emergency operations at the CDC. During the Zika outbreak, they deployed her to Puerto Rico where she helped with the local response effort for two months.

And now with the opioid epidemic, she’s a lead scientist on work to address neonatal abstinence syndrome — babies born to mothers addicted to opioids.

“So, I have my day job, where I’m able to do great things on a national scale,” Lind said, “but at the same time, I’m able to get involved on the ground when public health emergencies pop up.”

ENROLLING SUCCESS

Georgia State is growing and breaking enrollment records.

This fall, Georgia State enrolled 3,800 freshmen, up from last fall’s record-breaking class of 3,400.

With a significant increase in transfer students, Georgia State will likely enroll more than 5,000 transfer students at the Atlanta Campus alone this fall, said Tim Renick, senior vice president for student success.

“We also will have a record-size freshman class for Perimeter College,” Renick said. “With freshmen and new transfers combined, the number of new Georgia State students at Perimeter College should top 8,000.”

Altogether, the university forecasts a record of more than 16,000 undergraduates this fall.

“When the consolidation between Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter College was first announced, some people speculated that blending the two schools would dilute the applicant pool,” Renick said. “Just the opposite has been the case. We have enjoyed record numbers of freshman applications at both the Atlanta and Perimeter programs each of the last two years.”

DEAN’S LIST OR DOGHOUSE

Study shows public praise and academic probation both improve performance.

College students who receive dean’s list recognition and those put on academic probation both improve their academic performance in subsequent semesters, according to a research paper by Georgia State economist Nicholas Wright.

Using the confidential administrative records of a large, publicly funded university, Wright examined the extent to which college students are incentivized to change their behavior when they receive administrative feedback that either reprimands or rewards their academic performance.

The observed increase in grade point average, however, may not be indicative of improvements in student learning.

“Students were able to pick up on signals about the level of difficulty of courses and instructors based on past grading history,” said Wright, a Ph.D. candidate in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies.

Similarly, students who were exposed to the academic probation policy were 9 percent more likely to switch their majors, making a strategic change to their program of study to raise their academic performance.

“The results suggest both policies have a positive effect on academic performance,” Wright said.
ON CAMPUS / NEWS

DOCTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH

New advanced degree announced for working public health professionals.

The School of Public Health will offer a Doctor of Public Health (Dr.P.H.) program to meet the growing need for public health professionals with advanced training and prepare students for positions in leadership, applied research and other practice-based roles.

The new degree program will complement the school’s existing Ph.D. program by providing public health professionals with the opportunity to pursue a doctorate while working full-time. The first cohort of students will enter the program this fall.

“People often refer to Atlanta as the capital of public health because we’re home to so many organizations that … help people live longer, happier, more productive lives,” said Michael P. Eriksen, dean of the School of Public Health. “This program will be of value to those who want to advance their careers and make a difference in people’s lives, whether in Georgia or around the world.”

FAT GENES

Researchers investigate the link between obesity and epigenetics.

The National Institutes of Health has awarded Georgia State two four-year grants totaling almost $3 million to research the epigenetic mechanisms that may fuel obesity. Hang Shi, associate professor of biology in the College of Arts & Sciences, is the lead investigator on both projects.

Epigenetics is the study of any process that alters gene expression — the way genes “behave” — but not underlying DNA sequences. Gene expression is hereditary but can also be affected by a person’s environment. For this reason, obesity experts see epigenetics as a link between environmental risk factors, such as diet and lifestyle, and genetic risk factors.

Shi and his team hope their insights can identify new ways to prevent and treat obesity, specifically by studying the role of brown fat and nonalcoholic fatty liver disease.

COFFEE CATS

Haydn Hilton runs the city’s first cat café. The film student turned entrepreneur opened Java Cats Café on Memorial Drive in Atlanta and recently opened another location in Marietta, Ga. At Java Cats, patrons can sip on a cup of joe and hang out with about 20 cats, all up for adoption. Visit magazine.gsu.edu for a video tour of Java Cats.
Craig Drennen got his first taste of the international art scene at a very important loading dock in the early 1990s. Beneath the white spirals of New York City’s iconic Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the young Drennen worked late into the night with a team of art handlers, carefully shipping, carrying and installing works of international acclaim. Little did he know he’d one day secure a place in the art world as an honored Guggenheim Fellow himself.

One of the arts’ most prestigious accolades, the Guggenheim Fellowship has been acknowledging exceptional artists, writers and researchers since 1925. This year, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation’s selection committee awarded fellowships to 173 of 2,830 hopeful applicants — one of whom went to Drennen, associate professor of drawing, painting and printmaking at the Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design in the College of the Arts. With a Guggenheim Fellowship in the Fine Arts, Drennen has joined the ranks of the world’s esteemed scholars and creatives.

Ironically, he’s found his greatest success depicting rejected and failed cultural works.

He’s devoted himself to discarded, overlooked and panned productions for years. For the last decade, Drennen’s work — predominantly painting but also performance, sculpture and installation — has focused on the Shakespeare play “Timon of Athens.” Rarely taught in literature classes today, it’s the Bard’s only known play that never reached the stage during the Elizabethan era. Drennen puts characters from the play on his own stage.

With names such as “The Actors,” “Bandit,” “The Mistresses,” “The Painters” and “The Poet,” many of Drennen’s exhibits take direct inspiration from the script. He’s still working his way through all 31 characters, exploring them with contemporary sensibilities and creating highly abstracted portraits of each.

Drennen credits his fixation on this unsung but complex Shakespearean text to its obscurity, which allows him the freedom to claim uncharted land and avoid tired themes and subjects. He likens these failed works as rooms he can explore endlessly while diversifying his media and honing formal techniques. His art allows him to take ownership of projects eliminated from the popular canon and produce visual reflections on history’s little-known, failed masterpieces.

Drennen’s art has been widely exhibited throughout the U.S. Over the last year, his work has been featured by Art Papers, Burnaway, the Ernest G. Welch Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Swan Coach House Gallery and Hathaway Gallery. He’s also been profiled in Artforum, Art in America and the New York Times.

“’Timon of Athens’ is a corrupted text of indeterminate history, questionable sources and a dubious relationship to the respected canon,” he said. “That is to say, it mirrors my own position in the art world perfectly.”

Now that he’s received a Guggenheim, of course, some people might disagree.
STATE NOT SOUTHERN
Georgia State and Georgia Southern will renew their annual rivalry series Oct. 7 when the men's soccer team travels to Statesboro, Ga. For the past three seasons, the two Sun Belt Conference schools have squared off in a year-long, points-based competition that combines all sports. Georgia State has won each year by a wide margin and won the 2017–18 season by an overall score of 16.5 to 5.5. The Rivalry Series Trophy will once again be presented to Athletics Director Charlie Cobb following the teams' football game Nov. 24 at Georgia State Stadium. The Panthers defeated the Eagles 21-17 in their last meeting.

HEAD PANTHER
Georgia State named its former assistant women's tennis coach Alex Leatu to the head job in July. Leatu will enter her second season with the university since joining the program last season. In her first season with the Panthers, Leatu helped the team to a Sun Belt Championship and NCAA Tournament appearance. She was an all-conference tennis player at Vanderbilt University.

THE GEAR MAN
As head equipment manager for Georgia State athletics, former football player Nate Simon (B.I.S. ’16) keeps the Panthers ready for action.

BY AUSTIN BIRCHELL (B.A. ’20) | PHOTO BY STEVEN THACKSTON

When the sun crests over the top of Georgia State Stadium and traffic starts to bustle along the Downtown Connector, you can bet Nate Simon’s work day is well underway.

Simon, a former safety for the Panthers football team, is the head sports equipment manager for Georgia State athletics. Chances are he’s been at the stadium and on the clock since 5 a.m. The hours are long — some days he doesn’t get home until after 10 p.m. — but if you ask him, Simon wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I love it,” he said. “Not many people can say they work for a Division I football program and get to be around the sport all the time.”

Simon came to Georgia State in 2014 from Golden West College in Southern California and was a contributor on the 2015 team that made it to the program’s first bowl game after trouncing Georgia Southern 34-7 in the last game of the regular season.

His role today is just as important to the team’s success. Simon and his crew painstakingly ensure every helmet fits its player exactly right and that the uniforms and practice gear are clean and in place. They even help the coaching staff during practices.

“Nate’s work is absolutely invaluable,” said head football coach Shawn Elliott. “What they’re able to do to keep the operation moving is key for us. And it’s always great to have former players like Nate involved with the program.”

Simon places every number on every piece of clothing, loads and unloads equipment between the Sports Arena and the stadium, and runs more than 20 loads of laundry every day.

One of Simon’s high-profile jobs is placing the Panther decal on each helmet.

“It has to be perfect,” he said. “That’s one of the first things people see when the players run on to the field.”

It’s not just the player’s clothes either. Simon maintains the entirety of the coaching staff’s pristine polos and pants for game day.

“It’s a lot of work,” said Simon, “but it’s incredibly rewarding. I love this sport, this school and this program.”
In two new studies, Georgia State researchers upend traditional thinking on e-cigarettes.

BY JENNIFER RAINEY MARQUEZ | ILLUSTRATION BY REID SCHULZ (B.F.A. ’18)

IN THE DECADE THAT E-CIGARETTES have been on the market, they’ve gone from an obscure quit-smoking aid to a ubiquitous “lifestyle” product that’s particularly popular among young people, thanks in part to a slick, youth-oriented marketing campaign.

This has created a divide among public health experts about the best way to regulate what is now a $5 billion industry in the U.S. Because while vaping may be a safer, healthier alternative for smokers who want to quit, it’s also attracting teenagers and young adults who otherwise might never light up.

A new study by faculty at the university’s School of Public Health casts doubt on vaping’s major purported health benefit — helping smokers ditch cigarettes. The researchers examined the responses of more than 850 smokers who participated in an initial survey in 2015 and a follow-up survey a year later and found that 90 percent of those who used both traditional cigarettes and e-cigarettes were still lighting up at the end of the year.

This may be because smokers just don’t find e-cigarettes satisfying, says lead author Scott Weaver, a research assistant professor of epidemiology and biostatistics.

“Many of the e-cigarettes, particularly the older generations available in 2015, simply aren’t as effective at delivering that hit of nicotine, so smokers just give it up,” he said. There are also smokers who use e-cigarettes as a way to supplement their nicotine intake.

However, a newer type of e-cigarette comes very close to cigarettes’ ability to deliver a potent dose of nicotine with each puff — JUUL. Released in the U.S. in 2015, the product took off two years later as the market for e-cigarettes exploded.

While Weaver and his team say that JUUL could potentially be a more powerful tool to help smokers quit, a separate university study has found that it’s also designed as a powerful temptation for young people.

Jidong Huang, associate professor of health management and policy, and his colleagues examined JUUL’s sales data and marketing campaigns and found that — despite the company’s insistence that its product is intended for adult smokers who want to quit — JUUL is marketed primarily via social media channels like YouTube and Instagram that are disproportionately used by teens and young adults.

Since the study was published, JUUL has promised to stop featuring youthful models in its ads and work with social media platforms to remove teen-centric content. Still, Huang says the company’s self-policing won’t undo the damage that’s been done.

“They know they’re going to run into trouble if they keep up with this strategy,” he says. “But if you walk into any school and ask a student about JUUL, they know. The message is out.”

250 THOUSAND

Nearby stars plotted by Georgia State researchers working to make a census of the stars in the Milky Way galaxy.

THERAPEUTIC TARGET

Xiangming Ji, assistant professor of nutrition, and his collaborator at Vanderbilt University have discovered that an amino acid transporter named xCT could help oncologists diagnose the severity of non-small cell lung cancer, the most common type of lung cancer.

The researchers examined the responses of more than 850 smokers who participated in an initial survey in 2015 and a follow-up survey a year later and found that 90 percent of those who used both traditional cigarettes and e-cigarettes were still lighting up at the end of the year.

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UNEXPECTED MEDICINE

According to Binghe Wang, Regents’ Professor of Chemistry and director of the Center for Diagnostics & Therapeutics, carbon monoxide gets a bad rap. He’s studying how the gas can be used therapeutically.

“Carbon monoxide is very effective at inhibiting systemic inflammatory responses, which are conditions commonly seen in diseases such as lupus and rheumatoid arthritis and infection,” Wang said.

Wang is working to put carbon monoxide into a pill. “A person can take it orally with a very well-defined dose, or it could be dissolved in a solution for intravenous therapy or injection,” he said.
IN THE LATE 1980s, A YOUNG MARKETING STUDENT picked up a campus job as a sportswriter for The Signal, Georgia State’s award-winning student newspaper. With that move, D.W. Pine started down a path that quickly led to a long and prestigious career — 20 years and counting — as TIME Magazine’s chief visual storyteller.

Equal parts journalist, artist and marketer, Pine manages every cover while directing the magazine’s creative team and overseeing the brand in advertising and promotion. His leadership has helped TIME stay relevant as a print publication in an increasingly digital age even as he’s led the magazine to transcend the limitations of ink and paper. With Pine at the helm, TIME became the first weekly to premier on the iPad and has found novel ways to engage more than 60 million people on social media with captivating animations of each week’s cover.

For Pine, the job isn’t just about leading a brand or breaking big stories. It’s about clearing the static of these complicated times, building trust with the public and using art to chronicle and articulate history as it unfolds.

How did you go from a marketing major to the creative director of one of the world’s most iconic and influential brands?

My father was in marketing and finance at IBM, and I thought that would be a good path for me as well. However, after my first accounting class, I quickly realized it wasn’t for me. While I did take a journalism class at Georgia State, working at The Signal for three years is what really forged my future career path.

That said, I certainly put my marketing degree to work every day at TIME since a good portion of my job is making sure the brand is presented in a dynamic, historic and marketable way.

What led you to work at The Signal, and what did you learn?

I was walking through the old Student Center in 1987 and saw an ad for a sportswriter position at The Signal, so I went into the office and applied. My first story was about the Georgia State rowing team, which I knew nothing about, but I had always been interested in sports, and the writing just came naturally.

After a year, a position opened up at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC) for a sportswriter in the Cobb County bureau, and I got it. For the next three or four years, I worked there and at The Signal while taking a moderate class load.

I wrote more than 1,100 stories for the AJC, covering local and professional sports, including the PGA Tour. I was even the beat writer for the Georgia State basketball team for three seasons.

I was also moving up at The Signal. I made editor-in-chief by the time I graduated and got to work as the sports editor and news editor along the way, too.

After I finished school, the AJC needed a layout designer — another role I had picked up at The Signal. I had transitioned The Signal from waxed layout boards to computers in the late 1980s and had been...
teaching myself how to design on the Mac ever since. So, the AJC gave me a rare opportunity to write for 20 hours a week and design for 20 hours a week. I switched to full-time design after a year.

Take us through your responsibilities for the TIME cover.
I’m responsible for the overall design of the TIME cover each week, and I create my own graphic art or type treatment about once a month. I occasionally know the cover direction a few weeks in advance, but for the most part, we’re starting fresh each week.

It’s been a ton of hard work and sleepless nights – a willingness to do anything needed to help create TIME each week. Fortunately, I get to work with some of the world’s best photographers and illustrators to help fill that blank canvas. The media industry is exciting and stressful – especially right now – but it’s also rewarding and important. In that respect, it’s certainly a cool place to work.

You’ve spoken elsewhere about your dedication to the craft of visual journalism, which you see as the intersection of news and art. Why is this so essential?
We live in an extraordinarily complex world with few simple answers. For me, an image – whether a photo or illustration – goes beyond the familiar saying, “An image is worth a thousand words.”

It’s more than that. It has the power to cut through the clutter of tweets and 24/7 news and competing voices. The cover of TIME crystallizes what’s important in a simple, graphic, impactful 8-by-10 space. With all the competition for people’s time, it amazes me how the TIME cover is as relevant today as it was 95 years ago – and maybe even more so given the current climate of distrust in news.

TIME releases an animation of each week’s cover on social media. How important have these been?
About three years ago, I was interested in pushing the “red border” in new directions. So, I enlisted some friends at a New York design firm to start animating the weekly cover for our 60 million followers on social media.

Since then, we’ve produced more than 150 animated covers, some attracting more than two million Instagram views each. Once I close the cover around 2 p.m. on Wednesday, we produce the animated version in a few hours. It’s been wonderful to see the response and introduce a new audience to the power of TIME.

THREE OF PINE’S FAMOUS COVERS

Top left: 958 drones compose the magazine’s border and masthead in the sky above Folsom, Calif. (June 11, 2018)

Right: A provocative, two-color portrait epitomizes Donald Trump’s many faux pas during his 2016 presidential run (Aug. 22, 2016)

Bottom left: Parkland, Fla., high school students and March for Our Lives organizers tell the world they won’t tolerate another school shooting (April 2, 2018)
WILL THIS DOG HUNT?

By William Inman (M.H.P. ’16)  Photos by Clay R. Miller

Rusty, the golden retriever (is an airhead).

For thousands of years, we’ve bred canines to hunt, herd, help and protect us, and to be our best friends. But what is it that makes a dog good at its job, and how has all of that breeding affected behavior and personality?

A Georgia State researcher is investigating dogs’ brains to find out.
THE EMPATHY TEST

In a brightly lit lab in Kell Hall, doctoral student Olivia Tomeo kneels on the floor, places her hand flat on a small yellow X taped to the ground and raises a rubber mallet high above her head. Her human audience — watching a live video stream in a room next door — straighten up in our chairs in anticipation.

“How do you think she’ll react?” asks Erin Hecht, a research scientist in the Center for Behavioral Neuroscience at Georgia State and the lead researcher in a project funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) that’s investigating dog behavior.

The “she” is Babu, my rescued Chihuahua-mix who’s sniffing around the lab, and Hecht wonders what she’ll do when Tomeo pretends to smash her own hand.

I tell Hecht I’ll bet her 10 bucks that Babu, whom my wife discovered in our front yard one winter night so withered she must’ve slipped through the pickets in our fence, will rush to Tomeo’s side and lick her faux injury back to health seconds after she swings the mallet. Surely, Babu will show some concern for a member of the species that nursed her back to health and provided her the lifestyle of a tiny, canine queen. She loves her human family after all … or does she?

When the hammer falls and Tomeo wails in fake agony, Babu casually walks by her, taking just a second or two to investigate, and sits down in the corner of the room.

“We see a lot of variation here,” Hecht says, laughing, as I reach for my wallet.

Assessing Babu’s compassion toward humans, this is the third in a battery of behavioral tests that gather doggy data to explore how the differences in canine brains might explain the differences in their behavior.

Hecht leads a multi-institutional team in the project. The researchers are using the behavioral tests and dog owner surveys, as well as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) brain scans and genetic samples of Canis lupus familiaris, to investigate what makes up a dog’s personality, and how, over thousands of years of breeding, dogs’ abilities have evolved.

For instance, why does a border collie herd? What is it about a beagle’s brain that makes it so good at following scents? Are golden retrievers always dopey and lovable? (It turns out they have a pocket of air in the front of their skulls, Hecht says.) Or is all this due to some combination of breed and life experiences? And how do these behaviors and temperaments mix in mutts?

“I’m especially interested in the specialized behaviors we’ve bred dogs to do, like herding or hunting — they’re all learned behaviors,” Hecht says. “But there’s something in a dog’s brain that makes the predisposition to learn these behaviors innate.” Hecht’s research is exploring the boundary between instinctual and learned behavior.

“It relates directly to humans,” Hecht says, “because we have cognitive abilities that aren’t really innate, but we’re wired to pick them up quickly without much formal training — language, for instance.”

Man’s best friend, she says, can help us figure out how certain behaviors in complex organisms are expressed.

“To me, this is one of the fundamental questions of neuroscience, and there’s this perfect experiment that’s been walking around our homes for thousands of years,” she says.

THE TALE OF THE TAME FOXES

Hecht’s research follows up on one of the most significant experiments tracing the evolutionary pathway of domesticated animals.

In Siberia in the 1950s, a Russian geneticist named Dmitry Belyaev selectively bred hundreds of wild silver foxes over several years to recreate how early humans turned wolves into canine companions.

Belyaev selected foxes that were less aggressive toward humans and, after about 10 generations of breeding, had domesticated almost 20 percent of the animals. They showed little fear of humans, wagged their tails and were affectionate. Further, they had floppier ears and curlier tails and experienced other curious physical changes, such as the color of their fur and the shape of their skulls and teeth.

Just as Belyaev selected foxes to breed that expressed a predisposition toward tameness, he also bred another control group of foxes that were less tolerant of humans. These foxes developed even more aggressive behavior.

“We have these two strains of foxes that are separated, in the grand scheme, by only a few generations — 50 [generations] at
this point — yet they’re completely different temperamentally,” Hecht says.

Now, almost 60 years later, there’s a large population of domesticated foxes, and the biological experiment continues. The research thrust of Belyaev’s silver foxes is on genetics and behavior, but there has been very little focus on neuroscience, which explores the function of the nervous system and the brain. When Hecht, a neuroscientist whose work combines behavioral tests and the use of neuroimaging techniques, discovered that no one was analyzing the foxes’ brains, she set out to do so herself.

“I wrote to the researchers there and explained why we should care about how their brains are wired,” she says. “And then they sent me some brains to look at.”

**TO THE DOGS**

Hecht investigated how the foxes’ brains changed because of selective breeding. She expanded the research to include dogs — after all, what other animal has been bred more to suit our desires and needs?

In dogs, there’s tremendous anatomical variability. Babu the Chihuahua’s brain is much smaller than Rusty the golden retriever’s. There are neurological differences in breeds, too, Hecht says, which may explain why certain breeds have a disposition to perform certain jobs. Border collies, for example, will almost innately try to herd sheep when exposed to them, whether or not they’ve ever seen a sheep before.

Anatolian shepherds, similarly, have an almost built-in tendency to guard sheep. But where border collies display predatory behavior toward sheep — they stalk, chase and bark — Anatolian shepherds will treat them as if they’re pack members, submitting to them and even trying to mate with them.

Hecht is hoping to identify neural traits that might predict particular behaviors in dogs.

“For a border collie, perhaps we’ll find a neural circuit that may be associated with herding,” she says. “Or one that might make it a really bad pet.”

Part of Hecht’s NSF-funded research takes place at the University of Georgia and focuses on pure-bred “champion” dogs actively doing the job they were bred to perform, such as German shepherds involved in police work.

“The goal is to determine what differentiates a German shepherd brain from a border collie brain, and what neural differences are tied to the breed-specific skill,” she says.

Hecht and her colleagues are also working with the U.S. Department of Defense’s working dog program at Lackland Air

“To me, this is one of the fundamental questions of neuroscience, and there’s this perfect experiment that’s been walking around our homes for thousands of years.”

- ERIN HECHT
Force Base in San Antonio, where all military working dogs are trained. They’re searching for neural markers associated with symptoms of anxiety, aggression and post-traumatic stress disorder that may be related to training or deployment.

"Initially, we’re looking at the brains of dogs that were euthanized for health reasons that weren’t related to aggression, as well as ones that were uncontrollably aggressive and were a danger to themselves and others," she says.

Hecht says they’ve found neurological differences between the aggressive and nonaggressive dogs, and they’re beginning a new study to observe the dogs’ brains as they learn highly specialized skills.

The studies are still in their early stages, Hecht says, and she and her team are working to compile a larger sample size. They’re going to dog parks around Atlanta to interview dog owners and take genetic samples of their pets.

"We’re building a database of behavioral, genetic and survey data to get a better look at what sorts of individual differences exist in dogs," Tomeo says.

Back in Kell Hall, the researchers shuffle volunteer pooches through the behavioral tests, carefully cataloging each tail wag and anxious bark.

"In these tests, we’re trying to replicate the experiences dogs have in their daily lives," Hecht says, "such as meeting a new person, being in a new place, being left alone and, finally, being reunited with its owner."

For every behavioral test, the owner fills out a survey describing the dog’s behavior at home.

"The behavioral tests allow us to measure the dog’s behavior directly," Hecht says. "And with the survey and the tests, we can get a read on what the dog is really like."

Besides the empathy test, the experimenter will point to an object to see if the dog’s eyes follow — a gauge of the dog’s understanding of human gestures. They test the dog’s reaction to a “Bumble Ball,” a motorized, self-propelled kids’ toy (“Some dogs get out of its way, and some try to kill it,” Hecht says) and to a moving vacuum cleaner (“A lot of dogs follow it around nervously”).

For her part, Babu mostly sat quietly throughout the tests and avoided the Bumble Ball and vacuum. She did respond to a few communicative cues but didn’t seem very interested in contributing to science. (In her defense, she’s an older dog and has a hip dysplasia that makes walking difficult.)

"Babu is pretty chill," Tomeo says, offering an unofficial scientific assessment. "They’re all unique, and there’s no wrong or right in these tests. It’s just her personality."

It was as if Tomeo could feel my disappointment. I suppose I was hoping Babu would show off some secret skill or something that might surprise Hecht, Tomeo and the research team — something beyond indifference. Most of all, I wanted her to behave in a way that would reveal our bond to each other.

Then, as the research team wrapped up the penultimate test, Babu’s ears perked up and her eyes fixed on the laboratory door. The last leg of the series of tests reunites the dog and owner.

"See, it’s like she knows," Tomeo says. "She’s waiting for you."

WHAT ABOUT BABU?

If you’re in the metro Atlanta area and you and your furry friend are interested in participating in the studies, visit www.caninebrains.org.
FINDING THE AMERICAN DREAM

In Clarkston, Ga., the “Ellis Island of the South,” a Georgia State English professor and an alumnus, a Syrian Kurd, have teamed up to help young refugees navigate one of the most daunting parts of life in a new country — getting into college.
Over 6 feet tall in heels, with pale skin and a Southern accent, O’Connor waited alongside two Syrian women, a mother and daughter. She’d met them just few weeks earlier after a colleague alerted her to the pair, who were struggling to acclimate to their new country. O’Connor had driven to their apartment and knocked on the door with an offer of neighborly assistance, and today she had given them a ride to buy Halal meat.

Heval Kelli (B.A. ’08) was also in line at Al-Salam International. A Kurd from Syria who had come to the U.S. 15 years earlier, Kelli struck up a conversation with O’Connor in English as everyone around them chattered in Arabic.

Kelli discovered that O’Connor was an assistant professor at Perimeter College’s campus in Clarkston, a resettlement hub for refugees that contains the most diverse square mile in America. They exchanged contact information and shared stories.

She talked about helping refugees in her classroom and in the community get settled in their new metro Atlanta homes. Kelli — now a cardiology Fellow at Emory University — told her how difficult it had been to find his way to college after he arrived in the country at age 18, a journey many of O’Connor’s students shared.

“I was a 12th grader with limited English skills, no knowledge of the American educational system and a 40-hour-a-week job to support my family,” Kelli remembers of those first few months in the U.S.

Now, he wanted to help others gain access to higher education and fulfill the dreams they had for life in America — which was exactly what O’Connor wanted to hear.
ON SEPT. 25, 2001, Heval Kelli set foot in the U.S. for the first time. He had come with his parents and younger brother through a refugee resettlement program that placed them in Clarkston.

“We didn’t know anybody, and it was right after 9/11,” Kelli recalls. “But we were so thankful to be here.”

It was the second time he and his family had sought refuge in a new country. Six years earlier, they fled Syria in the wake of a crackdown against Kurds. After Kelli’s father was arrested and the family threatened by police, they paid a smuggler to get them out of the country and ended up in Germany.

But life there wasn’t easy.

“I didn’t know the language, and there was no one to teach me,” Kelli recalls. “I went from an honors student in Syria to a kid with bad grades who was getting in fights.”

His family had to renew their status as asylum-seekers every six months, with no guarantee of permanent residence.

“In Syria, we had a good life, but we couldn’t stay because it wasn’t safe. In Germany, we had safety, but there was no security,” Kelli says. “We were just moving from one refugee camp to another.”

Kelli, a quick study, eventually earned entry into the highest-level secondary school in Germany. Then a year before graduation, he learned that — after two years of undergoing extreme vetting — his family was moving to America.

As soon as they arrived, the clock was ticking. The resettlement agency found them a place to live and paid for three months’ rent. After that, they were on their own.

“You’ve got to learn the language, get a driver’s license, find a job,” Kelli says. “My mom was a housewife, she wore a hijab, she didn’t speak English. Finding a job post-9/11 was impossible for her. Meanwhile, my dad had heart disease and couldn’t work.”

He enrolled as a senior at Clarkston High School and found a job washing dishes at a Mediterranean restaurant near Emory University. He had just one year to absorb the language, pass all his courses, take the SAT and complete his college applications. On his own, it would have been impossible. Luckily, he had help.

There was Ms. Freni, his English as a Second Language teacher, who spent extra time helping Kelli hone his English. There was Jean-Pierre, a refugee from Rwanda who had arrived in America the year before, who showed him how to apply to college and get an in-state tuition waiver. There was his brother’s soccer coach, who spoke German and helped get his transcripts from Germany translated correctly.

“I think about this all the time: ‘What if I never had any one of these people?’” Kelli says. “But that’s what makes America so special. It’s not necessarily the opportunities and the success and all that. It’s this constellation of love and support without an incentive or agenda.”

In August 2002, just 11 months after he arrived in the U.S., Kelli enrolled as an undergraduate at Georgia State. His biology teacher, Hanan El-Mayas, was impressed by how well he adapted to college life.

“He grasps concepts very quickly, and he works hard,” she says. “He projected this strength and confidence. It was like he was saying, ‘I have to survive, and that’s what I’m going to do.’”

He became an American citizen the same year he graduated summa cum laude and enrolled in medical school two years later.

O’CONNOR grew up Roman Catholic in central Florida.

As a kid, she was close with her next-door neighbors, Joe and Marion Brechner, a Jewish couple who had each fled Eastern Europe with their families as children.

“I grew up with a very strong sense of what Ellis Island was, what it meant to them, and how the United States was built as a haven and for immigrants and refugees,” she says.

After earning a journalism degree from the University of Florida and a master’s in English education from Agnes Scott College, O’Connor began teaching English at Perimeter College while she pursued her doctorate at Georgia State.

In 2007, she was grading essays for her freshman composition class when a student’s words leapt up at her.

“The essay began, ‘I was born in a small village in Sudan. Militiamen burned my village and killed my parents, and I had to run away,’” she recalls. “I was like, ‘Whoa. What is this?’”

The writer was one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, a group of more than 40,000 Sudanese boys orphaned or expelled from the country during the African country’s second civil war, many of whom resettled in the U.S. Reading about his

“That’s what makes America special. It’s not necessarily the opportunities and the success and all that. It’s this constellation of love and support without an incentive or agenda.”
experiences woke her up to the plight faced by many of her students.

“He was the first student who taught me what it means to be a refugee — and what it means to be a refugee in Clarkston, Georgia, in my class,” O’Connor says.

After that, she began to consider how educators could better serve new immigrants and refugees, making it the focus of her doctoral thesis.

“At Perimeter, I might have 27 kids from a dozen different countries in each class,” she says. “That’s crazy, but it’s also exciting, and I love it.”

Through her church, O’Connor adopted refugee families who were new to the community. One year, it was a Somali family of 10. Another year, an Afghan family of six. O’Connor collected furniture donations, helped fill out food stamp applications and taught teenagers to drive.

On campus, she gained a reputation as someone who could troubleshoot problems for immigrants. Her students began to come to her for advice, particularly about gaining access to college.

“Kids would line up outside my door, saying, ‘My sister can’t get in [to college], and I don’t know why’ or ‘They told my friend she has to pay out-of-state tuition, but she lives here,’” she says. “Navigating administrative issues can be very difficult. How many test scores do you need? What if you have a transcript from a foreign high school? What if you just got your GED? You’d like to think there’s a one-size-fits-all checklist so you can just say, ‘Here’s what you have to do.’ But it’s not that simple.”

When Kelli saw the work she was doing, he convinced her they needed to create a bigger, more structured program to help would-be students knock down obstacles to higher education.

“He said, ‘We need to figure out a way to duplicate or expand the work you’re doing. Because you’re just one person,’” O’Connor says.

He told her about a program he’d started called the Young Physicians Initiative, which mentored immigrant and low-income high school students who were interested in becoming doctors. Kelli thought they could develop a similar mentoring program to help guide refugees into college.

THE MENTORING INITIATIVE FOR NEW AMERICANS (MINA) was established in 2016.

That year, O’Connor was named the senior faculty associate for Perimeter College at Georgia State’s Office of International Initiatives. The new role made her responsible for the international profile of the college and allowed her to devote energy toward the establishment of MINA with Kelli.

O’Connor knew that academic research showed college applicants — and immigrants in particular — prefer so-called “hot” information (delivered by people in their social network) over “cold” information (delivered by official sources or institutions). So, they started by recruiting students, many of them refugees themselves, from Georgia State and other metro Atlanta universities to serve as peer mentors.

“We thought, ‘Why don’t we take that experience I had with Jean-Pierre and make it into a model?’” says Kelli.

Mentors and mentees keep in close contact and attend monthly summits, each focused on a particular part of the college process, such as taking placement tests, filling out financial aid applications or choosing a major. A network of mentors is available to each mentee, which O’Connor has found works better than the one-on-one approach.

“The person who’s really good at preparing for the math portion of the SAT isn’t necessarily the same person who knows a lot about the TOEFL [Teaching of English as a Foreign Language, a standardized test that measures English language ability],” O’Connor notes. “And there may be a third person who understands how to navigate financial aid because his or her package was similar to yours.”

One of the first people to sign up as a mentor was Shahad Waheeb, a Syrian refugee who graduated with an associate degree in chemistry from Perimeter College in 2017 and is now pursuing her bachelor’s degree on Georgia State’s downtown campus. For her, it was a way to offer the kind of assistance she desperately needed when she arrived in the U.S. in 2013.

“I finished high school in 2012 and was admitted to Damascus University, but my parents wouldn’t let me attend because the Syrian government was bombing university campuses at the time,” says Waheeb. “They were afraid I would die.”

Waheeb was eager to resume her studies in America, but the college application process seemed murky. Some people told her that schools would not accept her Syrian diploma. Others
warned her that if her English wasn’t strong enough and she failed her classes, she’d have to pay a penalty to the government if she received financial aid.

“The system here is different from the one in Damascus, and I wished I had someone who had been in my situation to advise me,” she says. “I wanted to help other students who were struggling as much as I had. It didn’t matter if they were from my country or from somewhere else. I wanted to help.”

Through MINA, she was connected with Duha Ghazal, whose family had been driven out of their adopted country of Jordan after Syrian refugees began flooding across the border.

“W e’re Syrian, but we’d been living in Jordan for years. After the [Syrian] civil war began, we suddenly weren’t welcome,” says Ghazal, who arrived in the U.S. in November 2016 at age 22. “The last few months we were there, Syrians weren’t even allowed to work.”

Going back to war-torn Syria wasn’t an option, so the family sought help from the International Organization for Migration, which helped arrange resettlement in the U.S.

Just before leaving Jordan, Ghazal had completed a two-year degree in architecture and engineering and been accepted to a four-year bachelor’s program. Continuing her education was at the top of her priority list.

Still, like Waheeb, she was confused about the steps she had to take and had a hard time finding clear answers to her questions. Ghazal learned about MINA when O’Connor showed up at her house after a chance meeting with her brother and told her, “We’re going to help get you into school.”

A few months after the family arrived in Clarkston, she attended her first MINA meeting, and in fall 2017, Ghazal enrolled at Georgia State. Last semester she made the dean’s list. She credits the program, and subsequently starting college, with transforming her life in the U.S.

“It felt like a new start, a new beginning. My English got so much better every month. I stopped feeling lonely because I was making new friends,” she says. “College really helps with everything — your social life, your ability to talk and relate to people in this new culture and just feel part of a community.”

Now, her dream of becoming an architect is back on track, and she plans to apply to architecture school after completing her bachelor’s degree. When she graduates, she’ll be the first in her family to earn a college degree.

“I want to be an educated woman. I want to make my family proud,” Ghazal says. “And everything in Syria is rubble now. I want to help rebuild my home country.”

O’Connor says she’s continually amazed by what students in the program are able to accomplish.

“The fact that these young people can come here and be ready for college in a year is remarkable. What if I were suddenly dropped in the middle of Sudan after fleeing my home and had to find a job, go to school and pass a college course in a foreign country? There’s no way,” she says. “But that’s what they do.”

In 2016, the United Nations released a report showing nearly two-thirds of refugee children worldwide are unable to attend any school. Only 1 percent attend college. For young people, landing in a country like the U.S. offers a way to overcome this educational crisis, a path beyond just basic survival. Although that path may be clear and well trod for many Americans born and raised here, it’s often faint and nearly impassable for asylum seekers. With MINA, these students are benefiting from the one thing that can hasten their progress — a guide to show them the way.
The South Has Something to Say

BY ERRIN HAINES WHACK | PHOTOS BY STEVEN THACKSTON
As a young boy, Maurice Hobson spent his summers visiting relatives in Chicago, the first big city he got to experience. He didn’t see the Windy City’s skyscrapers or lakeshore views – just his aunt’s inner-city neighborhood.
His city-dweller cousins would tease him, calling him “backwards” and “country” and making fun of his red-clay-stained shoes. The words stung but didn’t land with their intended effect. Even at a young age, Hobson knew there was no shame in being black or Southern.

“There was always this chip on our shoulder when we would go up there,” Hobson recalls.

That feeling set Hobson on a journey that has made him one of the foremost experts on the American South after World War II, and Atlanta, regarded by many as “the Black mecca” for its critical mass of African-American educational institutions, professionals and politicians. Hobson is a historian and associate professor of African-American Studies at Georgia State.


Through his research and scholarship, Hobson is reshaping and expanding the narrative of the Southern capital, helping to tell a fuller story about the complexity of black life in Atlanta and its broader lessons for the nation and the world.

Hobson’s scholarship is steeped in a hip-hop aesthetic inspired by Southern rap pioneers like Atlanta’s Outkast and Goodie Mob, Houston’s Ghetto Boyz and Memphis’ Eightball and MJG – whom he frequently quotes in his work, in class and in conversation.

“Big Boi and André mess with my research because it talks about the larger implications of the music,” Hobson said, referring to the duo known collectively as Outkast.

Hobson’s relationship with Atlanta began early. When he was 5 years old, his father, a college professor, declined to take a teaching position at Atlanta University. Dozens of black boys were going missing and turning up dead across the city. Collectively known as the Atlanta Child Murders, their deaths made headlines across the country and brought the FBI to the city to investigate the killings. Hobson’s father feared raising his children in such terrifying circumstances.

Still, growing up in nearby Selma, Ala., Hobson frequently visited Atlanta to buy cool sneakers or go to Six Flags, the King Center or the World of Coca-Cola.

He was 17 when Outkast’s “Southernplayalisticcadillacmuzik” debuted. The group’s first album was nothing short of a revelation for Hobson, who felt the music’s lyrics represented him and gave a voice to his part of the country in hip-hop.

“I heard something in that music,” Hobson says. “What I heard was an on-the-ground conversation about Atlanta.”

But as a college student working the 1996 Summer Olympics, Hobson saw a big difference between Outkast’s Atlanta and the Atlanta that marketed itself to the world. That year, Hobson was in the stadium when Muhammad Ali lit the torch during the opening ceremonies. He saw sprinter Michael Johnson fly around the track in his signature gold shoes. He was in Centennial Olympic Park the day of the bombing.

However, Hobson saw another part of Atlanta during those years, too: blighted, struggling black communities left behind or left out of the city’s progress. As a graduate student at the University of Alabama, he decided to focus his research on Atlanta.

“It was a niche I understood, and I knew Atlanta was not what it seemed,” Hobson says. “I acknowledge that Atlanta is a unique place for black people in America. It represents the highest achievements of black people since the Civil War, but there are several black Atlantas, and people don’t want to
admit that. The city has done great things, but that's not the only story.”

Hobson coined the term “The Black New South,” a school of thought that focuses on the experiences of black people in a post-1965 South, challenging trends often overlooked by scholars. His work provides a holistic perspective on the national and international implications of the region’s history, culture, education, politics, health disparities, religion and business.

“No one’s really looked at how the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 helped change the politics of the American South and how those changes have played out on the ground in different areas,” he says.

Another of Hobson’s ideas, “the Olympification of a city,” explores the implications of franchising a city for big sporting events like the Super Bowl, Pan-Am Games or World Cup.

“It’s about what cities do to market themselves for the world and asking who the real winners and losers in local communities are,” he says.

Hobson has also done comparative studies between Atlanta’s Olympic experience and those of other cities, such as Athens, London, Melbourne, Seoul, Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City.

“The things that happened to Atlanta’s black communities are relevant to the experiences of other Olympic cities,” he says.

Providing a broad perspective on issues ranging from black political power to gentrification, Hobson was the chief historian for two recent documentaries.

“Maynard” details the life and legacy of Maynard Jackson, who was elected in 1973 as Atlanta’s first black mayor and the first black mayor in the Deep South, while Ken Burns’ “East Lake Film Project” explores the history of public housing with a focus on East Lake Meadows in Atlanta.

Though critical of Jackson in his book “Legend of the Black Mecca,” Hobson says he deeply admires the mayor and his accomplishments that shaped the city, including curbing police brutality, expanding public transit and the airport, and helping to create a black merchant class through affirmative action programs that opened up contracts for black vendors.

“In doing research around the city, you cannot speak ill of Maynard Jackson. Even his harshest critics talk about how great he was,” Hobson says. “A lot of things that keep Atlanta afloat as a very inclusive city still hinge on Maynard Jackson.”

“Maynard” director Sam Pollard didn’t initially think he needed a historian but changed his mind after he interviewed Hobson.

“I was pleasantly surprised at how relaxed and charismatic he was on screen,” Pollard says. “He provided wonderful context throughout the film that turned out to be very important. Every time he came on the screen, I said to myself, ‘Man, was he the right choice.’ His ability to give us the history in a warm and personal way was fantastic.”

Hobson is also participating in an upcoming documentary about former Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick, whose career with the team ended in 2007 after he was convicted of running a dogfighting ring out of his Virginia home and sentenced to almost two years in prison.

In fall 2016, Hobson penned an essay in the online journal Atlanta Studies titled “All Black Evertha(An)g: Aesthetics, Anecdotes and FX’s ‘Atlanta’.” In it, he uses the show as a prism to explore the city’s racial and political history and explain the multiple black Atlantas that exist today — and are often not part of the city’s narrative.

“Donald Glover’s ‘Atlanta’ is unapologetic and unabashed black art created for blacks that dwell throughout the blackest parts of Atlanta,” Hobson writes. “In this, Atlanta’s popular history is offset by Glover’s candid depiction of the city, exposing the smoke and mirrors of the ‘Black Mecca’ and ‘Hotlanta’ tropes. It rejects the representation of the city predicated on neoliberalism and demonstrates the further marginalization of the black masses through chic trends such as gentrification. Its awkwardness makes audiences uncomfortable by transposing Atlanta’s black masses to the center and moving
whites and the black upper and middle classes on to the fringes, places where they have little control over the narratives produced.

“When you study Atlanta, you always get ‘The City Too Busy to Hate’ or ‘Hotlanta,’” Hobson says. “But all of that is based on white interaction. But ‘Atlanta’ deals with black communities that have no interaction with white people.”

The essay soon caught the attention of “Atlanta” creator, star and Stone Mountain, Ga., native Donald Glover, whose staff called Hobson after reading it. They offered him the opportunity to work on the show as a consultant, where he helps the writers and producers highlight the tensions of black Atlanta and show the complicated nature of black life.

The collaboration brings Hobson full circle, as both he and Glover were influenced by Outkast and Goodie Mob as young Southerners. Hobson points out the show’s second season, “Robbin’ Season,” features themes that can be heard in Outkast’s 1993 song “Player’s Ball.”

“ ‘Player’s Ball’ was about Christmas Eve,” he says. “They’re saying that Christmas Day in the hood is no different from any other day because we’re poor.”

Hobson also sees the dichotomy play out in his daily life. Living in south DeKalb County, in one of the most affluent areas in the country for African-Americans, he is still often adjacent to violence and poverty.

Hobson’s passion for Atlanta — which can rival that of actual natives — is part of what fuels his complicated relationship with a city that has been so transformative in his own life. At the core of his commitment is that 7-year-old boy who knew his cousins weren’t better than he was. Only now, he’s able to express it.

“I’m trying to do my best to represent the kind of community I came from,” Hobson says. “My goal is to reclaim our narrative for us — good, bad and ugly. Just because I talk slow doesn’t mean I am slow. That’s what the Black New South is about.”

Errin Haines Whack is the Associated Press’ National Writer on Race and Ethnicity.
Hobson sits a spell on Edgewood Avenue outside The SWAG Shop, a barbershop owned by Atlanta rapper Michael Render, also known as Killer Mike.
Q: With Kell Hall’s demolition just a few months away, can you revisit some of the building’s quirky history?
Submitted by Nathan Brown (M.H.P. ’15)

A: Back in 1945, the six-story Ivy Street Garage caught the eye of George Sparks, the college’s director and future president. The college desperately needed more space, and Sparks thought the building’s rampways would make life easier on disabled veterans returning to school on the GI bill. He acquired it for $300,000 and used war surplus materials to transform it into classroom and office space by 1946.

For years, the college only occupied two floors of the building and rented the other four stories to tenants, including the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Southern Bell, tire shops (such as Holland Tire, pictured below) and a cotton broker. Always looking for ways to bring in money, Sparks even installed a sawmill on the fourth floor when lumber was in high demand.

But if the weirdest thing you’ve heard about Kell Hall is that turtles once roamed freely around the science labs, we’ve got a few more stories for you in our next issue.
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