At the heart of Atlanta’s dynamic startup community, Georgia State is giving the city’s next generation of entrepreneurs an edge.
Congratulations to the 40 Under 40 Class of 2020.

Meet KIANA NICHOLAS (B.A. ’12), senior manager of analytics and research at CNN, and the rest of the class at pantheralumni.com/40under40.

Nominations for the Class of 2021 will open this fall.

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Wil Lutz, who grew up playing soccer, wears two different shoes when he kicks the ball. On his right foot, his kicking foot, he wears a soccer cleat. On his left, he wears a standard football cleat. “I wear a size 11, but you want the tightest shoe possible when you kick, so I wear a size 10 on my kicking foot and a regular 11 on my left — why make my left foot uncomfortable?” he says.

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Groundbreaking for Research

As we prepare to build a new science facility, research at Georgia State continues to grow at record-setting rates and contribute to the health of communities around Georgia and across the world.

“Georgia State faculty earned more than $100 million in sponsored funding for the fifth year in a row. We’re now one of the fastest-growing research institutions in the nation.”

Last Spring, this Magazine

An oral history of Kell Hall, the university’s first permanent building and longtime research science headquarters, which we recently demolished to make way for much-needed greenspace. This spring, we’re planning to break ground on the newest addition to the Atlanta Campus: the third phase of Georgia State’s Science Park.

Occupying an entire city block, the Science Park already features the university’s most advanced research facilities. The project’s first two phases yielded the Perimeter College campus in 2010 and the Research Science Center in 2016.

Once complete, the new building will contain eight floors of ultramodern, biosafety-commissioned laboratory space dedicated to the study of infectious diseases, a critical piece of our expanding research portfolio.

But our research isn’t growing in just a bricks-and-mortar sense. Our research community is larger and more productive than ever. Last year, Georgia State faculty earned more than $100 million in sponsored funding for the fifth year in a row. We’ve now one of the fastest-growing research institutions in the nation.

But while these statistics are impressive, they don’t tell the whole story of research at Georgia State. That’s because they don’t show you the ways our faculty are making an impact in communities here in Georgia and across the world.

At the Perimeter College campus in Clarkston, a city known as the “Ellis Island of the South,” faculty have established a Prevention Research Center to address the health needs of the thousands of migrants and refugees living there.

In the Institute for Biomedical Sciences, researchers are working to develop what could be the first successful universal flu vaccine, which would eliminate the need for annual flu shots, as well as the first safe vaccine and effective treatment for respiratory syncytial virus, which hospitalizes tens of thousands of infants in the U.S. every year.

A collaboration among the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, the College of Arts & Sciences and the J.

Mack Robinson College of Business, the Evidence-Based Cybersecurity Research Group is uncovering vital information about online criminal activity that could help protect people, businesses and governments.

And just weeks ago, Regents’ Professor Jenny Yang published an exciting breakthrough: a new tool that could significantly improve our ability to find, diagnose and treat cancer before it has spread.

Yang, who holds 35 patents, also recently became the university’s first professor to be awarded a fellowship by the National Academy of Inventors.

These are just a few examples of how researchers at Georgia State are making a difference #TheStateWay.

Sincerely,

Mark P. Becker
President

Class Notes

Your classmates are a successful bunch. From mayors and authors to business owners and aquarium CEOs, there are Panthers out there doing fantastic things. Got a promotion? A new addition to the family? Go ahead, brag a little. Post your good news and read about your fellow alumni at news.gsu.edu/class-notes.

You can share Class Notes through Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Stay Updated

If you need to update your address — or if this issue is addressed to someone else — just send a note to update@gsu.edu. If you’d like to stop receiving the print issue and read the magazine online only, send an email to magazine@gsu.edu, and we’ll take it from there.

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CAMPUS CONNECTOR

With Kell Hall out of the way, construction crews are nearing completion on the first phase of the greenway, Georgia State’s future gathering space at the center of the Atlanta Campus.

By Benjamin Hodges (B.A ’08) | Rendering by Pond & Company

THE DEMOLITION OF KELL HALL AND THE EASTERN HALF OF LIBRARY PLAZA BEGAN LAST APRIL. Workers hauled away the last chunks of concrete in October and have since installed new facades on Langdale Hall and the Arts & Humanities building where they once adjoined Kell Hall. Construction has also started on the lighted walkway that will soon cross through the greenspace connecting Collins Street to Peachtree Center Avenue.

Crews are also building two new staircases. One will connect the Courtland Street bridge to a revamped ground-level entrance to Sparks Hall, and the other will link Langdale Plaza (the remaining section of Library Plaza behind Langdale Hall) to the greenway down below. By April, crews should begin landscaping the greenspace itself. The university hopes to open a portion of the greenway, including the walkway, by June. However, because the next construction phase calls for a new ground-level entrance to Library North, complete with exterior improvements and a sizable addition, the portion of the greenway that lies south of the walkway must remain closed to allow work to proceed.

The Library North renovation is expected to take about eight months, and the rest of the greenway should open to the public by the end of the spring 2021 semester.
Author Tom Chaffin (B.A. ’77) digs deep into the past to uncover some of history’s most intriguing stories.

From an early age, Tom Chaffin knew he wanted to be a writer, and by the time he graduated from high school he’d already decided to pursue a career in journalism. He spent decades in Atlanta, New York, San Francisco, Paris and other cities working as a freelance and staff writer for newspapers and magazines.

While Chaffin still occasionally publishes articles and op-eds, he left full-time journalism 25 years ago to launch a book career that has so far yielded seven narrative histories. His most recent book, “Helped Forge Two Nations,” was published last November by St. Martin’s Press. A Wall Street Journal review called it “a gripping narrative that offers a revelatory perspective on the combined origins of two nations.”

“All of my books are character-driven,” Chaffin said. “Much of my research is like being paid to read other people’s mail.”

By digging through primary sources such as journals and letters and often visiting the places depicted in his books, Chaffin creates biographies that shed light on the people at the center of historical events. Those travels often help him to better understand — and even discover errors recorded in — letters, diaries and newspaper accounts.

Chaffin said his discovery while visiting Versailles that a balcony faced an internal courtyard rather than the exterior of the palace changed his perception of one event’s significance. As Marie-Antoinette spoke to an angry mob from the balcony in 1789, Chaffin said she was not speaking to a crowd outside the palace, but one that had broken past guards and made its way to an area normally off limits to all but the royal family.

“All of my books are character-driven. Much of my research is like being paid to read other people’s mail.”

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“All of my books are character-driven. Much of my research is like being paid to read other people’s mail.”

BY MICHAEL DAVIS (B.A. ’03) | PHOTO BY STEVEN THACKSTON
TO YOUR HEALTH

The Georgia Health Policy Center celebrates 25 years of service.

Housed in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, the Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC) has been researching and promoting solutions to healthcare challenges since 1995. In commemoration of its 25th year of service, the GHPC will host 25 events and activities throughout the year, including a speaker and film series, community and service opportunities, and more.

Dedicated to improving health status at the community level, the GHPC connects leaders with the research and guidance needed to make informed decisions about health policy and programs. The center’s areas of concern include access to care, rural health systems, long-term care, children’s well-being, insurance coverage, behavioral health and more. Working to advance health and well-being throughout Georgia and in more than 200 communities across the nation and globe, the GHPC has completed more than 1,000 projects for more than 100 clients.

For more information about the GHPC’s 25th anniversary, visit ghpc.gsu.edu/anniversary.

HAIL, VICTORS

GEORGIA STATE ESPORTS had a banner season last fall, bringing home two national titles for its play in the video game “Smite.”

In December, the team topped Georgia Tech to win the American Video Game League’s Collegiate Championship. The month before, they took home the top prize at Dreamhack Atlanta, an esports and digital festival that attracts thousands of in-person spectators and thousands more on the Twitch streaming platform.

Founded in 2017, Georgia State esports competes in the Georgia Esports League. The university is one of more than 100 colleges and universities in the National Association of Collegiate Esports. Team members are eligible to earn scholarships and learn a variety of disciplines, including broadcasting, marketing, management and game development. Produced by Atlanta-based Hi-Rez Studios, the game “Smite” is just one example of Georgia’s fast-growing video game industry.

1,385 Pieces of music by Johnny Mercer (1909–1976) archived in the Georgia State Library Special Collections

STAYING THE COURSE

Perimeter College ranks among nation’s best two-year colleges for student success.

Perimeter College students successfully transfer to four-year degree programs at dramatically higher rates than students at other two-year colleges around the country, according to a new ranking by The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Perimeter ranks 20th in the nation for student success among the 888 two-year colleges considered by The Chronicle, which tracked students who entered college in 2015. By 2018, nearly 83 percent of Perimeter students were still enrolled, had transferred to other programs or completed their degrees. About 51 percent had transferred to bachelor’s degree programs, nearly 35 points higher than the two-year college average.

“We have increased the number of students who transfer from our associate degree pathways to four-year undergraduate programs by 1,000 students a year, and we have one of the highest transfer rates in the country,” said Tim Renick, senior vice president for student success. “This increase affirms that our strategies are working post-consolidation, helping students achieve their goals at record rates.”

SHIFTING GEARS

As executive director of the Atlanta Bicycle Coalition, Rebecca Serna (M.S. ’07) is focused on improving infrastructure for all modes of travel.

While working and traveling as a paralegal, Rebecca Serna got to know public transit systems across the United States. She had grown up in Atlanta riding MARTA’s trains and buses but realized there was room for improvement.

She was also looking to make a career change.

“I was kind of used to the way things were, but I was traveling to all these cities that had much better transit than Atlanta,” she said. “That’s how I got interested in transportation.”

That interest led to advocacy and eventually to the position she’s held since 2007 as executive director of the Atlanta Bicycle Coalition, an organization focused on safe spaces to ride and, more recently, sustainable transportation.

While working on her master’s degree in urban policy studies at the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Serna spent 2006 on a Fulbright Fellowship in Bogota, Colombia, learning about participatory planning. After the Fulbright, she interned in the bicycle and pedestrian office of the Georgia Department of Transportation.

“It gave me a greater understanding of the planning environment and how that intersected with policy,” Serna said of her master’s program. “Here at the Atlanta Bicycle Coalition, we’re trying to change the infrastructure, but policy is very closely intertwined with how those changes play out. The policy decisions really come first and govern how the built environment works, feels and looks.”

Serna has led the Atlanta Bicycle Coalition through an expansion of its roster from around 200 members in 2007 to more than 1,500 today. Over the past year, she’s also led the group as it has broadened its focus from advocating for bicycle safety and mobility to championing safer, sustainable transportation for motorists, cyclists and pedestrians.

As the coalition developed its new mission, it examined traffic crash data from neighborhoods throughout the city. Serna said the highest rates of serious injuries and fatal traffic crashes tend to occur in areas already struggling with income inequality, educational disparities and high incarceration rates.

“Basically, the communities most burdened by everything are the communities most burdened by the transportation system,” she said.

The group’s Vision Zero campaign encourages planning practices to eliminate traffic deaths. Among the coalition’s policy priorities for 2020 is advocating for a uniform speed limit of 25 miles per hour in Atlanta.

“We feel like where we can make the most difference is in the street,” Serna said. “We’re really trying to reclaim the street for people. Everyone needs a way to get around that’s reliable, affordable and safe.”
When Brad Stromdahl got the call to interview for the job of head baseball coach at Georgia State, it felt like the start of a homecoming. Ahead of his seven seasons at the helm of Georgia Gwinnett College’s baseball program, Stromdahl spent five seasons at Georgia State (2007-11) as a recruiting coordinator and hitting instructor. The Panthers hit .300 or better in each of those seasons and set a Georgia State record in 2010 with an average of .356. "Today, I’m sitting here, and I couldn’t be happier with where we are, the state of the program and where we’re going," Stromdahl said before the start of the Panthers’ 2020 campaign. “The future is so bright, and the future is now, not only for baseball and the Athletics Department, but for Georgia State as a whole.”

In 2011, Stromdahl was selected as the first head coach of Georgia Gwinnett’s new baseball program. Over the next two years, he laid the groundwork for its inaugural season in 2013. In his seven seasons at Georgia Gwinnett, the Grizzlies won 75 percent of their games (328-104) and reached the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics World Series three times, making semifinal appearances in 2018 and 2019.

"It was really great to have the opportunity to learn and build," Stromdahl said. "Now, I can take what I learned there and apply it to the Georgia State program on a fundamental level and really focus on the game. Now, it’s about coaching, getting the players ready and giving them an unbelievable Division I experience."

Athletics Director Charlie Cobb announced Stromdahl’s return to Georgia State in June, making him the Panthers’ 10th head coach in school history. "Players enjoy playing for him, and his beliefs mirror the culture established within our department," Cobb said. "Georgia State baseball was successful during his previous tenure, and we have the same expectation going forward."

Back in his old stomping grounds, Stromdahl has set his sights on the College World Series once again. “Ultimately, what we are trying to do is have fun and play a really exciting and fast-paced style of baseball,” Stromdahl said. “I know what it takes to win and go to a World Series and our goal is to make that happen this year. We’re going to make mistakes, and we may lose a couple of games, but you can bet we’re going to win a lot more than we lose.”

State to Face Tech

A crosstown contest begins in 2024 when Georgia State football faces off against Georgia Tech in the first game of a home-and-home series. Tech will play host on Aug. 31, 2024, at Bobby Dodd Stadium, and the Panthers bring the Yellow Jackets to Georgia State Stadium on Sept. 19, 2026.

In the program’s short history, Georgia State has already traveled to play two other Atlantic Coast Conference teams: N.C. State, who comes to Atlanta in 2022, and Clemson. The Panthers’ 2019 season brought its third bowl appearance in five years, and their seven wins matched a school best. Georgia State opens the 2020 season at home Sept. 5 against Murray State.

SandY Panthers Rank again

The Panthers continue to rank among the top 20 NCAA beach volleyball teams. After appearing in the 2019 Coastal Collegiate Sports Association semifinals, Georgia State entered the 2020 season at No. 17 in the American Volleyball Coaches Association Poll and No. 16 in the Dive Magazine Poll.

The roster includes more than a dozen returning players, including four seniors who each won at least 20 duals in 2019.

Healing the Home

Researchers in the School of Public Health are helping stabilize Georgia families affected by substance abuse.

In the U.S., Parental Neglect is the most common reason children enter the foster care system. Neglect often goes hand in hand with other issues, including substance abuse. As of 2017, a parent’s abuse of alcohol or illicit drugs accounted for one of every three U.S. children in foster care — a rate that has been rising steadily since the mid-2000s.

“These problems don’t happen in isolation,” said Daniel Whitaker, professor in the Department of Health Policy & Behavioral Sciences in the School of Public Health. “If there’s substance abuse going on, chances are these families are also dealing with things like poverty or mental health issues. Kids endure a range of negative social and emotional impacts that result directly from a parent’s substance abuse as well as indirectly from related matters such as a parent’s arrest.”

Recently funded by a $1.65 million federal grant, Whitaker and his colleagues are working with state and county governments to serve these children and their families more effectively. Funded through the Regional Partnership Grants program, which aims to improve partnerships among public services to create better outcomes for children affected by parental substance abuse, the project has two goals.

It steers parents with substance abuse issues who have been reported to the Georgia Division of Family & Children’s Services (DFCS) into family treatment courts (FTCs). It also improves the services at FTCs, which are two-year, judicially supervised treatment programs that have shown positive outcomes for parents.

“Accountability is an important part of recovery,” Whitaker said. “Compared to community-based treatments, FTCs are more effective at reducing continued substance abuse, which has a greater impact on parents and children.”

Whitaker and his team will engage regional DFCS offices and FTCs in four judicial circuits that cover 13 Georgia counties: Hall and Dawson; Clarke and Oconee; Chatham; and the eight counties in the Ocmulgee circuit. In the project’s second year, the researchers will help the courts identify and implement evidence-based strategies for improving trauma treatments and trauma-based parenting programs.

“The primary goal is to get parents into these programs, reduce their risk of further substance use, and improve the safety and well-being of children in Georgia,” Whitaker said. “We also hope to see families reunited and help moms and dads improve their mental health and their ability to be a good parent.”
“There’s a severe lack of representation for Muslims in film and TV ... Muslims need to be shown not just as taxi drivers but as normal American people, like high schoolers. After all, we are American.”

ROLE MODEL

When Shahreen Elahi (B.S. ’18) applied to be an extra in “Spider-Man: Homecoming,” she was just supposed to be another student at title character Peter Parker’s high school. But what started as a background role brought an issue — a glaring lack of Muslim representation in TV and film — front and center.

INTERVIEW BY TORIE ROBINETTE DURHAM
PHOTO BY STEVEN THACKSTON

IN THE SUMMER OF 2016, SHAHREEN ELAHI, then a rising junior at Georgia State, learned the movie “Spider-Man: Homecoming” was filming in Atlanta and looking for extras. A lover of comic books and superheroes, she applied and landed a part as a student at Peter Parker’s (Spider-Man’s) Long Island high school.

But when the directors emailed her the scenes, something stopped her: She’d have to change clothes in a women’s locker room. As a Muslim woman, Elahi didn’t feel comfortable undressing on camera, so she decided to speak up.

When Elahi took her concerns to the directors, they didn’t dismiss her like she had feared. Instead, they got an idea: They asked if she’d wear a hijab for her scenes. Elahi doesn’t don the traditional garb in her day-to-day life, but the chance to represent Muslim women in a major American movie – a rare sight – thrilled her. Little did she know she’d be the very first extra to wear a hijab in a Marvel film.

Since the movie was released, big things have happened for Muslim actors in the Marvel franchise. British-Pakistani actress Zoha Roman played the hijab-wearing main character in the sequel, “Spider-Man: Far From Home,” and Disney+ is expected to release “Ms. Marvel,” the first Marvel Studios series centered on a Muslim character.

Elahi reflects on the gravity of her role and the impact it’s had on Muslim representation in Marvel films.

How did your faith factor into this role?
What was crazy is the filming overlapped with Ramadan. Balancing those two schedules was the hardest part of it all. During the month of Ramadan, we go to the mosque to pray every day between 8 p.m. and 1 a.m. We also fast from about 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. It was super hot in Atlanta, and each scene takes so long to film. We’d have breaks with catered food from fancy restaurants, but I couldn’t eat or drink anything.

Then there was a house party scene the directors decided they wanted me in, but it was filming at a time when I was supposed to be in prayer. I ended up staying at the mosque, so I did miss out on a few scenes.

I was also in a gym class rope-climbing scene, and they wanted me to wear shorts. I had to explain to the directors that when wearing the hijab, one wouldn’t show her arms or legs bare. [Only one’s feet, hands and face can be exposed.] I ended up wearing leggings under the shorts.

Did you have any memorable interactions with the actors?
Actually, yes. It’s hilarious because it was totally accidental. Somehow, Tom Holland, who plays Spider-Man, heard me say I was thirsty — this was while I was fasting and couldn’t drink. He came up to me out of nowhere, told me he was concerned about the heat and the long hours, and offered to get me some water. I had to tell Tom Holland, “No!” I couldn’t believe it. The one time I got to talk to him, I turned him down.

You don’t wear the hijab regularly. How did you feel about wearing it in the movie?
I didn’t have to, except when I couldn’t do certain things in some of the scenes. I think people were kind of hesitant to ask me about it because they were unfamiliar. There were other extras on the set wearing yarmulkes and turbans, and I was really happy to see that because you wouldn’t probably see other religions and ethnicities represented in a real American high school.

Did you realize the significance of being the first person to wear a hijab in a Marvel film?
I didn’t think it was a very big deal while I was on set, but after the movie came out, I remember friends who didn’t know I’d been an extra remarking that they couldn’t believe they’d seen someone wearing a hijab in the movie. It was so cool to see people so happy about someone who was just in the background.

There’s a severe lack of representation for Muslims in film and TV. And when we are cast, Muslims are usually portrayed as outsiders struggling to fit in and find their identity in the Western world. It’s a very common stereotype. Muslims need to be shown not just as taxi drivers but as normal American people, like high schoolers. After all, we are American.

What does it mean to you to see Muslim women leading in “Spider-Man: Far From Home” and “Ms. Marvel” – both following your role? I remember growing up and not having anyone I could relate to on TV or in movies. Seeing these actresses take on these parts has helped me understand the impact of my own role. It’s incredibly humbling.

I think stories are the greatest tool for education, and we need Muslim voices in stories out there so that Muslims and people from other marginalized groups know they’re being seen, heard and valued.

You graduated from Georgia State with a degree in neuroscience in 2018. What are you doing now? Do you see any more acting in your future? I’m working as a clinical research assistant at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, which I love. I focus on sports medicine, looking at knee injuries in kids and studying the long-term effects and improvements associated with reconstruction surgery.

I would like to continue with my research and possibly go back to school, but I’m just trying to leave doors open and take opportunities as they come. I haven’t done any more acting, but I am definitely not opposed to it. I think it would be awesome.
In one of the nation’s most enterprising cities, Georgia State’s Entrepreneurship & Innovation Institute has teamed up with The Marcus Foundation to fund, mentor and develop 21 new businesses. Working in industries that range from recycling and logistics to art production and music management, they all have a story.

BY BENJAMIN HODGES (B.A. ’08) | ILLUSTRATIONS BY TARA JACOBY
It had already been a rough day for Ashley Daramola.

After a two-hour commute, Daramola (B.S. ’10, M.S. ’12) — who goes by “Ashley Bella” — had just worked eight hours in a safe house for female victims of sex trafficking. Some of the women were fresh out of prison. Others were deterring from addictive drugs. Another who suffered from a severe case of mental illness was prone to violence and had threatened Bella and her coworkers. After her shift, Bella was ready to brave another commute home.

“That wouldn’t happen, though. Her car had two flat tires, and her small salary as a social work case manager afforded her no money to fix them.

“My work with these women means everything to me,” Bella thought. “But I should be able to give back to what I know she should have done a long time ago.

She quit to start her own business.

 Seeds of Opportunity

Bella has loved art since her first Sunday school craft projects, and it soon became a therapeutic outlet from a home environment she calls “a little dysfunctional.”

As she got older, her teachers frequently advised her to pursue her talent.

Her family wasn’t keen on the idea of Bella seeking a career as an artist, and the last thing she wanted was to end up supporting herself in her dream. She ended up spending more than a decade in and out of school, shifting from design to a seven-year stint in social work.

But in September 2016, as she gauged at her immobile car outside the Acworth safe house, those two flat tires became symbols of a personal conviction she could no longer ignore.

“That confirmed it for me — that maybe the reason I was having so much trouble getting grounded somehow was because I wasn’t doing what I was meant to do,” she says. “And if there’s one thing I know, it’s how to figure stuff out. So, I’m going to quit my job and become an artist, and I’m going to figure it out.”

ArtyBella, Bella’s company, was born when she used her last $10 to buy the supplies she needed to paint a mural in her friend’s apartment. She got paid $10, and when photos of the painting took off on social media, she started getting offers to create more. To minimize expenses, she moved out of her apartment and lived out of the trunk of her car, couch-surfing at friends’ houses. Then she sold her car, too.

Using the cash from her murals, she bought materials to host ArtyBella “sip and paint” parties, where guests pay to follow an instructor’s lead to create their own paintings. With no home or vehicle, she enlisted her friends to host the events at their houses and borrowed a car each time to transport furniture and supplies, including the easels she made out of cheap plywood.

For a year, she operated out of a studio in a Westview church, hosting events and even living there when finances were especially tight. Her events grew so popular she had trouble accommodating everyone who wanted to come. By last summer, she’d earned enough money to open her own space in downtown East Point.

Around the same time, Bella received an invitation from Greenidge, a research assistant with the Center for the Advancement of Students & Alumni (CASA) at Georgia State. Among its other changes, CASA brings successful alumni and profession- als to campus to talk about their careers. Greenidge had discovered Bella on Instagram and wanted her to sit on a panel and share her story with students.

“She has this great energy,” Greenidge says. “I needed to get her in front of young people and let them know that if you dream it and put the right people around you, you can do it.”

After the event, Greenidge introduced Bella to Jackie Davis (B.A. ’09, M.Ed. ’12, MBA ’18), the associate director of Georgia State’s Entrepreneurship & Innovation Institute (ENI).

Established in 2016, ENI is dedicated to building an entrepreneurial culture and mindset across Georgia State, with programming for students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members. The institute started offering a bachelor’s degree in entrepreneurship through the J. Mack Robinson College of Business in 2017, and its classes are open to students of any major.

“The reality is entrepreneurship happens everywhere. It’s not confined to the traditional business industries,” Davis says.

Davis told Bella about ENI’s biggest opportunity yet — the chance to participate in an exclusive eight-month incubation program for promising seed and startup businesses called the Main Street Entrepreneurs Seed Fund. Supported by a $150,000 grant from The Marcus Foundation, Main Street offers mentorship and funding to help Georgia State students, recent alumni and community members develop new businesses that can create jobs and have a significant impact on Atlanta.

Participants get not only advanced workshops and weekly one-on-one meetings with a notable and experienced Atlanta-based entrepreneur — 3iE — but also some hefty grants — $5,000 for seed companies and $10,000 for startups.

“I knew Georgia State was an innovative university that made students their primary focus, but I had no idea they were taking it to this extent. And now I get to be a part of that,” says Janine Moton, one of the program’s two EIRs.

A prominent Atlanta businesswoman and investor, Moton is the founder of the fast-growing Skylar Security startup. It’s her job to coach the young business owners alongside Musaddiq “MK” Khan (B.S. ’05), ENI’s lead EIR, a startup mogul who’s helped create and lead companies in industries from energy and hospital administration to artificial intelligence.

ENI enlisted the support of faculty and alumni, as well as local industry leaders, venture capitalists and promi- nent entrepreneurs to review the 100 applications they received with a balanced, thorough perspective. Fifty semifinalists delivered their best pitches to this diverse group over the course of three days. Twenty-one earned a spot in the program, which began in September.

After wrapping up a custom installation for a teach- er’s classroom at a local elementary school, Bella was driving to a friend’s house when she received word that ArtyBella made the cut.

“I had to pull over to cry,” she says.

“Most of the things I’ve done in my life were very scary. But once you get on the other side of that fear, everything you probably wanted is there.”

— ASHLEY BELLA

“Liftoff

After attending a networking event, Sheehan Khan (B.S. ‘14) wended his way through the parking deck and got in his car. His business, a logistics startup called Airlift, had taken a few hits recently, and his bank account was running low, so he checked his phone to see if any payments had arrived.

Nothing had worsened. His account was so drained he couldn’t pay for his parking to leave the garage. So, he slept in the backseat until just before daybreak when a deposit clearing for a customer got back to work and kept piling away to get his company off the ground.

For Khan, this kind of danger is part of the game you play as an entrepreneur.

“I’ve always been an entrepreneur,” says Khan, a first-generation American, the son of Bangladeshi immi- grants. “I knew it was called entrepreneurship, but I felt whatever I did needed to have value.”

“I’ve always been an entrepreneur. I didn’t know it was called entrepreneurship, but I felt whatever I did needed to have value.”

— SHEEHAN KHAN

In third grade, he designed and sold trading cards to his classmates for a playground game called “War.” They were a hit. Later, he turned to creating his own comic books, selling each photocopy for 50 cents of his classmates’ lunch money. When he couldn’t acquire an airbrush for his new idea — customizing white T-shirts with graffiti-inspired art — he made his own by swapping out the washable marker in a Blow Pen with a Sharpie. One of his fellow middle schoolers couldn’t pay $15 for a shirt, so he traded his Casio watch, which Khan then sold on eBay for $30.

“That’s when I realized I can sell this stuff online. I can sell everything online,” Khan says.

And he did. While still in high school, he built an e-commerce business, selling items from around the house and nearby thrift stores. By the time he was studying at Georgia State, he had run out of space at his parents’ house and had set up shop in a storage unit packed with goods imported from overseas. He often spent more time at the storage unit than in class, all while pursuing other ventures, including a media agency and an online ticketing platform.

“It was a hell of a ride,” he says. “I missed tests. I didn’t graduate with the best GPA.

In the storage facility, he met a community of other plucky e-commerce business owners running shops out of their units. Like Khan, they were all encountering a similar problem: managing their inventory across multiple locations and online sales platforms. Maintaining some master spreadsheet just wasn’t working.

For small businesses like these, traditional fulfill- ment companies — places that store and ship orders for retailers — aren’t a viable option. These big centers need clients with a high volume of sales across a narrow range of standard products and who can afford high monthly fees just to open an account — barriers to entry that turn away most startups.

So, Khan created a solution. He used a computer science class project at Georgia State to start tinkering...
Assembly, Switchyards and more.

opportunities it offers through hubs such as Atlanta in the university community with Atlanta's robust opportunities. Soon, ENI will connect students with a take advantage of unique mentorship and networking neurs can live together, share coworking spaces, and 
take advantage of unique mentorship and networking opportunities. Student programming includes competitions, work-shops and guest speakers, as well as the E-House Living-Learning Community, where aspiring entreprene-urs can live together, share coworking spaces, and take advantage of unique mentorship and networking opportunities. Soon, ENI will connect students with a network of alumni-owned startups and businesses for invaluable internships. ENI also assists faculty with commercializing their research. For example, if a scientist discovers a novel way to reduce waste, a viable business might be the best way to extend the research, and the environ-mental benefits it offers, all over the world. Off campus, it connects emerging entrepreneurs in the university community with Atlanta's robust startup community and the innumerable events and opportunities it offers through hubs such as Atlanta Tech Village, Constellations, Flatiron City, General Assembly, Switchyards and more.

The Big Ideas

For Bella, Khan and the rest of the Main Street Entrepreneurs, one date loomed large. On Feb. 27, or “Demo Day,” all 21 finalists gathered at Georgia State Stadium to give three-minute pitches to a new group of judges comprising a who’s-who of the Atlanta business community for the chance to win additional funding. Khan pitched how he would expand and decentralize Airlift through micro-fulfillment in urban centers. That means partnering with theoretically anyone in any city who has storage space and a vehicle to fulfill orders using equipment Airlift would provide, such as barcode scanners and label printers. Airlift would then distrib-ute its clients’ inventory closest to the people who are buying it. It’s like Uber or Airbnb for fulfillment, where Airlift’s system, credibility and reliable supply of cus-tomers can give any person willing to do the work the chance to run his or her own fulfillment center. With Main Street’s help, Bella had already been able to hire instructors to take over some of the sip and paint classes, a public relations specialist to promote her company’s story, and a business developer to create strategies and proposals for soliciting new work and partnerships. The business developer alone led to some high profile commissions — and committee appoin-tments — for the cities of College Park and South Fulton and the Aerotropolis development at Hapeville’s shut-tered Ford factory. For her Demo Day pitch, Bella introduced a new product called the BellaBox. A monthly subscription art-making kit, the BellaBox fuses Bella’s talent for art instruction with her commitment to mental health. Each box will come with everything needed to create a particular project. Along with materials and instruc-tions, Bella included a book that explains how the process of making that piece of art addresses mental or emotional well-being. To achieve rich, bright hues with watercolor, for example, the artist must show a lot of patience, building layer upon layer of color atop a deli-cate pencil outline. There’s no way to rush it, she says, and that methodical focus can release deeply buried memories or feelings.

with ideas for a program. While he scraped all the original code, he transformed those initial concepts into the software that became the foundation for Airlift. Using Khan’s proprietary technology, Airlift tracks and updates a business’ inventory, pricing, orders, fulfills orders and more from every sales platform — such as Amazon, Shopify or Etsy — all in one place. To avoid fleecing small companies with exorbitant monthly fees, Airlift makes most of its money on transactions, charging for each order it packs and ships, as well as local pickups and storage in the company’s warehouse in Atlanta’s Boulevard Heights neighborhood. “E-commerce is growing rapidly,” Khan says. “Right now, it’s a $10.3 trillion market worldwide, and com-panies are spending more than 10 percent of that on shipping alone. We want to make sure this market by building a completely modern system that has the potential to change the fulfillment industry.” Last year, though, Khan pitched his company to ENI’s panel for a shot at the Main Street Entrepreneurs Seed Fund, the response was enthusiastic. “He has a great model and a great concept,” says Moton. “He’s a brilliant, brilliant entrepreneur who’s converting that brilliance into a business.” Last year, some unexpected cash flow prob-lems forced Khan to consider dropping clients, shutting down temporarily or even starting over from scratch. “I was determined to make this work,” he says. “The financials made sense. We were making money. But then everything went wrong, and I didn’t know if we were going to make it.”

Just in time, he received his first check from Main Street. He was able to hire some help and modify his accounting to create a more reliable stream of cash, giving him space to further develop the software. “I admire his grit and tenacity,” Moton says. “It’s going to be an incredible story when he gets to the end of it.”

AND THE DEMO DAY WINNERS ARE

Seeds
1st: Artehub
London Baibosa (B.S. ’19), Rhythm Varshney (M.S. ’19) — art discovery platform for emerging artists
2nd: Bukhari Tutoring & Health
Usama Muta-Ali (A.S. ’15, B.I.S. ’21) – academic and lifestyle services for STEM students and professionals
3rd: EcoDrop Technologies
Nicole Tolle (B.B.A. ’19, M.S. ’22) — end-of-life waste and recycling solutions to promote and incentivize recycling

Startups
1st: ArtzyBella
Ashley “Bella” Daramola (B.S. ’10, M.S. ’12) – art services, classes and products emphasizing mental health
2nd: Totem Agency
Ashley Richardson (B.S. ’17), Katherine Shaub – automated system for managing visual branding
3rd: SweatPack
Umama Kibria (B.B.A. ’14) – collaborative accountability platform for meeting personalized fitness goals
In 1956, three African American women — MYRA PAYNE ELLIOTT, BARBARA PACE HUNT and IRIS MAE WELCH — sued to desegregate Georgia State and won. Their victory set an important legal precedent that paved the way for the integration of universities in the South. Georgia State, now the nation’s leading nonprofit institution in conferring degrees to African American students, honors the struggle of these civil rights pioneers.
M

yra Payne Elliott isn’t feeling well. Getting out of bed takes more energy than she has most days, and the chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) makes it hard to breathe. You wouldn’t know it to look at her, though, immaculately dressed in a beaded silver gown and matching jacket, her white hair carefully pulled into a bun and secured with a silver pin in the shape of a butterfly.

There have been reporters and photographers at the door. Last week, it was a documentary film crew. Now, she’s being honored with a special lecture at Georgia State.

Elliott isn’t comfortable with all the attention. “I don’t like glory and fanfare,” she says between clicks of the camera shutter. Still, she fixed herself up today because it’s important to her daughters that she finish what she started nearly 65 years ago. At age 97, she’s being recognized for what she did to advance civil and human rights in Georgia and throughout the South. It’s a story the world, and even her own children, didn’t fully appreciate until now.

In 1956, Elliott, Barbara Pace Hunt and Iris Mae Welch sued in federal court to desegregate Georgia State University (then called Georgia State College of Business Administration) and won.

Though their names are not well known in the civil rights pantheon, their victory became the first federal court action against segregated education in the South. It’s a story of the world, and even her own children, didn’t fully appreciate until now.

On a rainy February afternoon, Daniels told the story of these desegregation pioneers to a crowd of more than 850 attendees at Georgia State’s inaugural Groundbreaker Lecture, with Elliott and the children of the late Hunt seated in the front row.

“This is a story of great historical significance because it’s a story of hope, encouragement and sacrifice,” says Daniels. “It’s also a story of pain: the pain of these hidden figures, who are a great source of inspiration.”

“We now graduate more African Americans than any school in the country, and it’s awfully relevant to us how that all came about,” says Wendy Hensel, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs, who hosted the event.

“We need to understand the history that brought us here and respect the people who brought us here.”

— Confronting Resistance —

Elliott still remembers the hamburgers at H. L. Green. They cost a nickel apiece, and they are, to this day, the best she’s ever tasted.

“But we had to go in through the back door to get one,” she remembers. “By the time I got to be about 12 years old, I knew there was something wrong with that.”

Tuned into racial and economic injustice from an early age, Elliott sensed the importance of seeking an education. After graduating from a prestigious black Presbyterian high school in Keysville, Ga., where she was valedictorian, she briefly attended Spelman College but dropped out to raise children. Her parents also couldn’t afford the tuition. She worked as a maid, an elevator operator and in the Emory University lunchroom before getting a job at the Atlanta Life Insurance Company on Auburn Avenue, the most prominent black-owned business in Atlanta.

Hunt was also working on Auburn Avenue as a secretary at the Pittsburgh Courier, a black-owned newspaper. Like Elliott, she had been a bright student in high school, going on to attend Clark University for a year before putting her studies on hold to start a family. She aimed to become a journalist. Welch, a former schoolteacher, was working as a bookkeeper on Auburn as well. She had taken college courses in Alabama but didn’t finish.

All three women aspired to earn college degrees, and Georgia State seemed a natural place to do it. It was downtown near where they worked, and it was a commuter school with evening classes — perfect for Atlanta businesses who wanted to send their employees for continuing education. There was just one titanic obstacle: In 1956, Georgia’s colleges and universities remained deeply and bitterly segregated.

At the time, southern states were openly defying Brown v. Board of Education, the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision that ruled segregated education unconstitutional. As “Ground Crew” recounts, Georgia’s soon-to-be governor Marvin Griffin vowed to “maintain segregation in the schools ... come hell or high water” and later declared the Supreme Court decision “null, void and of no effect.” He even went so far as to try to prevent Georgia Tech from playing in the Sugar Bowl because the opposing team had one black player.

“Tune it up tremendous obstacles to prevent would be students like Elliott, Hunt and Welch from even applying for admission. As Daniels explains in his book, the school didn’t always give out the application form to black applicants, so maintenance staff sometimes had to sneak them out under the cover of night. The Board of Regents instituted a number of policies to maintain segregation, including giving scholarships to black students to study out of state if the program they wanted wasn’t offered at Georgia’s black colleges. This was hardly a workable solution for Elliott and Hunt, who had

“I didn’t think about it as being brave back then. I was scared after I got involved because they started hurting people.”

— Myra Payne Elliott

From left: Barbara Pace Hunt, Myra Payne Elliott and Iris Mae Welch after the Jan. 30, 1959, injunction that declared segregation unconstitutional at all Georgia colleges and universities.

“I should have been smiling. But I just didn’t feel like smiling,” says Elliott. “I just thought, ‘Why’d we have to go through all that?’”

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jobs and families that couldn’t just be uprooted and moved.

Another policy required applicants to secure “character certifications” from three alumni. Given that 100 percent of University System of Georgia graduates were white, this was an impossible hurdle to clear at a time when social life remained deeply segregated. Policies like these were typical of other white colleges of the time, Daniels notes.

“Most of the policies of Georgia State that were designed to block the admission of black students were policies that had been handed down from the Board of Regents,” he says. Any school in the system that dared to admit a black student risked losing its state funding and being essentially shut down. “They were very similar to policies that other institutions in the Deep South also practiced.”

When their applications were rejected, Hunt, Elliott and Welch sued, aided by lawyers from the NAACP, which had also supported Horace T. Ward when he tried to enroll at the University of Georgia Law School six years earlier. That case was dismissed on a technicality. NAACP lawyers strategized that Hunt, Elliott and Welch might meet less resistance at Georgia State because it was a private school, not the state’s flagship institution. It also seemed a safer option because they wouldn’t have to live on campus. It also seemed a safer option because it would be them good doggies or bad doggies, let

She struggled to balance the law-suit with her responsibilities to work, marriage and four small children while the case — and her private life — was splashed across the pages of newspapers. Georgia State’s own student paper, The Signal, denounced the NAACP as a com-munist organization and vociferously opposed the students’ attempts to enroll.

“We see no place for you at Georgia State,” threatened an open letter.

At trial, the defense assailed the women during cross-examination, looking for any speck of disqualifying information. They fixated on the fact that Elliott and Hunt had become mothers before getting married.

“They never mentioned that I was married,” Elliott remembers, her voice rising. “It made me feel like I had done something wrong because I was trying to live a normal life.”

During all of this at the tender age of 26 required an uncommon fortitude, but Elliott shies away from such labels.

“I didn’t think about it as being brave back then,” she recalls. “I was scared after I got involved because they started hurting people.”

Hunt, the lead plaintiff in the case, experienced an onslaught of threats as her daughter Alicy Pratt recalls.

“There were harassing phone calls and death threats from the Ku Klux Klan. The final straw came when a group of people showed up on their front lawn.

“My mom came in my room and said, ‘Don’t you answer that door. We just stood there and didn’t answer and were very quiet,’ Pratt says. “She put her life on the line, and her kids’ lives, but when those people came to our apartment, that was it for her.”

Hunt packed up her daughters and left Atlanta before the lawsuit was finished. She even changed her name. When the ruling came down on Jan. 9, 1959, she learned about it in a letter.

On that date, the judge in the case, Boyd Sloane, issued an injunction declaring segregation unconstitutional at all Georgia colleges and universities. He agreed that the alumni certification requirement functionally barred black students from enrolling. The news made the front page of The New York Times.

Looking at a photograph taken after the ruling, Elliott notices the subdued expression on her face.

“I should have been smiling, but I just didn’t feel like smiling,” she says. “I didn’t feel like jumping up and down and saying, ‘Hallelujah!’ I just thought, ‘Why’d we have to go through all that?’

The ruling was bittersweet because the judge stopped short of ordering Georgia State to admit the three women, leaving the door open for the university to continue denying admission to black stu-dents on the basis of “moral character.”

Elliott and Hunt, for having the audacity to seek an education while raising chil-dren, were thus denied.

In fact, segregation in Georgia did not go nearly as “Ground Crew” details. Both of the state’s senators condemned the ruling, and new Gov. Ernest Vandiver threatened to shut down Georgia colleges entirely if federal courts forced them to integrate. Legislators passed a host of new laws aimed at preventing integration, and the Board of Regents instituted an age-limit rule that would automatically deny undergraduate admission to any applicant over the age of 21. This was the excuse used to deny admission to Iris Mae Welch, who was in her 40s at the time of the suit. Welch died in 1962, three years after the ruling. None of the three women ever enrolled at Georgia State.

Pivotal Role

“The elders always say, ‘Let old dogs lie, be them good dogsgie or bad dogsgie, let them lie,’ “ says Crystal Freeman, Barbara Hunt’s youngest daughter. “That’s not my attitude.”

Freeman says Hunt didn’t like to talk about that chapter of her life, and she only learned the full extent of what her mother went through after her death in 2005. Since then, she’s been pushing for more recognition for what her mother and her co-plaintiffs accomplished, and the university’s new Groundbreaker Lecture series was inspired in part by those efforts.

“I want her story known and for them to be acknowledged for the sacrifices they made that could have cost them their lives and their children’s lives,” Freeman says. “Georgia State is where it is today because there were people who simply wanted an education.”

“We owe these women a debt of grat-i-tude for their courage in forcing change on an unwilling university,” agrees Hensel. “We have to own that history and respect it and also celebrate the progress and achievement we’ve had since then.”

After the trial, Hunt moved to Texas, where she earned a bachelor’s degree at the University of Texas at Arlington and two master’s degrees. She worked civic-minded jobs for the United Way, Southern Christian Leadership Conference and city governments before she passed in 2005.

Elliott never did complete a four-year degree, though she went on to attend two junior colleges later in life. She’s lived to see her niece graduate from Georgia State with a degree in business administration, the very subject she hoped to study a half-century prior. She lived to see her daughter earn an MBA from Emory University, in whose lunchroom young Elliott once served spoonfuls of beans and sliced bread to white students getting the education she so badly wanted for herself.

And now she’s lived to see the Georgia State Senate and House of Representatives issue official proclama-tions acknowledging her and her co-plaintiffs, which were unveiled at the Feb. 20 lecture event. The crowd, includ-ing hundreds of students of color whose right to an education these three women fought for, broke into applause as Elliott made her way up to the dais to speak, flanked by her two daughters.

“The day you said I couldn’t come, it hurt my feelings,” she said with character-istic understatement to the packed audi-torium. “But you’ve come a long way.”
How a walk-on at Georgia State and an undrafted free agent went on to become one of the National Football League’s best kickers.

BY WILLIAM INMAN (M.H.P. ’16) | PHOTOS BY STEVEN THACKSTON
It was the New Orleans Saints’ first game of the 2019 season against the Houston Texans on “Monday Night Football,” and with two ticks left on the clock, Wil Lutz had to make the longest field goal of his career to win the game.

By every metric, Lutz is one of the best kickers in the NFL. He makes nearly 90 percent of his field goal attempts and owns the Saints’ franchise record for kicking 26 in a row. Not only is he accurate, he’s got range — Lutz has missed only three kicks of the Saints’ franchise record for kicking 26 in a row. Not only is he accurate, he’s got range — Lutz has missed only three kicks.

But then we saw him kick. There was a different sound when he put the ball on the tee and then the team’s coach and himself an NFL Pro-Bowler, eyeballed into the Georgia State football team’s locker room. Bill Curry, who went undrafted in the NFL, began his first Pro-Bowl season.

IN SPRING 2012, a skinny kid with braces on his teeth walked into the Georgia State football team’s locker room. Bill Curry, then the team’s coach and himself an NFL Pro-Bowler, eyeballed the kid and asked, “And who are you?”

“I’m your kicker, coach,” Wil responded, smiling.

“Hey, I’ve got a guy for that,” says Thomas Morstead, the Saints punter and the holder for Lutz’s field goal and extra point attempts.

Lutz did, and there was no doubt from the moment his right foot walloped the ball that his kick was good. Even before it cruised through the uprights, Morstead spun around and rushed his kicker, teammate and friend. The Mercedes-Benz Superdome erupted as the Saints poured onto the field and swarmed him.

“We knew going onto the field that he was going to make that kick,” Morstead says. “We just knew.”

That was how Wil Lutz, a former walk-on player at Georgia State who was undrafted in the NFL, began his first Pro-Bowl season.

There was no slacking in the Lutz household when it came to the boys’ schoolwork.

“Looking back, I really appreciate it,” Wil says. “But if you asked me when I was in middle or high school, I would’ve said something totally different.”

At Georgia State, Wil was on the Athletic Director’s Honor Roll as a criminal justice major and, if football didn’t pan out, he planned to go to law school. Julie says that, though he usually came home with good grades, juggling academics and athletics was tough.

“We were pretty hard on him, but he’s a hard worker and always has been,” she says. “If he didn’t do well on a test or on the field, he would take it as a challenge. He was the kind of kid — and now, he’s the kind of man — who says, ‘OK, I’ll show you.’”

Based on his stats, Wil wasn’t a great kicker in high school (“I was a strong-legged soccer player learning how to kick a football,” he says), but Curry’s coaching staff was intrigued by his potential — just not enough to give him a full ride. Wil was offered scholarships from a handful of smaller schools, but he chose to walk on at Georgia State to prove he could play Division I football.

He started his freshman season as the team’s kickoff specialist, a position tailor-made for a guy who can boot the ball a mile. Four games in, he took over all placekicking duties. He was perfect on all his extra point attempts and only missed two field goals, both from long range at 49 and 54 yards.

He earned his scholarship as a sophomore and kicked his first 50-plus yard field goal — a school-record 53-yarder against No. 1 Alabama (the only points the Panthers scored that day). Halfway through his junior year, just like in high school, he took over as the team’s punter.

“Yeah, that actually turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me because it showed NFL teams that I could handle all three kicking duties,” Lutz says.

Going into his senior season, it was Wil Lutz the punter who was an all-conference selection and a preseason nominee for the Ray Guy Award, given to the nation’s best at the position.

He finished his college career as Georgia State’s leader in games played, field goals and extra points made, and overall points scored. That kick in Tuscaloosa, Ala., against the Crimson Tide still stands as the longest in program history.

“When he made that kick, a guy we know turned to us and said, ‘That’s what he’ll be known for,’” Julie remembers. “I saw that guy not too long ago, and said, ‘Well, he’s known for a lot more than that one kick now, isn’t he?’”

WIL WASN’T SELECTED IN THE 2016 NFL DRAFT.

“He really didn’t know if he’d make it to the NFL,” says Julie.

“He even got a dog.” (Cooper, a Catahoula, currently lives with Julie and Bob and wears a Saints doggy jersey during Wil’s games.)

But his versatility — the ability to send a kickoff deep into the end zone, kick field goals as well as punt — interested NFL general managers, and he received a handful of training camp invitations.

“I had what they call a ‘camp leg,’” Wil says. “I was basically the guy NFL teams want to bring in during training camp so their starters can rest.”

That spring, Wil made an extraordinary decision. He signed with the Baltimore Ravens, a team with one of the league’s best field goal kickers, Justin Tucker, entrenched as the starter. Wil knew his odds of making an NFL roster were slim, so he picked Baltimore, an organization known for prioritizing its special teams and developing special teams players.

“What you do to a place where I can learn from the best?” he says.

Wil processed everything during training camp and soaked up the experience like a sponge. He played so well during the

**The Saints mob Wil Lutz after his game-winning 58-yard field goal, the longest of his career, beat the Texans 30-28.**

PHOTO BY BUTCH DILL / ASSOCIATED PRESS

**The Saints mob Wil Lutz after his game-winning 58-yard field goal, the longest of his career, beat the Texans 30-28.**

PHOTO BY BUTCH DILL / ASSOCIATED PRESS
WIL LUTZ IS AN ATLANTA FALCONS FAN NO MORE

“My buddies give me a hard time, but I’ve grown up hating the Falcons,” says Lutz, who grew up in Atlanta. “My buddies give me a hard time, but I’ve always had a lot of motivation in those games. Knock on wood, I’m 22 for 22.”

Going into this season, his career-long field goal was a 57-yarder against the Falcons in the Mercedes-Benz Superdome.

“All of my family and friends were there,” Wesley says. “When Wil called me that time around, he said he wasn’t coming home, too. Last summer, he flew her parents and a handful of her friends to town before he dropped to a knee and proposed to her atop the Ponchartrain Hotel.

“We love the good food, the parades, and we’re really gotten into the culture here,” he says.

Last Mardi Gras, he rode on a leopard-spotted chariot in the “Krewes of Bacchus” parade, and he and Megan are a regular sight at the city’s restaurants, events and festivals.

“The first time I met Drew, I called him ‘sir,’” Wil says, laughing. “He’s one of those guys who I get to share the locker room with who I grew up idolizing. “

Lutz and Morstead, also a fellow college walk-on, have forged a particularly close friendship. The two, along with snapper Zach Wood, work closely together as a symbiotic operation — snap-hold-kick, snap-hold-kick — on thousands of repetitions in order to make those 59 yards when a game is on the line.

“I consider Wil a close friend, and I’m excited for his future on and off the field,” Morstead says.

Wil is also one of the Georgia State Alumni Association’s 40 Under 40 for 2020, a list of the most influential and innovative graduates under the age of 40. It’s an honor he holds high. Wil was a few credits short of graduation when the NFL called, but Wil is one of the most reliable kickers in one of the most high-pressure jobs in professional sports.

In 2008, he made 28 of his 30 field goal attempts and 51 out of 53 extra points. This past March, the Saints rewarded him with a five-year contract extension that made him the league’s highest-paid kicker at the time.

This past season, Wil was second in the league in points scored, third in field goals made and he set an NFL record by making 35 straight kicks on the road. He was named to his first Pro Bowl and took his family to the game in Orlando, Fla.

“We didn’t get to see much of him because he was so busy,” Julie says, “but to see all of these NFL stars and people wanting his autograph . . . I was one proud mama.”

“His head coach back at Georgia State is proud, too. Curry says he and his wife, Carolyn (M.A. ’99, Ph.D. ’99), watch as many of his games as they can and keep a running count of his field goals.”

“This is a great locker and a great young man,” Curry says. “You don’t get great because of natural ability. You get great because you’re willing to spend more hours working on your skill than other people.

“And that son of a gun kicks ‘em right down the middle.”

WIL HAS PUT ROOTS DOWN IN THE BIG EASY. He just bought a house on a leafy, live oak-lined street in New Orleans’ historic Garden District, and he’s getting married in April. He met his fiancée, Megan Fox, a Florida native, in New Orleans three years ago. Last summer, he flew her parents and a handful of her friends to town before he dropped to a knee and proposed to her atop the Ponchartrain Hotel.

“We love the good food, the parades, and we’re really gotten into the culture here,” he says.

Last Mardi Gras, he rode on a leopard-spotted chariot in the “Krewes of Bacchus” parade, and he and Megan are a regular sight at the city’s restaurants, events and festivals.

“The couple are active in the community and volunteer with two of his teammates’ charitable foundations: Monteeady’s “What You Give Will Grow,” which helps children battling cancer, and the “Brees Dream Foundation,” future Hall of Fame quarterback Drew Brees’ charity that helps improve the quality of life for cancer patients and provides assistance for the needy.

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“I consider Wil a close friend, and I’m excited for his future on and off the field,” Morstead says.

Wil is also one of the Georgia State Alumni Association’s 40 Under 40 for 2020, a list of the most influential and innovative graduates under the age of 40. It’s an honor he holds high. Wil was a few credits short of graduation when the NFL called, but came home to finish during the offseason after his rookie year.

That summer, the criminal justice major and professional football player completed his coursework by interning with the Atlanta Police Department.

“He knew that it was very important to us that he finished his studies,” says Julie, who holds four degrees, “but to see all of these NFL stars and people wanting his autograph . . . I was one proud mama.”

“His head coach back at Georgia State is proud, too. Curry says he and his wife, Carolyn (M.A. ’99, Ph.D. ’99), watch as many of his games as they can and keep a running count of his field goals.”

“This is a great locker and a great young man,” Curry says. “You don’t get great because of natural ability. You get great because you’re willing to spend more hours working on your skill than other people.

“And that son of a gun kicks ‘em right down the middle.”

WIL HAS PUT ROOTS DOWN IN THE BIG EASY. He just bought a house on a leafy, live oak-lined street in New Orleans’ historic Garden District, and he’s getting married in April. He met his fiancée, Megan Fox, a Florida native, in New Orleans three years ago. Last summer, he flew her parents and a handful of her friends to town before he dropped to a knee and proposed to her atop the Ponchartrain Hotel.

“We love the good food, the parades, and we’re really gotten into the culture here,” he says.

Last Mardi Gras, he rode on a leopard-spotted chariot in the “Krewes of Bacchus” parade, and he and Megan are a regular sight at the city’s restaurants, events and festivals.

“The couple are active in the community and volunteer with two of his teammates’ charitable foundations: Monteeady’s “What You Give Will Grow,” which helps children battling cancer, and the “Brees Dream Foundation,” future Hall of Fame quarterback Drew Brees’ charity that helps improve the quality of life for cancer patients and provides assistance for the needy.

“The first time I met Drew, I called him ‘sir,’” Wil says, laughing. “He’s one of those guys who I get to share the locker room with who I grew up idolizing.”

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THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

by Samuel Donaldson

ACROSS
1  Kibitzed at a klatsch
5  Animal that sounds like a buck?
10  Refreshes, as memory
14  Thoroughfare of nostalgia
19  "I don’t believe it," in texts
24  Came to rest (anagram of TAIL)
28  Despite, as memory
33  Quiver-ing god?
37  Set out
42  It makes blood boil
47  Kermit’s greeting
52  Attempt
56  Fishbone’s partner
61  Dredg’s partner
65  "Wag the Dog" actress Anne
66  Outdoor gear retailer
68  Greek yogurt brand

DOWN
1  Refreshes, as memory
2  Soon
3  Richly deserved
4  Objective
5  Bowler’s "Stop!
6  Wofford
7  Royce’s partner
8  ___ limits
9  "I don’t believe it," in texts
10  Ford supermini
11  1st Amendment org.
12  Cowardly Lion’s alter ego
13  Quiver-ing god?
15  Word with Coast or tower
16  VA-Va-___
17 lius
18  Votes from opponents
20  Tag along
21  Thoroughfare of money laundering
22  Rude look
23  Author
25  Dead air
26  Trade fair
27 思索
28  Southern Spanish province
29  Word with Coast or tower
30  Beer buy
31  Va-Va-___
32  Actor Jackie ___ Haley
33  Yuletide decoration
34  Big pair in poker
35  Kermit’s greeting
36  Outdoor gear retailer
37  Eye-boggling display
38  Asmara’s home
39  "I’ll take it!"
40  Post-goal cheers
41  Angry driver’s noisemaker
42  Big pair in poker
43  Ethnic insult
44  Eye-boggling display
45  Set out
46  Big pair in poker
47  Thoroughfare of money laundering
48  Outdoor gear retailer
49  Ethnic insult
50  Thoroughfare of nostalgia
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A professor at the College of Law who creates crosswords on the side, Samuel Donaldson has published more than 120 puzzles in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and more. Donaldson is now regularly contributing a crossword to each issue of Georgia State University Magazine. Check your answers at magazine.gsu.edu.
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