The Reality Issue

CUTTING THROUGH THE STATIC

Exploring the world around (and within) us, USC Dornsife scholars look for answers.
A graduate student applying computer science to the study of nerve cells. A physics and astronomy professor who creates graphic novels to depict complex science. An expert in immigrant integration analyzing the formation of the Mexican-American middle class. An undergraduate fighting for environmental justice.

From Belize to the Arctic to Los Angeles, we are USC Dornsife’s frontline scholars. In laboratories, in classrooms and all around the globe, our faculty and students work side by side. Through thoughtful collaboration, creative problem solving and dogged persistence, we seek the most direct paths to effecting lasting change in the world.

We take full advantage of our location in one of the world’s most diverse cities. Using L.A. as the test bed for our innovative ideas, we strive to create solutions that transcend geography, making global contributions that will endure the test of time.

Today, we stand at the horizon of possibility. From health to sustainability to social welfare to education, society faces great challenges. But we see paths forward to real solutions. We came to USC Dornsife with hopes and ideals, and through the university’s vast resources, we have gained the skills to succeed on the frontline of any issue.
Beyond False Peaks

Jonas Salk, the legendary scientist who developed the first successful polio vaccine, said, “Hope lies in dreams, in imagination and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality.”

In 1952, the year of the worst polio outbreak in United States history, the extremely high likelihood of succumbing to the disease was viewed as “reality.” Salk refused to accept that, choosing instead to forge his own story. Now polio has been nearly eradicated from the globe. Jonas Salk, the legendary scientist who developed the first successful polio vaccine, said, “Hope lies in dreams, in imagination and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality.”

What makes USC Dornsife unique is our determination not just to understand the contours of our individual pieces, but also to see out those whose pieces might interlock precisely with our own. A linguistics professor collaborates with a marine biologist to understand speech disorders associated with Parkinson’s disease. A physicist reaches out to a USC Viterbi colleague to improve screening for diabetic retinopathy, a leading cause of blindness. Through partnerships such as these we uncover potential new solutions that may lead to better realities.

Dedicating oneself to scholarship means embarking on a lifelong journey to discern what is true — what is real. Every crisis we encounter is another false peak on the climb to a summit we know we will never reach. But we keep climbing — because along the way there are so many smaller discoveries, each with the power to change our shared reality, improving quality of life for all.

Steve Kay
Dean of USC Dornsife
Anna H. Bing Dean’s Chair

THE REALITY ISSUE

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While college is designed to prepare students to pursue their life’s goals, some lessons can only be learned through experience. Recent graduates talk about their adventures after USC Dornsife and what their post-collegiate lives have taught them. By Laura Paisley

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USC Dornsife

College of Letters, Arts and Sciences
The “Iranian Culture and Diaspora” conference, organized by the Catholic Center and USC Dornsife, offers great digital experiences using the Layar App.

**Augmented Reality**

**Social Dornsife**

**USC Dornsife Magazine**

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**#DornsifeDay**

USC Dornsife promotes Nobel Laureates and distinguished Professor Angew. Chem. With a symposium, which brings together leading scholar and Nobel Laureate from around the world to celebrate World’s achievements and to mark his 75th birthday.

**#DornsifeDay**

A day in the Life of USC Dornsife.

On Feb. 26, we filmed students, faculty and alumni on campus and around the world to capture the amazing breadth and depth of academic and opportunities available at USC Dornsife.

A Day in the Life of USC Dornsife premiered on campus on Sept. 3 to a crowd of hundreds gathered near Tommy Trojan. Student ambassadors were on hand to talk about their studies as well as the clubs, organizations, research and study-abroad opportunities they have participated in at USC Dornsife. Attendees cooled off with ice cream treats and entered an opportunity drawing for great prizes.

**SHOW US YOUR #DORNSIFEDAY!**

We invite you to share your day at USC Dornsife with us — from wherever you are — using the hashtag dornsifeday. Snap a photo for Instagram, tweet your campus experience, shoot a Vine. Show us your #DornsifeDay! To see how your fellow Trojans are spending your #DornsifeDay, visit dornsife.usc.edu/dornsifeday.

Scan pages 4 to 5 to start your Layar augmented reality experience.
Scientists have long understood that the brain has two ways of learning. One is avoidance learning, which is a punishing, negative experience that trains the brain to avoid a situation in which it made a mistake. The other is reward-based learning, a positive, reinforcing experience in which the brain feels rewarded for reaching the right answer.

A new study by Giorgio Coricelli and a group of international researchers using magnetic resonance imaging has found that the opportunity to learn from failure can turn it into a rewarding experience — if the brain has a chance to learn from its mistakes.

“We show that, in certain circumstances, when we get enough information to contextualize the choices, then our brain essentially reacts toward the reinforcement mechanism, instead of turning toward avoidance,” said Coricelli, associate professor of economics and psychology at USC Dornsife.

For the study, researchers engaged 28 subjects, each around 26 years old, in a series of questions that challenged them to maximize their gains by providing the right answers. If they chose a wrong answer, they lost money, while right answers helped them earn money.

One trial prompted their brains to respond to getting the wrong answer with avoidance learning. A second trial prompted a reward-based learning reaction, and a third but separate trial tested whether participants could learn from their mistakes, allowing them to review and understand what they got wrong.

In that third round, the participants responded positively, activating areas in their brains that some scientists call the “reward circuit” — or the ventral striatum. This experience mimicked the brain’s reward-based learning response, as opposed to an avoidance-learning response, which is an experience that involves different parts of the brain that together comprise the anterior insula.

Coricelli said this process is similar to what the brain experiences when feeling regret. “With regret, for instance, if you have done something wrong, then you might change your behavior in the future,” he said.

Coricelli collaborated with scientists from University College London, Pierre and Marie Curie University, the École normale supérieure and the University of Lyon. The study was published in the journal Nature Communications.

Students explore Los Angeles modernist architecture, which embodies a commitment to indoor-outdoor living as one of its defining principles.

This four-week Maymester course deepened undergraduates’ understanding and appreciation of Los Angeles as they were introduced to the history of modern architecture, experiencing firsthand many of the city’s most iconic 20th-century homes.

“The built environment of Los Angeles is a rich laboratory for understanding social concerns that have shaped the city’s history over the last century,” Luke said. “By enabling them to physically experience the work of major architects like Charles and Henry Greene, Frank Lloyd Wright, Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra, John Lautner and A. Quincy Jones, students are gaining the critical skills and historical knowledge necessary to answer questions about how a private home can exemplify particular arguments about the collective life of a city.”

The course required students to think about questions of urbanism, preservation and innovation of architecture, particularly through photography. To further their knowledge, undergraduates studied the archives of Greene and Greene, Neutra and noted architectural photographer Julius Shulman.

They also considered the defining principles of A. L. Beaux—architectural ideas to support and foster progressive political bohemian lifestyles,” Luke said. “These buildings are not just meant for private use, but are declarative statements.” — D.A.
forces the reader to abandon incredibly innovative typographic and visual impact of this piece — of the Marne. French troops after the Battle Joffre’s victorious tour of the map to recount gen. Joseph used the form of a military le front en auto. 

After the Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto.

One of Marinetti’s seminal essays “toumb toumb” of explosions and words — such as the “ta ta” of machine guns and matopoeic repetition of letters and subtraction (-) symbols depicted speed, while the isometric projection of letters and words — such as the “ta ta” of machine guns and “toumb toumb” of explosions — dramatizes the cacophony of the battlefield.

The artist used letters to depict topographical elements — Mt. Sainte-Genevieve, Mt. Venus, Mt. Aventine, Mt. Aventine, Mt. Aventine.

Imagine a world without the technology of the San Andreas Fault. Imagine a world that is a 5.8 magnitude earthquake — 20 times weaker than a 7.6. The San Andreas Fault can support an 8.0 earthquake. While devastating, it would be more than 200 times weaker than a 9.6 magnitude event. Also, a strike-slip fault such as the San Andreas cannot produce gigantic tsunamis like those in the movie. "The fault line does not produce these types of events because those offshore faults," said Jordan, who also is director of the Southern California Earthquake Center (SCEC) and coordinates an international research program in earthquake system science that involves more than 600 scientists at more than 60 universities and research organizations.

He noted that the movie exaggerated the potential damage to Los Angeles buildings while also completely overlooking true dangers such as soil liquefaction, landslides — and fire. "One of the things we are most worried about is fire following an earthquake. You actually can get forest fires that start to sweep across large sections of the city," Jordan said. In U.S. Geological Survey simulations, an 8.0 earthquake on the southern San Andreas Fault would cause an estimated 1,600 multi-alarm fires across the L.A. basin — at a time when even the nearest firefighters might lack water, fuel, personnel or viable roads.

Mark Benfield, director of communications for SCEC, pointed out that the movie’s focus on downtown areas misses the reality for the vast majority of residents. "The population of downtown Los Angeles and downtown San Francisco is less than 1 percent of the affected area of the movie," he said. "What most people are really going to be dealing with is their bookshelf falling on them, and that is a risk that you can actually reduce." — R.P.

Spread the Word

Linguist Edward Finegan explores the social implications of words added to online dictionaries.

"Agender" and "bigender" were new additions this year to dictionary.com’s database — along with 120 other new words, including "lanestream" and "bar."

Edward Finegan, professor emeritus of linguistics and law and an emeritus member of the Dictionary Society of America and editor of its journal, believes that language must evolve based on circumstances. Adding terms keeps communication effective. For instance, snarky words such as “backtitt” — that is, actions taken to bring about political or social change, but requiring only minimal commitment, effort or risk — may challenge the monopoly of electronically signed petitions to end dolphin fishing.

"Legitimizing a word like this almost shames people into realizing what they’re actually doing," he said. "And giving words power is a wonderful thing."

President of the International Association of Forensic Linguists, Finegan consulted on a case in which a student was expelled from a private university because she had indicated her "gender" as female, although she was biologically male.

Though the court ruled that the school had the right to ask the student to leave, the school changed its application asking candidates to indicate their “sex” rather than “gender.” The evolution of social constructions often begins in language," Finegan said. "It’s important that our vocabularies keep up with these social changes." — L.H.

Blockbuster Busted Earthquake experts find the recent movie San Andreas offered lessons both solid and shaky.

Last summer’s disaster flick San Andreas had a hard time on what might happen if the largest earthquake in history struck the West Coast. But could it ever really get as bad as this word-count scenario? USC earthquake and preparedness experts found that it overstates some dangers but understates others.

Thomas Jordan, University Professor, William M. Keck Foundation Chair in Geophysical Sciences and professor of earth sciences, said the temblor were too big. "They have a 9.3 and a 9.6, and the largest earthquake that the San Andreas can produce is about 8.0." While devastating, it would be more than 200 times weaker than a 9.6 magnitude event.

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THE UNIVERSAL SCHOLAR

Who: James Heft

At USC Dornsife.

Heft is founder and president of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies (IACS) at USC Dornsife, grew up with a Catholic mother and a Protestant father, who worked for a beloved Jewish employer.

“...that experience of love, relationship and goodness, not only with my father, but also with my employer and others, shaped my upbringing,” Heft said. “But it wasn’t until many years later that I began to realize the influence that religious pluralism had on how I thought about things.”

These ideas have continued to shape Heft’s spiritual and academic journey — a journey that led him to form IACS in 2010. Two years later, he brought the institute to the University of Southern California, where he was able to develop his mission of creating an international network of scholars to explore religion through dialogue, research and publications.

“We’ve done some first-rate research that has resulted in a number of publications around the importance of inter-religious dialogue between Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and others,” he said. “We’ve also created a stellar series of publications on cocaine and Catholic social teaching with Oxford University Press.”

Heft is now leading the drive to raise a $45 million endowment to fund an international residential research center to explore 2,000 years of rich Catholic intellectual and spiritual traditions.

“There is no area that would be out of bounds in terms of the research we support because Catholic is, well, Catholic. It’s universal,” Heft said. “I’m not interested in whether the scholars are liberal or conservative, Catholic or from another religious tradition. I just want to create a place for exceptional scholars to do serious research on these kinds of ideas and topics. If we were afraid of where the chips will fall, I don’t think the institute’s research would deserve respect.”

In April, Heft will travel to Rome at the invitation of the Vatican to host an international conference for the 25th anniversary of John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical Centesimus Annus (The Hundredth Year), written following the collapse of the Soviet Union about capitalism, labor and Catholic social teaching.

This will be the second conference IACS has hosted at the Vatican: In 2010, Heft chaired an international symposium on Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical Caritas in Veritate (Love in Truth) and how it applies to the United States. Heft joined the Marians of the Description in 1951 and was ordained a priest in that order in 1973. He described his decision to join the religious order as, “more like the dawn than a lightning bolt. I ran out of good reasons against it.”

By then he had already earned his undergraduate degree in philosophy and education at the University of Dayton in Ohio, and was a graduate student in philosophy at Georgetown University. He taught language and English in Cincinnati, Ohio, High schools for three years. During the political and social upheaval of the late ’60s, he served for two years as a director of youth programs at a newly founded ecumenical center.

At the time, Heft was involved in the Civil Rights Movement. He organized retreats, led by black students, for white suburban students. “I never turned into a radical, but I began to see racism as a deep cancer. I call it ‘America’s original sin.’

“I was also doing draft counseling,” he said. “I taught Catholics understand that their own religious tradition has something to say about conscientious objection as an option for those who objected to the Vietnam War.”

In 1977, Heft earned a Ph.D. in history and theology from the University of Toronto in Canada. He has organized conferences that have examined the historical origins of the doctrine of papal infallibility — a study of the first third of the 14th century. He then began a 30-year teaching career at the university of Dayton, serving six years as chair of the theology department, eight as provost and 10 as chancellor. A former chair of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Heft has written and edited 12 books and nearly 200 book chapters and articles. In 2011, he was honored with the Theodore Hesburgh Award for long and distinguished service to Catholic higher education.

If not the priesthood, Heft said he would have gone into medicine, law or teaching. “But what I’m doing allows me to teach, heal and explore...”

A Genome in Peril

Biology researchers gain insight into a hazard that arises during early embryonic development.

In the earliest stages of an organism’s existence, its genome suffers a terrible, self-imposed shock.

After a sperm and egg cell join to form a single-celled zygote, fetal proteins from the original egg cell continue driving life processes. As the zygote divides — first into two, then four and so on — to form the embryos, the residual proteins chizzle. The ‘embryonic cells’ counter by jumproasting their genome so they can produce the proteins they need for themselves.

In a study published in Developmental Cell, recent biology Ph.D. recipient Melania Butaci and her mentor, Matthew Chiladz, associate professor of biological sciences, found that this lifting jolt into activation is, paradoxically, the cause of widespread genome instability.

Despite the danger, the primitive cells survive because, as the scientists found, robust repair mechanisms — much better than those of mature cells — efficiently fix the DNA damage.

But why would cells evolve such a risky approach?

Michael explained that the cells are ‘trading the risk of mutation [caused by DNA damage] for speed in activating gene expression responses...’ when they need to start making their own proteins.

It’s easy to imagine that a rapid gene expression response is very advantageous, and as long as repair is efficient, then this seems like a reasonable trade,” he said.

The researchers continue to tease apart this genomic puzzle. “As a scientist, I am extremely intrigued to understand more about this mechanism and the evolutionary path that just seems so bizarre at first glance, but surely has arisen with a great purpose,” Butaci said. — D.S.J.
Being First-Gen

A group representing 14 percent of USC's student body finds motivation in high expectations.

USC Dornsife has developed the Dornsife Preceptor Program, which offers full-time, salaried preceptor positions to recent doctoral graduates of USC. The program aims to address an increasingly competitive job market, particularly for positions in the humanities and social sciences.

The program also responds to another teaching related challenge this group may encounter.

“Because they didn’t go to college themselves,” said George Sanchez, vice dean for diversity in the college of liberal arts and sciences. “We have found that parents of low-income, first-generation students are typically the opposite of the helicop-
tor designs a syllabus for a course that relates to his or her area of expertise. Preceptors can receive mentorship from the faculty member teaching the general education course, and they have time for refining personal research with the goal of publication, further strengthening their talents as they search for tenure-track positions. Alex Young, who received his doctorate in English last summer, is one of this year’s preceptors. Already an award-winning researcher, he wants to continue his career as a humanities scholar and is looking for tenure-track jobs in American studies or English.

The program fills the gap that’s getting increasingly hard to fill between completing a Ph.D. and successfully finding a tenure-track job. This gives me an opportunity not only to build my teaching profile but to continue to build my research profile in ways that will assist me as I continue my search," Young said.

Lamy noted that preceptors can propose new kinds of undergraduate summer courses — and some have.

“I think our undergraduates are benefitting from some really smart people who care about students,” he said. —L.P.

Zombie Cells

Susan Forsburg of biological sciences and colleagues create mutant yeast cells that survive DNA damage.

When cells divide normally, they duplicate their DNA so each new cell has a copy. Disruptions in the DNA replication process can lead to cancer and other diseases. USC Dornsife researchers have developed a mutant form of yeast to help them understand how this can happen.

"We’ve been able to create yeast cells that harbor a gene mutation that dis-
rupts DNA duplication during cell division — causing muta-
tive damage to chromosomes — while somehow allowing the cell to continue dividing. The result is zombie cells that by all rights shouldn’t be able to survive, let alone divide. Their chromosomes appear shatter and strung out by tiny bodies called micronuclei, which are often found in human cancer cells."

With their new yeast model, researchers hope to learn more about both the mutation and micronuclei.

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USC Dornsife launched a new program for first-generation students and their family members this Fall. “The program aims to address an increasingly competitive job market, particularly for positions in the humanities and social sciences."

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How many researchers does it take to change a light bulb? And how many lives could they save by changing it? The answer to both questions is larger than you might expect.

“A light bulb’s illumination is attractive to a range of insects, which means that the type of bulb you use can increase the risk of catching vector-borne diseases. Worldwide, 8 million people are infected with Chagas disease, which is transmitted by a bug that is attracted to lights. Also drawn to light are mosquitoes, which carry malaria, and sand flies, which can infect people with a protozoan parasite.

A study led by Travis Longcore, assistant professor of architecture and spatial sciences, found that what matters most in attracting insects is not just how bright your bulb is, but what color wavelengths it gives off. The white light given off by bulbs is attractive to all insects, but white is not actually a color — it is a combination of light of all colors. Different insects are sensitive to particular combinations of these wavelengths. Blue, violet and ultraviolet wavelengths are especially attractive to moths and many other insect groups.

With this in mind, Longcore and a team of former students from the University of California, Los Angeles investigated if they could mitigate these effects as part of a project with Phillips Research in the Netherlands. Their primary goal was reducing the number of insects an LED bulb would attract while still maintaining its white light for indoor use.

“For the purpose of this study, we created unique and one-off LED lamp designs that can be customized to emit different color wavelengths to reduce the attraction of insects,” said André Barroso, a senior scientist at Philips. The special bulbs were tested against off-the-shelf commercial LED bulbs, compact fluorescent bulbs and a control with no bulb. Longcore and his team fixed each bulb over soapy pans traps in several Los Angeles County sites. In just over a month, they collected nearly 5,600 insects in the traps. The specially made bulbs attracted about 20 percent fewer insects.

“The research provides proof in concept that LED lamps can have multiple uses, including saving lives and making them more enjoyable,” said Barroso.

By Andrew Good
It’s the little things

For David Caron, professor of biological science, “The small things are where it’s at in the ocean.” Caron studies marine microorganisms. Though most are too small to see with the naked eye and too tiny to carry a certain other ocean denizens, these creatures are crucial to the ocean ecosystem. Without them, none of the larger sea-faring creatures — sharks, dolphins, seals and whales — would have a chance.

The sea organisms studied at USC include viruses and one-celled organisms such as algae, bacteria, and amoebae — constituting the vast majority of Earth’s surface — about 75 percent — is covered by water. More than 96 percent of that water is found in oceans.

1 MICROMETER

Protists — amoeba, single-celled organisms such as algae and amoebae — constitute the base of the food chain. They vary in size, but the smallest are just 1 micrometer across. Two of them could safely move abreast along the length of a strand of spider web.

1/4–10 hours

Certain marine protists produce toxins that can accumulate in shellfish that feed on them. When animals — or humans — consume these shellfish, they can become dangerously ill, with symptoms arising anytime from 15 minutes to 10 hours after ingesting them.

4 tons

In one of nature’s most ironic twists, the largest animals ever to grace the planet feed on some of the smallest. A blue whale, reaching 100 feet long, consumes each day about 4 tons of tiny krill, most of which are less than an inch long. Krill, in turn, dine on even smaller organisms such as single-celled algae.

700 SAMPLES

Researchers at the USC Microbial Observatory have taken samples — totaling about 700 — from the same location midway between Los Angeles and Catalina Island, California, every month since 2000.

2.5 million light years

If larger animals lose their own version of spring break, when the ocean goes from clear blue to murky green, Fuhrman and Caron know they’re looking at an algal bloom. Some of the participating microorganisms are harmless, but others make toxins, which can collect in shellfish. If larger animals — including humans — eat the contaminated shellfish, they might suffer the malady consequences.

100,000 years

“Stones” are just one of the ways tiny marine microbes exercise their power over the big animals that think they run the planet, though most ocean microorganisms are not dangerous to people. What’s more, these microbes have been there for millennia. “They’re probably still as some microorganisms left when the oceans were formed,” Caron said.

A Divine Doctorate

A new doctoral program at the USC School of Religion offers multiple tracks of study.

The University of Southern California was founded in 1880 thanks in large part to land donated by three men of varying religious persuasions: the German-Jewish banker Isaac Helman, the Protestant horticulturalist Osmund Childs, and the Quaker banker Edward Hopper. In 1884, the University founded a faculty of divinity, which was made a dean in 1888.

Today, the USC School of Religion is the only graduate school of divinity in the Rocky Mountain West. It is also one of the oldest divinity schools on the West Coast, as well as one of the most diverse in theological diversity.

The mission of the USC School of Religion is to provide a rigorous, comprehensive, and relevant graduate program of study in religion.

The School of Religion offers five tracks of study: Biblical Studies, Historical/Critical Methodology, Theology, Ethics, and Interreligious and Intercultural Studies.

The Doctoral Program in Religion currently offers five tracks of study: Biblical Studies, Historical/Critical Methodology, Theology, Ethics, and Interreligious and Intercultural Studies.

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Philip J. Ethington, professor of history, political science and spatial sciences, has spent the last 15 years sifting through the tangled histories of Los Angeles. “I like to visualize the presence of the past,” she said. “I see myself making ghosts visible,” he explained.

Those histories might be elusive or fading, but they have not yet vanished. The specter of the past is all around us, he has observed. “And often it is hidden in plain sight.”

Ghost Metropolis, Ethington’s multimedia “book” due out in Fall 2016 from University of California Press, explores how greater L.A. came to be such a fluid and volatile site of innovation, one both haunted and bound by its history. Through words, interactive maps, photographs and videos, Ethington is building a text that is as alive and sprawling as the city itself. At 900 pages in online form, it traces a path across not just regions but epochs.

Ethington landed in L.A. in the ’90s “right after the Rodney King uprising,” he said, an incident that he knew had deep roots. The racial, ethnic, socio-economic and political tensions had been written into the understructure of L.A. for millennia. Those three days of civil unrest became his narrative’s seed.

That moment, both in time and place, Ethington said, “was an important site in global history to account for. So I wanted to do that — address that why?”

Ghost Metropolis pushes against accepted “truths” about the city and covers 13,000 years of L.A. history.

“I explain all the ruling regimes of Los Angeles — they’re all linked. Each one establishes institutions that the next group finds unacceptable and keeps them from coming to conquer the places. It’s well known that Los Angeles has had many rulers — Native American, Spanish, Mexican — so I have to tell this story from multiple beginnings, multiple factors, different levels of society.” These histories thread out from the same place, as do the toxins. “Rodney King, to me, has the same relationship to the Watts Rebellion as World War II to World War II. It’s just more recent.”

In devising creative ways into a multi-narrative portal, Ethington realized that it was imperative to find some innovative way to house it. The effort produced Scalar — the online platform where the digital book will live. “It’s free and open and allows everyone as an author to tell their stories.”

Ultimately what is most important to Ethington is crafting a compelling narrative about a region long misunderstood from within and without.

“I just want to tell a great story about a great city. Great in a master story, but also in a creative story. Because it’s not all about the bad guys and the injustices and the oppressions. I also want to achieve accountability. That’s a really big goal.”

Here is a psychology experiment you can try at home: Watch an Alfred Hitchcock film with someone and observe how he or she responds.

Hitchcock’s plots are like the Swiss watches of suspense, designed to twist and turn and leave a knot in your gut. When we see a character on the verge of surprise, about to discover a murder, we gasp. The conflict becomes mirrored into words.

“Suspense in their young subjects through simple stories. For example, one character would pilfer a valuable item, leaving another’s false expectations,” Moll said.

“This body language is just as visceral in children. A new USC study detected similar reactions in toddlers as young as 2 to 3 years old, younger than previous research suggests. The study has wider implications as to when children can feel these emotions before they can actually put them words.”

Moll used this empathy to uncover children’s insights into the world that differ from their own.

“We know children identify with other people,” said Moll, assistant professor of psychology. “They’re novel and touched by what happens to others.”

Her study took an integrative approach, combining interview questions with videotaping children’s responses as they watched the drama unfold. “We really want to know when children start being able to understand another’s mind. There’s this idea that young kids are egocentric, that they’re locked into a perspective of the world and fail to understand other people’s thinking. We’re fighting this notion of childhood egocentrism.”

Preventing Blindness

Researchers at the Translational Imaging Center are developing a method to save eyesight.

Diabetic retinopathy is the chief cause of blindness in American adults, affecting nearly 8 million people. Researchers in the Translational Imaging Center, a joint venture between USC Dornsife and USC Viterbi School of Engineering, are developing a method to catch the disease early.

Scott Fraser, Provost Professor at USC Dornsife, Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, the Keck School of Medicine of USC, and USC Viterbi and Jeff Eglinger, senior scientist at the center, are improving optical coherence tomography (OCT), a system that quickly images the retina to simplify screening for diabetic retinopathy, which was originally invented by Keck School of Medicine of USC Dr. Carmen A. Puliafito. Eglinger and Fraser are working to make the system more accessible, helping more patients receive adequate treatment — and save their sight.

The two hope to make OCT screening stations available in pharmacies, akin to blood pressure monitors free to patients with insurance.

“If these instruments were in pharmacies, patients could pick up their medications and look into the machine, making screening [for diabetic retinopathy] more of an everyday thing,” Fraser said. — K.R.
Our World

FACULTY Napoli

Quakes, Landslides, Now Floods?

Joshua West examines a string of disasters in Nepal in hopes of improving recovery efforts in the future.

For Nepal, the hits just keep coming. It started with a magnitude 7.8 earthquake in April, which led to ongoing aftershocks. All the shaking has triggered an estimated 5,000-plus landslides — and now, material from these landslides is filling up riverbeds with sediment.

If persistent flooding makes it hard to rebuild key infrastructure, that could really challenge Nepal’s tourism-dependent economy, said Joshua West, assistant professor of earth sciences. He traveled to Nepal this summer to conduct an assessment of the condition of the rivers and landfills.

“Though this [earthquake] was a tragic event, we can potentially learn a lot,” West said. “If we understand where the landfills occurred this time, we may get a better understanding of where they’ll occur in future earthquakes as well as the sequence of post-earthquake hazards.”

“Understanding that may help others to better plan recovery efforts,” he said.

FACULTY Italy

Our World

BUFFETED by a chilly wind blowing from the choppy gray waters of Southern California’s Salton Sea, the group of USC students stood on the vast inland lake’s southern shore and gazed out across the desolate beauty of the environmentally stressed landscape. Calcium-rich algae blooms churned underfoot and the ghostly, bleached trunk of a long-dead true rose from the murky water.

The 10 Thematic Option student honor students from diverse majors were participating in a course led by Jim Haw, professor of chemistry and environmental studies.

“We are looking at water and energy issues through the lens of the Southern California desert, which, where the effects of a reduced water supply are obvious on the landscape and where a disproportionate share of the transition to renewable solar, wind and geothermal energy will be hosted,” Haw said.

As California experiences an unprecedented drought and state-mandated water restrictions, the course could not be more relevant — or more timely.

From their base at a desert research center in Borrego Springs, the group explored the Anza-Borrego Desert and the Salton Sea over a two-week period. Students chose to research diverse projects, ranging from the history of California’s complex water rights to West Nile virus to the functionality extinct Sacramento Delta smelt.

“Many of these students had never seen a desert before,” Haw said. “Now they are empowered to visualize a world with a very limited water budget. I want them to have a real basis on the-ground, minds-in-the-sky kind of understanding of critical contemporary problems.”

STUDENTS Ivory Coast

After spending two years in the Ivory Coast as a Peace Corps volunteer, creative writing and literature doctoral student Todd Freedson is returning to Abidjan, the African country’s commercial capital, on a Fulbright Research grant. Freedson aims to complete translations of three poetry collections by Assa Vauguy, José Guibo and Tanella Boni that were born out of the author’s experience living under the country’s recent civil war.

Freedson said his Fulbright project is “a continuation of informal research done while living [in Abidjan] as an ex-volunteer and as evolutions and coups transformed into the first civil war.” He is interested in how the years of ethnic violence are being authentically represented.

“I also hope to find poets in the north, as the conflict has been a north/south divide, and each of the three poems I am working with is set in the south,” he said. “I am interested in the extent to which the identified poets are portraying the conflict, knowing that this is a southern country where the majority speak a language very different from the literary standard.”

Freedson’s work will contribute to the completion of his doctoral dissertation, in which he considers resistance to neocolonialism in poetry. Upon his return to the United States, he plans to seek out new writers of African poetry and create an academic network within the creative writing and literature fields.

STUDENTS Napoli

In the shrinking forest fragments between Budongo and Bugoma reserves — a roughly 1,200-square-kilometer area along Lake Albert on Uganda’s western border — graduate student Megan McCarthy found evidence of a far larger population of endangered chimpanzees than previously estimated.

“Our results show a surprisingly widespread and large chimpanzee populations in the region, especially given the extent of habitat loss,” said McCarthy, who is pursuing her doctoral degree in integrated and evolutionary biology.

An estimated 16,000 to 19,000 eastern chimpanzees remain in the world, about 0.5% live in Uganda.

Because the area is unprotected, the chimpanzees are vulnerable to trapping and loss of the fruit trees they rely on for food, McCarthy said.

“Hundreds of kilometers of forest are estimated to have been lost in the region in the last 20 years,” she said. “We have plenty of evidence of this while collecting data.”

The population in the region McCarthy studied represents the emerging status quo. No longer inhabiting wide expanses of forest, the chimpanzee instead set out an existence in shrinking forest patches.

Megan McCarthy will investigate whether the chimpanzees are using the fragments as a corridor to move between and reserves or if the populations remain genetically isolated.

STUDENTS Uganda

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STUDENTS Palau

Michelle Felberg is known for the connection between a Pacific nation and the marine environment, having worked there where they intersect for the past two years. Thanks to a scholarship, she plans to study how the Palauan economy connects its business plan to marine conservation.

A graduate of USC Dornsief’s Environmental Studies program and the USC Scientific Diving program, Felberg was awarded a one-year Fulbright Scholarship.

David Ginsburg, assistant professor (teaching) of environmental studies and assistant USC dive safety officer, extolled the significance of the honor.

“This is a very prestigious award — it’s the Fulbright scholarship of the diving community — and Michelle is the representative for North America,” he said.

Felberg credits the scientific diving program and subsequent research trips to the westernmost national park of Micronesia, Palau Guam and Palau — arranged through the Environmental Studies program — as key factors in her recent honor. Since graduation she has worked in Palau in a dive guide and underwater naturalist.

Felberg hopes to expand her network of diving colleagues worldwide through her Fulbright Scholarship, believing diverse perspectives are key to unraveling the future of ocean habitats.

“There is no one perfect solution but rather various possibilities for successful marine conservation,” she said.

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ALUMNI Indonesia

Trusting His Animal Instincts

Chemistry alumnus Dave Chapman, now a veterinarian, tends his skills to care for animals in underserved countries such as Nepal, Costa Rica and Indonesia.

Dave Chapman recalls traveling through Bali, Indonesia, with a group of veterinarians, stopping in different villages to spay and neuter hundreds of stray dogs. The work, on behalf of the nonprofit Bali Street Dogs Foundation, aimed to reduce the stray dog population in rural Indonesia without resorting to euthanasia.

It worked. “We are pretty significant population reductions,” he said.

Originally from Yorkshire, England, in a family that included dogs, cats, rabbits and guinea pigs, Chapman was drawn to veterinary medicine. He earned his doctorate in integrative ethno-veterinary studies while pursuing his interest in the clinical connection between traditional and allopathic medicine. He then headed to USC Dornsief for his doctorate in organic and medicinal chemistry.

While a postdoctoral fellow, Chapman decided to finally fulfill his dream and attend veterinary school at Washington State University — taking every opportunity to gain global insight.

One summer, he studied the incidence of snake bites on livestock in Nepal and later volunteered at a wildlife rehabilitation facility in Quepos, Costa Rica.

Chapman, who now practices in Costa Mesa, Calif., continues to give back. He volunteers with the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center of Orange County, a rescue facility that treats sick and injured native species, releasing them back into the wild. He also delivers supplies to an underserved veterinary clinic in Mexico.

Committed to providing the best care possible, Chapman knows what separates a good vet from a great vet is empathy.

“Ninety percent of veterinary medicine is your relationship with the two-legged client,” he said. “I deal with many different characters — a lot of whom come to the animal hospital in a state — so unless I can communicate clearly and effectively, I probably can’t do the best for the animals.”
College students hear an awful lot about the “real world.” Relatives, professors, neighbors and even well-meaning strangers feel compelled to dispense advice about this almost mythical place. For some it can provoke a sense of foreboding and uncertainty; others may have an overly rosy view of what is in store for them after graduation. The fact is, most young alumni will experience a reality check of some sort once they adjust to their new lives. Indeed, their education doesn’t stop beyond the USC campus — it’s just a much bigger classroom.

**THE ADVANTAGES OF ADAPTABILITY**

After all the effort and subsequent excitement of landing a new job, experiencing occasional bad days at work is inevitable. Adjusting to less than ideal circumstances and negotiating difficult situations becomes part of the deal. But good or bad, each day offers opportunities to learn along the way, both professionally and personally.

Kelly Hann ’13 works as a nurse at the Children’s National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Her current post is on the pediatric hematology, oncology and bone marrow transplant floor, where she often cares for young cancer patients. At times it is an emotionally draining experience.

“[The job] can be exhausting, but a good kind of exhausting,” she explained. “You focus on the small victories, like ‘I made that kid laugh today’ or ‘that parent gave me a hug.’”

Recently, Hann had a 4-year-old patient who was undergoing chemotherapy, and one day the little girl was particularly resistant to her treatment.

“She was fighting tooth and nail,” Hann said. “We finally agreed that if she took her medicine, she could paint my fingernails light blue. After that she was in the best mood. I saw her the next day and she was so excited to see I’d kept the polish on.”

That, Hann said, was a good day.

Laura Martinez ’14 decided to teach English as a second language after graduating with an international relations degree. She took a job in Thailand through the Council on International Education Exchange.

“As an ESL teacher, each day is exciting and new, but also coupled with its own set of challenges and frustrations.”

The single greatest strategy Martinez has developed to work through difficulties in her job is to keep an open mind and go with the flow.

“I’m much more aware of how conditioned I used to be to constantly over plan and try to over control situations. In a job that is continually changing and full of unexpected occurrences, the best thing I can do is to be flexible and adjust accordingly.”

**GRADUATING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL**

Some new grads postpone their entry into the workforce by pursuing further education, which presents different challenges. As a first-year student at Cornell Law School, Anthony Wu ’14 experienced “the hardest academic year of my life.” The reality of law school meant letting virtually no time go to waste, he said, and being keenly aware of the importance of his investment.

“Ultimately, it was hard work. But I think what made it really hard was the lack of time. You are just constantly learning something new and trying to apply it. I think the most challenging thing for me was just the ability to balance my time between the different classes and the different activities. It was definitely a very challenging year.”

**REALITY CHECK**

Through dispatches from the workforce, graduate school and abroad, a few recent graduates talk about how their experiences after USC have matched up with their expectations.

By Laura Paisley
“Living and working in another country has taught me that there is always another lens to view an issue through. Living abroad forces one out of one’s dominating life perspective and to consider an alternative.”

**A DIFFERENT SOCIAL SCENE**

One aspect that graduates do not always anticipate is the transformation that their social lives undergo once they leave school. When they are living in the dorms, there is always an open door down the hall and someone who feels like talking or going out. But in the full-time working world, they have to navigate differing schedules and the fact that friends are now scattered across the country.

“If in college, everyone is basically your age and you have common interests,” Hann said. “In the real world, it’s a lot harder to meet new people and there isn’t always someone who wants to go out. That’s been a bit shocking — it’s like, ‘Wait, how do grown-ups make friends?’”

Those living abroad are even farther from the comfortable social bubble they knew as students. For Braun, the Peace Corps was the first time she had ever lived alone, and being so far from family and friends, she had a lot more time on her own.

“College for me was about learning to live with other people, like roommates. Being in Cameroon, one of the things I’ve had to learn is how to live with myself.”

**NETWORK IT**

Even here, they tend their dream job or move on to further educational opportunities, many graduates have already learned the importance of planning and forethought as a critical step toward attaining their goals. One invaluable tool they can use as undergraduates is networking, which can yield everything from work experience and mentorship to potential job offers.

Wu took part in the Gateway Internship Program while a junior at USC Dornsife. The program offers work experience, professional mentorship, networking opportunities and an academic leadership skills course. He interned with ABC Document Solutions Inc., a company that provides document and information management solutions for businesses of all types.

“It was a great experience to see what it’s like working with colleagues and showing up to work every morning — normal things about work that you don’t really know as a student but you learn about through internships,” Wu said.

He got the chance to meet with mentor and company CEO K. “Suri” Surirakkumar, a USC Dornsife Board of Counselors member. His internship supervisor provided a glowing letter of recommendation that bolstered his law school application.

During her nursing job search, Hann received offers in four states. All came about through her networking efforts, she said.

“If I’ve learned anything, it’s that networking is the key to success. Society 53 [USC Student Alumni Society’s leadership program] taught me how to network, be professional and interact with people. I learned how to build those relationships, which always used to make me a little uncomfortable.”

Hann reflected on her experiences as a full-time member of the workforce.

“I think some people try to scare you about the real world,” she said. “But it’s not nearly as scary as they make it out to be.”

**SHIFTING RESPONSIBILITIES**

Some of the wake-up calls of life in the “real world” include having less free time, having to manage personal finances, having less free time, having less free time, having less free time and becoming a responsible adult. A commonly used phrase in Thailand is “mai pen rai,” which approximates “no worries.”

It’s much harder to adjust to different ways of communicating, a second language or differences in the relationships between men and women.

Living abroad helps you learn a lot about your own culture, she said, when you see all the peculiar aspects of a foreign culture and then realize how peculiar your own can be.

“When you travel, you learn things you can’t learn from a book. I’ve learned so much about race, poverty and development,” she said. “Seeing the world is the best education you can get.”

In Thailand, Martinet said she has learned innumerable lessons surrounding the themes of perspective, patience and adaptability. A commonly used phrase in Thailand is “mai pen rai,” which approximates “no worries.”

“It captures an essence of the Thai culture that permeates the country across its people and customs and the lifestyle,” she said. “It means go with the flow, don’t sweat the small stuff, and recognize it’s all going to be OK.”

Although she initially experienced frustration in the face of a very different pace of life in Thailand, after a year in the country, she has come to deeply internalize this ethos. She is more patient and easy going.

“I think some people try to scare you about the real world,” she said. “But it’s not nearly as scary as they make it out to be, especially if you find a career that you want to be in.”

**FOR Hann, as she pursued her nursing credentials at Johns Hopkins University and then began working, she found the unique academic focus she had as a health and humanity major at USC Dornsife to be very beneficial, particularly her concentration in psychology.

“I use the material I learned from my undergraduate psychology training all the time. At Hopkins, having the combined psychology/biology background made my nursing classes easier. It felt like I had a leg up in terms of understanding things like cognitive processes and empathy.”

WE’RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

Following graduation in 2013, international relations alumna Rebecca Braun served two years in Cameroon with the Peace Corps. Working as a youth development volunteer, she taught young people about sexual reproductive health, healthy life skills and empowerment for girls.

Going into the experience, Braun was aware that the Peace Corps would be challenging.

“I said, ‘OK, I can’t have running water or electricity. I won’t have supermarkets. How am I going to take care of myself?’

“But once I figured all that out, I realized that physical discomfort is the easiest part of living in a foreign country. It’s much harder to adjust to different ways of communicating, a second language or differences in the relationships between men and women.”

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THE UNIVERSE AS WE KNOW IT

By Darrin S. Joy
Sitting in a small French bistro across from Pershing Square in downtown Los Angeles, Clifford Johnson held the pumpkin-hued drinking straw parallel to the table. “Essentially, this straw has two dimensions to it. I can walk along the straw,” he explained, running his index finger along the length, “or I can walk around the straw.” His finger traced the object’s glossy curved surface.

Johnson, professor of physics and astronomy at USC Dornsife, was explaining how the universe could hold extra, hidden dimensions. “But let’s imagine the straw is really, really long and thin, and I’m walking along the length and I don’t have the equipment to look at very, very small distances.” With those limitations, a traveler would only be able to see the one dimension of length ahead and behind.

Johnson motioned toward a point past the noisy traffic and pedestrians passing by, across the street. “It’s basically the same as if I took the straw over there. You would see its orange length, but you wouldn’t see the roundness. Still,” he said, his finger again circling the straw, “notice everywhere I am in the one-dimensional universe, I could go around if I wanted to. That extra dimension is always with me.”

In a similar way, the four-dimensional universe that humans know, comprising three dimensions of space and one of time, could actually harbor other dimensions that are too small to detect, Johnson said.

Why is that important? One word: strings.

Johnson, who describes his research as an attempt to understand the basic fabric of nature, is a renowned expert in string theory, the closest thing scientists have to a single theory that explains everything in the universe — all of reality.

If he and his fellow physicists are right, strings may be the most basic unit of existence. Every particle of force or matter may boil down to a simple, one-dimensional, vibrating string.

**Teeming with countless planets, stars, galaxies — and perhaps a host of as yet unimagined phenomena — the universe is incomprehensibly large.** Despite its massive nature, reality ultimately boils down to infinitesimal basic building blocks. No one is quite certain what they are, but two USC Dornsife physicists explain how scientists may be closer than ever to an answer.

**THE LARGE AND SMALL OF IT**

For most of history, humankind’s view of the universe and how it works focused on large-scale phenomena — planetary motion, visible properties of light and effects of magnetic fields, for example. Around the turn of the 20th century, as physicists began to examine the microscopic universe of atoms and their constituent pieces, they found that the subatomic world seemed to be governed by a very different set of rules. Max Planck, Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr and a host of brilliantly creative scientists began exploring this realm through mathematics and direct experimentation.

As the scientists worked over the next several decades, they discovered that there were two different classes of fundamental particles, fermions and bosons. The former are the core constituents of matter while the latter mediate interactions between pieces of matter.

Stated simply, different kinds of bosons transfer forces between different kinds of fermions. Photons, for example, transmit the electromagnetic force between charged fermions such as electrons.

“This major breakthrough — that there are particles that can communicate forces or interactions — that was an amazing piece of quantum physics that was understood in the middle of the last century,” Johnson said.

This quantum system seems to work nicely for three of the four known forces of nature — the strong nuclear force, which holds the particles in the atomic nucleus together; the weak nuclear force, which strains to break those nuclei apart as radioactive decay; and electromagnetism.

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The coolest thing about string theory is that it’s the only theory out there that reconciles quantum mechanics and general relativity...

Life on the Holodeck

By Darren S. Lynn

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The theory of gravity in four dimensions may be more efficiently described as a theory that is not gravitational in one dimension fewer.

CLIFFORD JOHNSON

Professor of physics and astronomy

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The most information you need may actually be just three-dimensional,” said Clifford Johnson, professor of physics and astronomy.

In other words, the universe may be a hologram.

ONE LESS DIMENSION

Most people recognize a hologram as a two-dimensional image that has three-dimensional information. A common example is the small security feature on many credit cards. In the broader sense, however, a hologram is an image of an object in one less dimension that preserves its higher-dimensional properties. For physicists, the insight provided by Hawking and Bekenstein into the nature of black holes led to the realization that the four-dimensional universe, comprising three dimensions of space and one of time, might be described mathematically using just three dimensions, two of space and one of time. This idea of the world as a hologram suddenly becomes viable, he added.

This idea of the world as a hologram has further led to conjecture about the things moving on that surface source the gravitational field out of the box, the more I can put in — the more books, or rocks or information. In the broader sense, however, a hologram is an image of an object in one less dimension that preserves its higher-dimensional properties. For physicists, the insight provided by Hawking and Bekenstein into the nature of black holes led to the realization that the four-dimensional universe, comprising three dimensions of space and one of time, might be described mathematically using just three dimensions, two of space and one of time. This idea of the world as a hologram suddenly becomes viable, he added.

In other words, the universe may be a hologram.
Not long after its emergence in the early 19th century, photography gained prominence both as visual art form and as a means of journalistic documentation — with the two seemingly disparate genres often overlapping. Kate Flint, Provost Professor of Art History and English, and Geoff Dyer, writer in residence, delve into photography’s role as a window on life and an evolving method of defining reality.
Two related questions: How long do we have to go back to trace the origins of what happened last year in Ferguson, Missouri? And when does the aftermath of what happened begin?

In terms of narrative history, origins and aftermath — causes and effects — are continuous, capable of being lengthily extended in either direction so that “what happened” is the aftermath. While many strong photographs captured protests, unrest, rioting and the way the police provoked or responded to them, the BEAUTY picture by Justin Sullivan seems directly to engage with these questions.

What it lacks in photojournalistic immediacy is more than compensated for — especially now, many months later — by its reach. (Since it was taken in Dellwood, Missouri, that reach is geographical as well as historical.) Given the number of camera crews and press photographers camped out in Ferguson, waiting for the verdict on the killing of Michael Brown, hoping for photogenic action, it also serves the useful function of reminding us that there was a time when reported events went unphotographed.

In showing the aftermath of a demonstration, Sullivan harks back to a time when the machinery of photography was too cumbersome and slow to capture events as they occurred. Unable to record a cavalry charge in the Crimea, Roger Fenton famously photographed cannonballs lying in the Valley of Death in 1855. What was absent could only be suggested or implied by what was present. So it is here — except the implication is, so to speak, explicit.

The extent of the damage done is exacerbated by another aspect of the photograph’s reach. This is almost spelled out, since the damaged “BEAUTY” sign cannot but recall another self-captioning image, possibly the most famous one of all. In about 1929, Walker Evans (born, incidentally, in St. Louis) photographed workers loading a long, neon “DAMAGED” sign onto the back of a truck. The two signs are tilted at exactly the same angle (20 degrees, I’m guessing) but it is, of course, the differences that make the resemblance so effective.

The DAMAGED picture is anything but. On the contrary, it’s pristine and perfect — a thing of such obvious aesthetic beauty as to instantly label itself an Evans, as an American Photograph! Sullivan’s is altogether less assured of its standing and status. Sure, it’s an impressive picture (that’s why we’re still looking at it, long after its retail value as a news picture has passed), but it lacks the capacity to assert and define — as Evans did, again and again — both the centrality of the medium and the photographer’s instantly eminent place in its history.

One might almost say that it stands amid the rubble of that tradition and history, in the long aftermath of the original.

Writer in Residence Geoff Dyer’s book White Sands will be published in Spring 2016 by Pantheon.
In 1887, Jacob Riis was working as a journalist in New York City when a four-line newspaper item caught his eye: “There was, the thing I had been looking for all those years … The darkest corner might be photographed that way.” Two German chemists had just invented flash powder.

For more than 30 years, until the invention of the flash bulb, this magnesium compound was essential to the taking of pictures in dark places.

For Riis, the literal associations of illumination were infused with biblical overtones of revelation. He saw it as his mission to expose terrible living conditions in lodgings houses and tenements, and the crowded ownerships of Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

Sometimes his subjects start out of the frame, angry at this interruption of light; sometimes they seem clearly posed. Sometimes, as in the image of “Little Susie,” they appear too busy with piecework to stop. Indeed, as she pastes linen on tin covers for pocket flasks, this 12-year-old works “with hands so deft and swift that even the flash could not catch her moving arm.” Riis deliberately sought a compassionate response. He contextualized his subjects, making us see them as types — and often victims — rather than individuals.

At the same time, we see not just his human subjects, but all the details of a room. Flash is a great democratizer. Light cannot be carefully directed, and this means that work tools, creepyace and lace curtains often take on unplanned prominence as a sudden flare makes them more noticeable than at any other time in their existence. Were the room’s inhabitants aware that the picture was cropped? Does the flash reveal a material reality that is not, in fact, visible to those who inhabit dark interiors? Or, there’s another possibility: Did Riis himself tilt the frame, giving a compositional unity through flash and design?

How far, in other words, can one trust the details given in a documentary picture, where a photographer may move an object to improve aesthetics or reinforce a polemical point?

In documentary photography, “reality” is not just found in physical surroundings — even if sparse, grimy furnishings exert a calculated appeal on the middle classes at whose political and charitable sensibilities these images were aimed. It’s located in human interactions and expressions, even when a photograph is clearly posed.

“What does the image say about the intersection of human resilience and charitable intervention?”

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“What does the image say about the intersection of human resilience and charitable intervention?”

Does her expression suggest mistrust of the photographer, or of the woman in a hat, or bewilderment at the whole set of circumstances? Is the younger woman sad to see her leave, or happy to have her home? Is she saying goodbye to the kittens? Does the array of pill bottles on the mantelshelf suggest that someone — mother, child, absent family member — is sick? Why the flag on the same mantelshelf? What of the mismatch — surely revealed by flash — between the untidy newspapers shoved into the grubby area behind the stove and the mess of papers on the table behind, and the china and trinkets that display a desire to decorate and beautify these shabby surroundings?

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What does the image say about the intersection of human resilience and charitable intervention?

What happens next?

Reality is not readily captured. It’s a complex, messy thing — not just illuminated by a brilliant light and caught on a photographic plate. Photography may stop its flow for a moment, and even bring out and fix details that are not readily apparent in reality’s daily flow. But very often, the most provocative images are those that suggest tensions, stories, circumstances and inner lives that the camera can hint at, but never fully reveal.

Kate Flint is Provost Professor of Art History and English. She is currently completing her book Flash! Photography, Writing, and Surprising Illumination.
Over the years, dozens of USC Dornsife alumni have found their own 15 minutes of fame by appearing on reality television programs. We caught up with five notable participants who left their marks on their respective shows and who were, in turn, forever changed by the experience.
“Being an art history major really helped to fine tune the way that I see things, and obviously that’s a skill that’s useful when I’m dressing a client for the Oscars.”

Goreski was no stranger to baring his soul on reality television as he aspired to make a name for himself as a stylist. Audiences became familiar with Goreski’s sparkling personality and vibrant fashion sense — he often wears sharp suits accented with a bow tie — on another Bravo series, The Rachel Zoe Project. That show followed well-known stylist Zoe as she prepped celebrities for the red carpet, Armed with a love of fashion and a foundation in art history from USC Dornsife, his first season of The Rachel Zoe Project in 2007.

“At the beginning of each season of The Rachel Zoe Project, we would cut our way through a mountain of books on painting and photography,” Goreski said. “I’m just incredibly thankful. I was prepped and educated in ways that I see things, and obviously that’s a skill that’s useful when I’m dressing a client for the Oscars.”

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“Those days of uncertainty are behind him now. As a stylist, Goreski, 39, has a growing client list of glamorous celebrities including Demi Moore, Rashida Jones, Lea Michele and Sarah Hyland. This year, he joined E!’s Fashion Police on Entertainment Television’s The Rachel Zoe Project. Now, he dresses his own roster of celebrity clients for the red carpet, armed with a love of fashion and a foundation in art history from USC Dornsife.

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GIRL POWER

Whether she is navigating the mangroves of Micronesia as a contestant on a reality TV show, or encouraging girls and young women to nurture their self esteem while negotiating the pitfalls, paradoxes and perils of today's image-obsessed social jungle, alumna Alex Jones knows what it takes to be a survivor — both literally and metaphorically.

Since 2008, the media personality and activist has empowered a generation of young women through her nonprofit organization, I AM THAT GIRL, inspiring young women, this year she turned her attention to instilling the process of building a personal brand," she said. "I've always been passionate about using media as a vehicle to empower and educate, and USC Dornsife prepared me to use nontraditional means to achieve success." 

Amid growing national concern over sexual assault of young women, this year she turned her attention to instilling self-esteem, bullying, leadership, activism, and social entrepreneurship. Often those talk addressing survival tactics, among them how to stay alive in a sea of self-doubt.

"A girl's physical, emotional and mental well-being is rooted in her self-worth," Jones said. "I AM THAT GIRL exists to transform self-doubt into self-love and inspire that in others.

Her book I Am That Girl (Evolve Publishing, 2014) provides a how-to guide for doing just that. "Business is easy. I can put together financial and communication plans in my sleep. But asking people the hard questions in life — if they really love themselves, and if they're happy — that's tough," Jones said.

In 2011, she was invited to the White House for the 100-year anniversary of International Women's Day. There she met Michelle Obama.

After giving the first lady her card and suggesting that her group co-host an event at the White House, Jones got a call from Obama's assistant, saying the first lady was impressed with her bravado and wanted to invite her back.

Jones returned to the White House to discuss a media initiative she created to examine media impact on girls.

"We live in a world that teaches us from a very young age that our self-worth is commensurate with our physical attractiveness. In that very dangerous paradigm, girls are not taught to love themselves unconditionally. Instead, we are held up against unattainable expectations of beauty."

This insecurity has been exacerbated by a multibillion dollar beauty and fashion industry with its digitally altered images, Jones said. That problem is compounded further by social media, with its focus on posting highlights of our lives, and — in worst-case scenarios — cyberbullying.

"Girls aren't talking about what is really going on in their lives, or the pressure they are under," Jones said. "We are bred to create this idealized façade, but beneath the surface we're all too scared to admit our insecurities." 

Paradoxically, despite her own — apparently flawless — self-confidence, Jones is no stranger to insecurity. "One of my greatest struggles as a student was thinking I had to do things to deserve love, rather than believing I am intrinsically worthy of it," she said.

She cites Steven Lamy, professor of international relations and vice dean for academic programs, as her greatest influence at USC Dornsife.

"I don't think I would have the courage or confidence to do what I've done in my life if he hadn't poured all that faith into me," she said.

Also in her sophomore year, Jones experienced two life-changing events. First, she landed a role in a campus production of Eve Ensler's play The Vagina Monologues, which got her interested about girls' and women's issues.

Then, she won a three-year gig hosting a USC television show about the celebrity red carpet, Doing It for Reel, enabling her to get an inside look at the entertainment industry and build some powerful relationships.

"Both events testify to the caliber of USC, which provides not only the theoretical education, but the opportunity to tackle new experiences and step outside your comfort zone," she said.

A Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority member, Jones started I AM THAT GIRL at USC so young women could discuss issues they struggled with, whether pressure at school, relationship problems or body image.

She began holding weekly meetings at which young women undergraduates could talk about what really mattered in their lives. Six showed up to the first meeting, but soon hundreds were attending.

"That's when it dawned on me that there was a real lack of community for girls. And maybe there was a need to create a community for girls at other universities, too — spaces where young women could be courageous enough to be vulnerable," Jones said.

"We're all starving for that message of unconditional love, and being given permission to feel insecure and scared is so powerful for all of us." Jones, who sees the digital revolution as both the culprit and the solution, acknowledges the irony.

"In today's world, media is the most powerful tool to influence how a girl defines herself. Through our website and social media, we're providing tangible tools and resources with an interactive curriculum to teach girls emotional intelligence, professional skills and personal development." Jones said her education at USC Dornsife taught her to think outside the box and be a creative, innovative leader. "Now I'm considered a 'thought leader' in the media world. I literally have to pinch myself sometimes because I'm actually living out my dreams." — S.B.

SMART SURVIVOR

A contestant on the 16th season of the CBS competitive reality television series Survivor to launch her "ProtectHer: The Vagina Monologues, Enslers play that's currently touring in locker rooms and women's bathrooms across the country.

"I was excited about using a reality TV show to expedite changing events. Survivor is so powerful for all of us," Jones said.

Jones, who has spent the last seven years speaking to more than 250,000 girls in person, and millions more online, is rooted in her self-worth," Jones said. "I AM THAT GIRL exists to transform self-doubt into self-love and inspire that in others.

Her book I Am That Girl (Evolve Publishing, 2014) provides a how-to guide for doing just that. "Business is easy. I can put together financial and communication plans in my sleep. But asking people the hard questions in life — if they really love themselves, and if they're happy — that's tough," Jones said.

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Life after reality

In the real world.

Talks about his career and life in Los Angeles County, he the Superior Court of California popular CBS reality TV show '93 was a participant on the public recognition now comes from a very different source — away entirely.”

Knew me but couldn’t quite place me. Now it’s finally gone from years to not be.

Knew Curtis Kin.

Air six nights a week on primetime television. America cash prize, reserved for the last person standing. The show of the American public — as they competed for a final reality TV phenomenon was a nascent strain in our culture.

As a 29-year-old in the summer of 2000, Kin and nine strangers lived together in a house where they were under near constant surveillance. For 98 days, scores of cameras and live Internet feeds laid bare the contestants’ existence. Individual housemates were regularly evicted — by vote of the American public — as they competed for a final cash prize, reserved for the last person standing. The show aired six nights a week on prime time television. America knew Curtis Kin.

“Overall it was a positive experience,” Kin mused. “I think I learned a lot from it and had a lot of fun doing it.”

Does he still get recognized in public? He said it took

Over time it morphed from being recognized as Curtis from Big Brother to people having this general sense that they knew me but couldn’t quite place me. Now it’s finally gone away entirely.”

Indeed, 15 years later, the experience seems distant. Kin’s public recognition now comes from a very different source —

Kin is currently a judge for the Superior Court of California in Los Angeles County. California. Gov. Jerry Brown appointed him to the position in 2013. Prior to that, Kin was chief of the Criminal Appellate section at the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Central District of California, the office he had worked in since his stint on Big Brother.

“I had a great career at the U.S. Attorney’s Office, and what I loved the most is the fact that I was able to change things up every few years,” he said. “I was able to do a lot of different things and always be able to challenge myself.”

Kin started out working on general crimes, as rookie prosecutors often do, then he moved on to white collar crimes and fraud, eventually becoming a supervisor in the office for the trial unit. In 2009, Kin successfully prosecuted the largest human sex trafficking case ever tried to verdict by the U.S. Department of Justice. The feat garnered him the Attorney General’s Award for Distinguished Service. Criminals knew Curtis Kin.

“That was really gratifying, working with the victims of those crimes and being able to vindicate them,” Kin said. “As a result of that case, I learned quite a bit about how to work with victims and investigate and build a case for trafficking. Thereafter, I served as the coordinator for the human trafficking unit at the office. I was fortunate to travel around the country and internationally, teaching law enforcement officers and victims’ rights advocates about sex trafficking and how to combat it. It was a very rewarding part of my career.”

Kin grew up in Tustin, Calif., the youngest of three children. As a teenager in the late ’80s, “back when L.A. Law was big,” Kin developed an interest in the legal profession that followed him to USC Dornsife. He majored in international relations and graduated in 1993 before going on to Stanford Law School and earning his J.D. three years later.

Within the first few years of practicing, Kin knew he wanted to be a trial lawyer and a prosecutor. But, after law school, he served as a clerk for a couple of judges — including future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. The judicial experience inspired him. Eventually he was able to work in both areas.

“At the end of the day, what I love most both as a judge and in my former role as a prosecutor is the truth-seeking function of the courts, where you’re always trying to do the right thing and reach the right results. As a judge, it’s nice because you’re no longer on one side or the other, you’re just trying to make the best decision based on the facts and arguments presented.”

Kin comes from a USC family. His parents and his sister attended the university USC Dornsife certainly prepared him for his law career, he said. As a freshman, he participated in the Thematic Option program, a rigorous interdisciplinary core curriculum that offers small classes and top professors and writing instructors.

“I think that very intense year may have been one of the most influential experiences in terms of shaping my ability to write.”

Good Judgement

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“I think that very intense year may have been one of the most influential experiences in terms of shaping my ability to write.”

“As a federal prosecutor, writing is constant,” he continued.

“At the end of the day, a lawyer is a purveyor of information in a persuasive way. It can be oral, but most often it’s going to be in written form. Particularly in federal cases, decisions are made mostly on the basis of the briefs and written submissions. So all of the writing really matters.”

Kin took part in all kinds of activities at USC, from being a resident adviser and orientation adviser to being a Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity president, a campus tour guide and a member of the choir.

“I loved USC. It was such a great experience and those really are your formative years. I felt I walked out of there very well-rounded.”

In some ways, his experience on Big Brother still relates to his current life and career, as well.

“The biggest lesson I’ve taken away is that the way you conduct yourself in your private and public life should be the same. That’s been helpful for me as a prosecutor and a judge — as a public figure. The person you present to the outside is the person you should be in chambers, at home and in your private communications: straightforward and honest.”

“Some attorneys really enjoy the spotlight and media attention, but I think as a result of Big Brother, it doesn’t matter as much to me. For my cases, no matter how big, the focus was always on the case. I suppose the novelty of the public spotlight just isn’t there for me after Big Brother.”

Curtis Kin knows himself.  — L.P.
He performed in drag venues in Oakland, Calif., and Berkley, Calif., between classes, work and volunteer commitments.

Mulugeta graduated from UC Berkeley at the height of the economic downturn, yet found a tailor-made job as a programs director at the Rainbow Community Center of Contra Costa County in Northern California. There, he helped to establish a mental health clinic for the LGBT community in the area and continued to work with at-risk youth. He balanced his professional social work responsibilities with a burgeoning entertainment career. By 2011, Honey Mahogany was a local celebrity in nightclubs throughout the Bay Area and was voted Best Drag Performer by the readers of SF Weekly.

Emboldened by the response to Honey Mahogany, Mulugeta auditioned for the fifth season of RuPaul’s Drag Race, Part America’s Next Top Model, part Project Runway with a dash of American Idol thrown in for good measure, the show thrust Mulugeta into the international spotlight.

Honey Mahogany did not exactly wow the judges, however. An excess of billowing Grecian gowns and caftans in Honey Mahogany’s wardrobe received the dubious distinction of being “very Bath, Bath and Beyond.” Following a difficult lip-sync for your life performance, the titular host asked the San Francisco native to “sashay away” in the show’s first (and thus far, only) double elimination.

Critics and fans were quick to categorize Honey Mahogany as the solitary, cerebral contestant. “I think I was a little naïve about how reality television works,” he said. “Fans would come up to me and say I was too nice.”

Still, Mulugeta does not think he would behave any differently if given a second chance at the crown.

“I think, with my educational background in psychology and my work as a social worker, it’s instinctive for me to try to be objective, to listen and to think before I speak. I’ve always prided myself on being levelheaded, and nonreactive. Not to mention I was worried how my co-workers, family and the youth that I work with would react if I completely flew off the handle on national television … but I don’t think levelheadedness makes for very good reality TV.”

Honey Mahogany appeared in just five episodes. Still, Mulugeta is optimistic about the experience. “RuPaul’s Drag Race had a huge positive impact on me. It’s an opportunity to get your feet in the door in Hollywood — in both movies and television, and even music,” Mulugeta said. “It’s also a good way to take an objective look at yourself. Opportunities came to me out of the experience that probably wouldn’t have presented themselves if I hadn’t been on the show.”

Mulugeta now is focused on the future and looking for ways to keep his community in the area and continued to work with at-risk youth. He warmly remembers how USC bolstered his self-confidence.

It was during this time that Mulugeta returned to female impersonation as a means of creative release. When he fixed the names of two shades of makeup he used in his theatre days, his female character finally received a name: Honey Mahogany.
A leading voice on the style scene, Los Angeles fashion lawyer-turned-fashion blogger Jenny Wu ’03 is known among her devotees for cutting an elegant figure in the alluring designer outfits she dons on her blog, Good, Bad, and Fab. The wider American public, however, may now remember her in a much less glamorous pose — slipping from head to toe with glistening, brown gunk.

As a contestant on the 26th season of CBS Television’s *The Amazing Race* in February, Wu was obliged to plunge into a giant man-made pool of mud and wade through it as fast as she could. As the cameras attest, she wore it well, showing that being a good sport can transform brown into the new black.

“It was a shock,” she said of the experience, “but I think it was the best way to prepare us for the race.” The muddy endeavor “quickly put me into race mentality,” she added.

Wu, who earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from USC Dornsife, went on to take second place on the popular Emmy-winning reality show. She credits her education at USC with propelling her toward victory.

“It was a stressful, intense and competitive environment on the show, so having a strong sense of discipline, focus and drive to succeed helped me block out distractions,” she explained. “USC taught me to be meticulous in everything I do, and there were many challenges where being detail-oriented helped us pull ahead. And because USC taught me giving up is not an option, whether I was confronted with cutting down a long row of sugar canes in Peru or getting thrown from a horse, I simply kept going.”

Wu was at a 2014 Independence Day barbecue when she decided to try out for *The Amazing Race* with a friend. After submitting a video showcasing why the pair thought they would be a good fit for the show, Wu received an invitation to audition — without her friend. Instead of the usual format in which contestants race in self-made pairs, the season took a new turn. Five of the show’s 11 race teams were to be locals, and vying for airplane, boat, taxi and other public transportation options on a limited budget. Teams are vied on TV or become a reality star but because I wanted to challenge myself,” Wu said. “This was an opportunity to stand on my own two feet and do something for myself, and let go of any fears that were holding me back from achieving my dreams.”

As a political science major, my classes involved a lot of writing and reading, which definitely helps with my blog because I am writing content every single day,” she said. “The added writing demands of a Thematic Option course in which she enrolled also helped hone her skills. Now she is turning those learned abilities into a successful, sustainable career.

“Not only am I a writer, creating content, I’m also a businesswoman,” said Wu. “Exercising both sides of my brain as I manage the creative and the business side of running my own business is a challenge. I’m learning every single day. It’s been such a great experience and I love it.”

Wu is also developing a book loosely based on her experience.

“USC taught me to respect others and engage with people in a kind, generous manner, and that definitely helped because I knew I needed to get along with my teammate, the rest of the cast and all the strangers we might meet along the way.”

The fact that she had gained an understanding of different governments, cultures and countries as a political science major also helped her compete, Wu said.

“Before going on *The Amazing Race*, I hoped to learn more about myself, what I’m capable of, my strengths, my weaknesses,” she said, adding that the experience put her to the test. “I learned I’m a lot stronger than I gave myself credit for. Now when I’m confronted with a stressful situation, I will trust myself more to go with my gut instinct.”

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“Good, Bad, and Fab”

As a political science major, my classes involved a lot of writing and reading, which definitely helps with my blog because I am writing content every single day,” she said. “The added writing demands of a Thematic Option course in which she enrolled also helped hone her skills. Now she is turning those learned abilities into a successful, sustainable career.

“Not only am I a writer, creating content, I’m also a businesswoman,” said Wu. “Exercising both sides of my brain as I manage the creative and the business side of running my own business is a challenge. I’m learning every single day. It’s been such a great experience and I love it.”

Wu is also developing a book loosely based on her experience.

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The United States is at historic levels of income inequality. What will it take to balance the scales between low-income workers and the top 1 percent? By Michelle Salzman Boston

When Zinahi Rodriguez turned 18, fresh out of high school, she took a retail job in downtown Los Angeles. She was excited. Her plan was to help support her parents, both garment workers, with whom she and a younger brother lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Koreatown.

The experience was demoralizing. She ended up working nine to 10 hours a day without any breaks. Her paycheck barely made a dent in her family’s expenses.

“I worked there for a month until I realized that I was getting paid $22 per day,” Rodriguez said. “It was a real struggle to help my family.”

Now 23 years old, Rodriguez is committed to fighting for workers’ rights, in particular for a decent living wage — a movement that has been steadily gaining momentum since fast-food workers in New York City launched the “Fight for $15” in 2012. Their stance is that workers employed by multibillion dollar companies shouldn’t be struggling to put food on their tables.

What Rodriguez’s experience underscores is a deeper issue that has been percolating throughout the United States for some time — an ever-widening gap between the income of the working poor and that of the wealthy.

In fact, President Obama has called the growing inequality and lack of upward mobility in the U.S. “the defining challenge of our time.”

Manuel Pastor, Turfanjian Chair in Civil Society and Social Change and professor of sociology and American studies and ethnicity at USC Dornsife, noted, “There’s been a very rapid uptick of income inequality, particularly in the last 25 years.

“The share of income going to the top 1 percent of Americans is as high as it was during the years before the Great Depression, a period of extreme inequality,” said Pastor, who is an economist by training. “Much of it has to do with pay for CEOs and huge returns on capital gains.

“Those at the top of the income distribution have seen
There’s a tendency to think that anybody who is working full time shouldn't be lodged below the poverty level. There’s also a tendency to think that there should be a fair wage and that there should be a mechanism for doing it besides the market.

A number of surveys reveal that, while the American pub-

clic is aware that some inequities in income and wealth distri-
bution exist, they are usually far off in understanding just how
deep the divide is. One study in Perspectives on Psychological

Science asked Americans to estimate distributions of wealth in
the U.S. Respondents overwhelmingly underestimated the actual
level of wealth inequality in the U.S., believing that the top 20 percent
of the population hold about 99 percent of the wealth. In reality, the top 20 percent of U.S. households own more than 84 percent of the wealth while the bottom 40 percent own just 0.3 percent of the wealth.

What is more problematic is that economic inequality

means for every dollar that an average U.S. worker makes,

The divide between low-income earners and the upper

class is staggering. The average annual salary for chief execu-
tive officers is $12.2 million while the average worker takes

$34,646 per year, according to the American Federation of

Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. That means
for every dollar that an average U.S. worker makes, a

California is a model of that theory. A swell to raise the

wage to $15 is surging through the states. California voted two years ago to increase its minimum wage (then $9 an hour, and now $9 an hour) to $10 an hour in 2016. But advocates are pushing for more. They are currently collecting signatures for a ballot initiative that would take it up to $15 an hour statewide.

Meanwhile, detractors argue that increases in the mini-
mum wage will lead to layoffs and small-business owners

losing their livelihoods.

Palm trees, malls crowded with signs in English, Korean and Spanish offering payday loans, discount shoes, Korean barbecue, prepaid mobile phones and auto body services. Palm trees silhouette the skyline.

She grew up in Koreatown, where she and her family still live. “It’s pretty crowded with four of us in a one-bedroom apartment,” she said. “But there are way bigger families that are also living in this time place. Many of us are not privileged to have our own bedroom or a backyard.”

Rodriguez described her neighborhood as primarily Hispanic and a tight community.

“Im not deny it, there’s violence, there are gangs,” said

Rodriguez. “It all depends on who you choose to hang around with and who you choose to make your friends.”

To support herself, Rodriguez now works as a barista at a local branch of a well-known coffeehouse where she earns minimum wage. She pitches in a portion of her pay-

check for her family’s finances but had to cut down her contribution when California raised its minimum wage to $9 an hour in 2014. Her employer no longer offered full-
time hours. Now, she works three days a week and takes home about $500 per month after taxes — half of what she was making before.

“I’m not sure there for another job until I find some-
thing secure,” Rodriguez said. “It’s the constant struggle for entry-level jobs.”

Rodriguez sees education as her ticket to earning a bet-
ter living. “My brother is in high school and I always tell him
to study,” she said.

In June, Rodriguez earned two associate degrees from

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There’s a tendency to think that anybody who is working full time shouldn’t be lodged below the poverty level. There’s also a tendency to think that there should be a fair wage and that there should be a mechanism for doing it besides the market.
overcome them?

African American or American Indian, are less likely to whose mother did not go to college, people who are Latino, challenge achievement, according to Daphna Oyserman potential, particularly when social and economic disparities or maybe work for Congress.”

Rodriguez. “I’ve always wanted to work as a city attorney, paying job to put herself through a four-year college.

her strive for “something bigger” — a way to get a higher-

school for Communication and Journalism, developed identity-based motivation theory to understand when and how people’s images of what is possible for them in the future can be leveraged so that they will persist in spite of difficulties they encounter in their lives.

According to identity-based motivation theory, people use their identities to make sense of their experiences and assume that who they are — the identities they have — is stable. Yet, which identities come to mind — what these identities are taken to imply for action, and hence, how experienced difficulties should be interpreted — is highly context-sensitive.

One area of Oyserman’s research focuses on how students can leverage their motivation to overcome inequalities and achieve goals such as attending and going to school.

School-to-Jobs is an intervention that Oyserman created to help disadvantaged students based on three basic objectives: make students feel like their future goals are connected to the present; help them understand that when something is difficult it means that it’s important; and let them know they can take actions now to work toward their final goals.

Oyserman launched School-to-Jobs in middle schools in Detroit. In 12 biweekly sessions held during homeroom periods, students participated in activities in which they created templates for fulfilling their goals. They were guided to form a mental image of adulthood, identify concrete steps to help achieve these goals and address their concerns for reaching goals.

The researchers found that those who took part in School-to-Jobs got better grades, were less likely to have unexcused absences, saw their standardized test scores rise, and reported that they spent more time on homework.

For two years, Oyserman and her colleagues tracked the students’ progress.

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All of those changes were more positive than they were for the kids who were in the control group, for whom things got worse over time,” Oyserman explained.

Now Oyserman is implementing School-to-Jobs in middle schools in Chicago, and with funding from the Institute for Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education, she is training teachers to train other teachers to run the program. She is also working with the country of Singapore to implement the program nationally.

Her book Pathways to Success Through Identity-Based Motivation (Oxford University Press, 2015) is being used in school districts and community colleges. She is collaborating with groups running after-school programs to adapt the program to their own settings.

“The goal is really to help kids get to what you might call the ‘American Dream’ — finish school in a position to get higher education and lead more stable and productive lives,” Oyserman said.

“At the most proximal level, this is an amazingly cost-effective way of improving society,” she said.

MOBILIZING KIDS FOR HEALTHY LIVING

Behind the apartment where Rodriguez lives is a tiny oasis, the Francis Avenue Community Garden. The space was once an empty lot. Neighbors cleared it up and turned it into a garden and meeting place.

In densely populated Koreatown, women and men from the surrounding neighborhood grow corn, tomatoes, chiles, squash, beans, bananas and mangoes in raised beds. The community holds events there, too, such as planting workshops, weddings and music and crafting classes for kids.

“It’s for the community, a place where kids can be outside and not be behind four walls,” said Rodriguez. “You find some relief.” Her mother grows vegetables that she uses to prepare family meals. The harvest helps supplement the groceries purchased from a nearby discount supermarket, which the family finds more affordable and accessible than other options in the neighborhood.

But not all similarly burdened neighborhoods are as lucky to have such a garden when they can supplement their diets with nutritious produce.

Low-income communities of color, much more than affluent areas, must contend with “food swamps” and “food deserts” — meaning they have a disproportionately high number of fast-food outlets (“swamps”) and very few options for healthy food (“deserts”). Research shows they also experience higher incidences of diabetes, heart disease and obesity.

Doris Spruijt-Metz understands these challenges. Her work at USC Dornsife focuses on promoting healthy habits in children who are faced with an uphill battle in the fight to eat nutritious. In particular, she studies obesity prevention and treatment in minority children.

Diet, physical activity, sleep and stress are the four factors that influence obesity, and minority populations have extra challenges surrounding all of these areas, said

A L I V I N G W A G E

For every dollar that an average U.S. worker earns, a CEO makes 825x. If the worker is a minority, the gap is even wider.

The goal is really to help kids get to what you might call the ‘American Dream’ — finish school in a position to get higher education and lead more stable and productive lives.”
“Together with the other great universities that are here, we can contribute to the future of Los Angeles and through that the future of California, the future of urban America and the future of the United States.”

“[L.A.] — the U.S. in fast-forward
If the effort to lessen inequalities in the U.S. must begin somewhere, L.A. is a perfect city to study in terms of determining what kinds of progress can be made.

The city is making huge strides to revitalize its downtown, reclaim its transit system and create new mechanisms to collaborate with its immigrant and undocumented populations.”

Spruijt-Metz, professor (research) of psychology.

“In some of the interventions that we’ve done, we’ve taken people grocery shopping in their communities to help them learn how to shop in a more healthy way within their budgets,” she said. “That can be really tricky because there are often not a lot of fresh foods and vegetables available.”

Between wasting activity levels, stress from any number of factors such as food insecurity or alienation, as well as challenges getting a good night’s sleep, you’ve got a recipe for poor nutrition.

Spruijt-Metz is using mobile technologies in her lab at USC Dornsife and in the field to understand the biological, behavioral, social and environmental causes of childhood obesity.

With 88 percent of American teens age 13 to 17 having access to a mobile phone, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey, smartphones are a perfect way for her to access research subjects.

“My work now is almost entirely in mobile-health technologies — it’s a great way to reach the hard-to-reach because they have access to mobile phones, often smart phones,” said Spruijt-Metz, who directs the USC mobile Health Collaboratory in the USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research. The collaboratory brings together researchers to advance research in health and well-being through knowledge sharing.

In one intervention called the KNOWME Networks, led by Spruijt-Metz in collaboration with several colleagues in the USC Viterbi School of Engineering, a small group of Hispanic youth were nonsupervisory monitors that collected data on their physical activity over a period of about three days. The data were analyzed using a combination of agile analyses on the phone and on a secure server, and used to determine in real time how long children were sedentary after school or during the weekend. Members of the Spruijt-Metz lab then used text messaging when the children were sedentary for more than two hours to encourage them to get moving.

The children increased their activity by a mean of 371 minutes in a week.

“That’s clinically significant,” Spruijt-Metz said. While the original pilot was small, she is planning to scale the project up in the near future.

Virtual Sprouts is another intervention that Spruijt-Metz and an interdisciplinary team of researchers have developed to teach children and families how they can grow vegetables and fruits in whatever space they might have available — backyards, windowills, balconies or even living rooms.

The interactive multimedia gardening game allows players to plant crops, tend to them, harvest them and then prepare them as part of a healthy meal.

Virtual Sprouts is an offshoot of L.A. Sprouts, a program started by former USC researcher Jamie Davis that puts edible gardens in schools around the city. The Virtual Sprouts started by former USC researcher Jamie Davis that puts edible gardens in schools around the city.
As the British writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley famously noted, “There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception.” USC Dornsife psychologists examine how our minds perceive the world around us—and how those perceptions can vary from reality. By Susan Bell
“Perception doesn’t emerge fully formed on our first day of life. It is shaped.”

The debate rapidly went viral, as differing perceptions split friends, families and co-workers. “The image of the dress triggered such a global furor because it challenges our seemingly self-evident and unquestioned assumption that we see the world as it really is, thereby raising questions about perception and reality,” said Bosco Tjan, professor of psychology and an expert on visual perception.

Do your perceptions differ? What does this say about the way we view the world? USC Dornsife psychologists consider these questions, looking also at how our perceptions are affected by those closest to us and examining some of the most extreme cases of differing perception — those rooted in schizophrenia, eating disorders and dementia — while giving their views on the question: Does an objective reality exist? While giving their views on the question: Does an objective reality exist?

But first, back to the dress: Why do people see it differently? “Perception is about how your brain interprets your sensory input,” said Tjan. A founding member and co-director of the USC Dornsife Cognitive Neuroimaging Center, Tjan studies the human visual system; in particular, the neural computations that underlie the perception of form. “Our perception of color depends on our perception of the light in a room or scene,” he said. “When cues about ambient light are missing — as was the case in the photograph of the dress — people may perceive different colors for the same object because they implicitly make different assumptions about the ambient light.”

This is because color, or more precisely “reflectance,” is a physical property of the material — how much light it reflects at different wavelengths. Tjan explained. A red object, for example, reflects more long-wavelength light than short-wavelength light. Our eyes cannot see reflectance (the color of an object). Instead, we see the light that the object reflects. In order to infer the color of an object, we need to know the color of the light shining on the object, or more precisely, the wavelength or spectral distribution of the light. In the case of the dress, we may make different assumptions about the time of day at which it was photographed, and hence assume a different color of the light source — forces our brains to infer the color of the dress from the imagined color of the light source, which influences how we see the dress. Our brains make the decision for us, unconsciously about the color of ambient light and consciously about the color of the dress, and once it has been done, we see it that way.

“The pairing of the colors in the dress materials turned out to hit just the right spot where assumption about daylight matters a lot for seeing the colors of the dress,” Tjan said.

SHAPING EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL PERCEPTION

Perception of the world is not limited to the visual, but is also rooted in the way we experience it emotionally. “ Perception is about how your brain interprets your sensory input,” said Tjan. A founding member and co-director of the USC Dornsife Cognitive Neuroimaging Center, Tjan studies the human visual system; in particular, the neural computations that underlie the perception of form. “Our perception of color depends on our perception of the light in a room or scene,” he said. “When cues about ambient light are missing — as was the case in the photograph of the dress — people may perceive different colors for the same object because they implicitly make different assumptions about the ambient light.”

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The therapist will then trace around the patient’s actual body to show how the patient’s perception deviates from reality.

“Usually patients draw themselves several inches wider than they actually are,” said Couture, who supervises Ph.D. students as they learn how to conduct therapy sessions.

While depression and rating scales can cause distortions in perception, those suffering from schizophrenia — a mental disorder often characterized by failure to recognize what is real — may truly find themselves in the realm of the unreal.

Disturbances in sensory perception can be seen in individuals with schizophrenia. 50 to 80 percent of whom experience auditory hallucinations, according to a 2007 review of the literature by Thomas McGlashan at Yale University.

“During these episodes they perceive voices, sounds or music that do not exist in reality,” Couture explained. “So why does this happen?”

That, said Couture, is the million-dollar question.

“In some cases, the content may be similar to a conversation or traumatic event the individual with schizophrenia may have experienced in the past. Our theory is that those types of auditory hallucinations may be related to memories being triggered, but the person is not experiencing them as memories,” said Couture.

Other types of auditory hallucinations are not associated with the past but feature voices commenting on what a person is doing in the present moment.

“Psychologists think those types of voices may be more related to inner speech, such as talking to oneself or imagining having a conversation with someone else,” Couture said. “Neuroimaging shows that parts of the brain activated in normal individuals engaged in those activities are also activated in people with schizophrenia experiencing auditory hallucinations.”

Individuals with schizophrenia can also experience tactile hallucinations, in which they might feel insects crawling on their skin, or olfactory hallucinations, in which they report smelling odors that are not there.

According to a 2014 study published in Schizophrenia Bulletin, between 15 and 40 percent of people with schizophrenia also experience visual hallucinations. These can manifest as distortion of perception, Couture said, so that an individual with schizophrenia may perceive an advertising slogan on a billboard or a newspaper headline as changing color, shape or size.

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Schizophrenia can cause distortions in sensory perception, including auditory or tactile hallucinations that may cause patients to hear voices, music or sounds that are not there, or to feel insects crawling on their skin.
Alzheimer’s disease, which found pleasure in using imaginary tools to “mend” a chair he falsely perceived to be broken.

“Describing the chair to be broken is another example of mistakes perception caused by dementia,” said Gatz, who also holds joint appointments in gerontology from USC Davis School of Gerontology and in preventive medicine from Keck School of Medicine of USC.

“When people become demented or develop some kind of neurocognitive disorder, the functions that most people think about being impaired are mostly related to memory, but in fact many aspects of the brain are affected in different ways.”

One early sign of dementia is faulty spatial perception, which often results in minor benders. “It’s not infrequent to see people having trouble getting through the garage door or hitting another car in a parking lot,” said Gatz, who codirected Forgotten Memories, inspired by a photovolta — a small pamphlet akin to a comic-book, with photographs combined with dialogue bubbles. Targeted at the Latino community, it aims to inform its audience about some of the beliefs about what the world is like.

“People don’t need to be suffering from mental disorders to have distorted perceptions of our world — but because we are inundated with information, that what we call consensually agreed-upon reality — can often be perceived differently, depending on a variety of different circumstances.”

Davison cites an example he often uses in undergraduate classes.

“You can look at a pencil and simply see a pencil. But if I fold it and point it at you, you may perceive it as dangerous. If I do that and also tell you this pencil is a device equipped with a gas canister that was used during World War II to fire a mace-like substance at the enemy, you would probably feel threatened.”

One example of the way our perceptions can play tricks on us lies in our built environment.

“Our cultural experiences guide us into thinking that doors and windows are rectangular, even though our retinas do not show them as such,” Davison said. “We can be fooled into thinking that everything that is a door is necessarily rectangular.”

However, some architects, such as Frank Gehry, manipulate this by constructing forms that are intentionally not rectangular.

“Gehry’s architecture plays with forms and tricks you into thinking a thing is a certain shape when it really isn’t,” Davison explained. “Taking advantage of the way we think the world is constructed can be an effective tool to get our attention.”

So is it possible to know whether there is an objective reality?

While he maintains that the way we construe our realities is governed by individual perception that can depend upon a whole host of factors, including our moods or even whether we are hungry, Davison argues that it would be illogical not to assume that some objective reality exists.

“We live in a physical universe and share certain consensually validated beliefs about what the world is like,” he said.

“Without that, it would be chaos.”

Couture agrees.

“As a society and in our relationships we tend to agree on some sort of shared perception of what is going on,” she said. “But the only way we could really know for sure is by recording everything and reviewing it. Even then we would be constrained by what is being attended to, which direction the camera is pointed.”
American Identity at Sea

A new book by Nathan Perl-Rosenthal explores how the efforts of American sailors to establish their nationality created the first racially inclusive model of U.S. citizenship.

"Now, sir, you are dissected!" Addressing these mocking words to a captured American sailor, an 18th-century British butcher ripped up the sailor’s identity papers and tossed them overboard.

This incident occurred two decades after the end of the American Revolutionary War. It is one of many descriptions of tribulations faced by American sailors during this period recounted by Nathan Perl-Rosenthal in Citizen Sailors (Belknap Press, 2015)—a work brimming with swashbuckling maritime drama.

"In the decades after the U.S. formally declared independence in 1776, Americans struggled to gain recognition of their new republic and their rights as citizens," writes Perl-Rosenthal, assistant professor of history and spatial sciences. "None had to fight harder than America’s sailors, whose profession took them far from home and deep into an often hostile Atlantic world.”

Citizen Sailors charts a chronological journey beginning at the start of the 18th century—when national identity was largely determined by language, an individual’s spoken word, when status mattered more than nationality and when identity papers were virtually nonexistent—through the Civil War, when sailors’ documents began to matter, and into the 20th century, when Americans finally won the right to carry papers issued by the U.S. government, identifying them as American citizens.

The importance sailors attached to these identity documents can be seen in the efforts of the French government to recover the papers of 100 American sailors captured in 1814 during the War of 1812.

"The importance sailors attached to these identity documents can be seen in the efforts of the French government to recover the papers of 100 American sailors captured in 1814 during the War of 1812," Perl-Rosenthal said. "To the federal government in this period publicly acknowledging and certifying the citizenship of American sailors is remarkable." — S.B.
Writing from his gig as a script coordinator for The CW's first novel in an adaption of the story for a book series.

...of the Arrow universe as they scheme against Queen. Books and co-written with Lauren Certo, follows the villains based on the DC Comics character Green Arrow.

...in front of people helped me develop a thick skin,” he said. USC Dornsife set him up for success in his career. “The experience of writing a book that taps into that universe is pretty incredible.”

...grew up reading comics as a kid, so the fact I’m now writing about characters,” said Balderrama, a script coordinator on the show. “It was fun coming up with the story lines for these characters.”

...he said. Balderrama’s experience studying creative writing at USC Dornsife set him up for success in his career. “The whole environment of being critiqued and putting yourself in front of people helped me develop a thick skin,” he said.

He recalled how his professors T.C. Boyle, writer in residence, and Susan Staub, associate professor (teaching) of English, would encourage communication for writing and a love of literature and storytelling. “Being in a supportive environment like that definitely instilled confidence in me,” he said. — M.S.B.

FULL STORY ABOUT YOUR BOOK Write to USC Dornsife Magazine, 3601 Petrossian Drive, Suite 200, Los Angeles, CA 90089; or magazine@dornsife.usc.edu

...in a dying man’s last breath. "The more I write, the more I know that writing is a tool for understanding. When writing, it is never just me talking to me. It’s a dialogue between what I feel in my body and what I write on the page."

...people who make it their life’s work to recover from the trauma of the Holocaust, and why it was unimaginable to ordinary people.

...and dreamers.

...a tale of infidelity during one man’s adolescence and a more reflective adulthood, in which she becomes “no longer the dreamer / but the doer.”

...a smoldering tale of women united against a corrupt government.

...questions in this novella-in-verse by Naomi Knatz (MPW '10) weaves together, or tear it apart.

...spirits of partisan soldiers and their monde-boucheing oops, along with stories of their military service.

...I convinced the dreamer / that it was the wiker, the watcher, the guard.”

...the kid surprised daddy / before the kids surprise daddy

...one man’s life who’s been missing when he returns home, he finds corruption rampant in his city and sets out to take down the criminal element, armed with a bow

...He recalled how his professors T.C. Boyle, writer in residence, and Susan Staub, associate professor (teaching) of English, would encourage communication for writing and a love of literature and storytelling. “Being in a supportive environment like that definitely instilled confidence in me,” he said. — M.S.B.

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...a smoldering tale of women united against a corrupt government.
Angela Flournoy can recall visiting Detroit with her father when she was a young girl. She drove Flournoy and her sister around the locations of formative events in his life such as his baptism and his first fight. She was a young girl. He drove Flournoy and her sister around the locations of formative events in his life such as his baptism and his first fight.

But these lots now lay empty, razed and abandoned during the intervening years, holding only the shadows of a once vibrant quarter. The experience led Flournoy to meet her mother, the city of Detroit. This Must Be the Place

In her debut novel, Angela Flournoy ’07 weaves together her fascination with history, the city of Detroit and the bonds of family. In her debut novel, Angela Flournoy ’07 weaves together her fascination with history, the city of Detroit and the bonds of family.

The Turner House

Centred around a house on Detroit’s east side, the novel — a National Book Award finalist — weaves 50 years of the city’s history, richly researched, around the lives of 13 children and their parents in the sprawling Turner family. Centred around a house on Detroit’s east side, the novel — a National Book Award finalist — weaves 50 years of the city’s history, richly researched, around the lives of 13 children and their parents in the sprawling Turner family.

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Flournoy is a Presidential Scholar at USC, relished her writing classes at USC Dornsife and the support of her instructors, including Writer in Residence and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English T.C. Boyle, who wrote for a novel.

“I never took an English class with more than 15 people, and having access to professors was really easy,” she said. “They were very generous with their time.” — L.P.

Alumni News

1970s

GERALD ADACHI (B.S., biological sciences, ’77) received an “outstanding alumnus award” from L.A. magazine.

FENG ZHU SUN, professor of biological sciences and mathematics, was named a fellow of the American Statistical Association.

MARK THOMPSON, Bay R. Tinti, president and CEO of Occidental Petroleum Corporation, Chair in Chemistry and professor of chemical engineering and materials science, received a $400,000 NSF Graduate Research Award from the Institute of Engineering and Electronics Engineers.

ABDUL WAHSHISH, Distinguished Professor of Chemistry, Biological Sciences, Biochemistry, and Chemical Engineering and Materials Science, and Dana and Donors Chair in Chemistry, received a honor for his work in the field of quantum mechanics, from the American Chemical Society.

In May, the Board of Supervisors of Santa Barbara County, CA, appointed GEORGE CHAPMAN (B.A., psychology, ’71; M.I.T., A.S., M.S., genotyping, ’84) director of the Community Services Department.

DENIS EGER (B.A., religion, ’83) was named president of the Central Conference of American Reform Rabbis, an international organization of more than 3,700 rabbis.

ERIN SMALL, professor of French, was named president of the French Peace Movement.

ERIN BIRK, professor of French and Spanish, and comparative literature, was named a Lusitano-Jewish Society Award of Excellence.

ERIN KUMAR (B.A., social sciences and communication) was named a recipient of the “H. M. School of Education, curriculum and instruction, ’94 position”.

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KAREN L. (D., psychobiology, ’73) was appointed as chief medical officer at St. Thomas More hospital in Sinai, MD.

Bronx, NY. (Continued on page 77.)

Shinichi Daimyo spent much of his early life among members of the Vietnamese boat-person refugee community in Los Angeles. He admired the strength and resolve of these courageous people seeking better lives for their families, many of whom fled political oppression during the Vietnam War.

“They sacrificed so much to escape persecution,” he said, “but found themselves quietly suffering new hardships in America.”

Since graduating in 2007, he has traveled to the poorest parts of the world, developing and implementing mental health systems within the world’s most underserved communities. Daimyo recently received a Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans, which will support his work toward a Master of Science in Nursing degree. Eventually he plans to work as a psychiatric nurse practitioner.

“I am surrounded by people who act like immigrants or the children of immigrants who have made sacrifices. So being able to support my vision of the world is the embodiment of my American dream.” — L.G.
Surviving the Storm

Ten years ago, Hurricane Katrina blew Morgan Hawkins off his path to medical school, surviving the storm doing cardiology research and is now a resident in internal medicine at Loma Linda S.B.

He leads 300 subordinates and, as a reserve officer, provides medical care at the site of his birth.

Admitted to medical school at the University of Utah, he graduated in 2014, spent a "The positive side is that challenges now seem smaller," he said. "Katrina put every -

Morgan Hawkins was holed up at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans. Marooned in a murky, debris-filled sea of alligator-infested floodwater, he was eventually rescued. But with his transcripts lost in the TROJANALITY of the California Women's Film

Swimfluential" for his innovative ideas and practices with other cities around the world.

The U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Fossil Energy appointed SAMUEL JOLIS FRIEDMANN (B.S., geology, '96) as supervisor, assistant secretary for clean coal. He was previously chief technology officer at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

The International Municipal Law- yers Association hosted a panel discussion, "Managing Change in the Practice of Law," in association with the American Bar Foundation.

Many alumni were invited to attend the frontline scholars Inside from cover / photo / photo (left to right) Jennifer (nichols) kearns (B.A., political science, '95; Ph.D., psychological science, '11) received a CAREER grant. She is an assistant professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

SENIOR ALUMNI NEWS FOR CONSIDERATION TO USC Dornsife's Magazine

High School in Burbank, CA. In October as part of the Women's Voices Theater Festival, Margaret Engel, premiered at the University of California at Los Angeles.

TRoJANALITY Conquering the Big Apple

A respected women’s rights advocate, Sri Lankan-born alumna Penny Abeywardena is New York City’s ambassador to the global community.

Appointed Commissioner for International Affairs by New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio in September 2014, Penny Abeywardena ’00 credits a lecture she attended as an under- graduate for setting her on her career path. "That lecture shifted my entire focus," said Abeywardena, himself a survivor of domestic abuse. "I started interning at Human Rights Watch near USC. That opened my eyes to women’s human rights, which became my main career trajectory.”

A former director of Girls and Women Integration at the Clinton Global Initiative, Abeywardena now serves as the primary liaison between New York City and its diplo- matic community — the world’s largest. Her goal is to facilitate partnerships and collabor - ation between New York’s international community and the city’s many agencies and local communities. She is building a platform from which New York City can exchange innovative ideas and practices with other cities around the world.

Her job also includes managing relationships with high-level representatives of foreign governments, the United Nations and the U.S. State Department.

"I got here, nobody could have planned," she said. “The only thing that makes sense is the consistency of my passion to make a difference.” — J.B.
in Memorium

James Kenneth Angle

Acclaimed in (M., International relations, 75) (27), Minnesota, MO, in 1936, he graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. He received a bachelor of science degree in physics from Tulane University; retired from U.S. Army after 32 years on active duty, founder and director of Systems Health Enterprises.

Paul Mikhail Alajian (Ph.D., philosophy, 98) was a resident of Los Angeles, CA (7/19/96) at age 97; head of the Department of English Language and Literature at Biola University (now titled vice president for academic affairs), Los Angeles, CA (11/15/14) at age 96; president of the Los Angeles County Medical Association (1976-78); and president of the Academy of Medicine in Los Angeles. He practiced medicine and was active in the community for 75 years; director of the J. Paul Alajian Foundation (2000-present).

Jack Charles Collins (B.A., English, 64; J.D., 67) was a resident of San Diego, CA (3/26/15) at age 85; professor at the University of San Diego School of Law; was active in the community for 50 years; and was a supporter of the arts.

Ronald Holden (M.A., economics, 66) was a resident of New York, N.Y. (5/4/15) at age 91; professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison; and was a supporter of the arts.

Karin Harrison Jr. (B.A., political science, 68; J.D., 71) was a resident of Miami, FL (4/20/15) at age 85; a business owner and was active in the community for 40 years; and a supporter of the arts.

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IN MY OPINION

Remaining Present

Financier Akir Gutierrez ’95 finds that growing up near USC has paid a lifetime of dividends.

I grew up in the 1970s and ’80s, a Hispanic boy living in the shadow of USC. One would think that there could be no greater divide. On my side a poor working-class neighborhood; two blocks away, an enclave of students and professors with whom I had little in common. They seemed of a different race, class and educational level.

Those two blocks may have appeared to most as daunting as a castle’s moat. But not to me. I lived in the present — the real world. I chose to see past the obstacles inhabiting that divide to the opportunities that awaited on a campus I knew to be obtainable with enough fortitude.

I was aware of the difference an education could make in my life; my immigrant Nicaraguan parents drilled that value into me — and all of my siblings — from a very young age. University was an important and necessary milestone that would allow us to achieve our potential. It offered our clearest route to realizing the American Dream.

But if attending university was a checkpoint on the road to the dream, the journey started well before that.

My friends, siblings and I saw USC all around us during our childhood. USC could glimpse it — the globe atop the Von KleinSmid Center — from our kitchen window; when we would step out into the street to play; when we went to buy groceries.

The university reached out to us in our elementary school classrooms through its students, some of them from USC Dornsife’s Joint Educational Project. These students would deliver lessons and then they would tell us of the things they were doing and learning at the university.

Lectures, labs, projects, independence — it sounded awesome. The students always said USC was for us, too. That we, on the other side of the moat, could be there. Study hard and stay focused, which in retrospect I interpret as staying present, staying ready.

A group of us in the neighborhood took advantage of the offerings USC held for us — sports camps, the open campus, the fields, Heritage Hall. We would even sell programs at the Coliseum during football games. There, Trojans would buy us out of our wares and then invite us to join in the festivities. They would demand to know where we were going to college.

My answer was always clear: “USC.”

I worked hard through elementary and middle schools, earning a scholarship to a prestigious college-prep high school. Those were the days of the Cold War, after all, and I wanted to understand the world I lived in — to remain present. When representatives from USC visited my junior class, I sat at the front of the group, eager to learn how the university might help me stay focused as I ventured into that world.

They spoke about the School of International Relations and how a liberal arts education helps students visualize challenges and find effective solutions. I was a young man eager to make a positive impact, and this was USC offering me a path. My choice was sealed.

My studies in IR proved fortuitous, but in a way I could not have predicted. They exposed me to economics and, ultimately, to finance, and as global events led to the Cold War’s end, I was able to stay present, to stay focused.

I leveraged the knowledge IR had given me to forge a new journey. Four days after graduation, I found myself in San Francisco, embarking on a career in finance. That choice has since led me to New York City — across a moat infinitely larger than that of my childhood.

Here, I remain mindful of what has always been key for me in my journey — being present. With my family, my friends, my colleagues, that focus — that presence — underpins every interaction I have. As much as being a Trojan does. As deeply as the drive to Fight On.

Akir Gutierrez is director of research for Susquehanna Financial Group, a global finance company. He lives in New York City with his wife, Michelle, and children, Maya and Dylan. Gutierrez earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in international relations from USC Dornsife in 1995.

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Life Moment

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