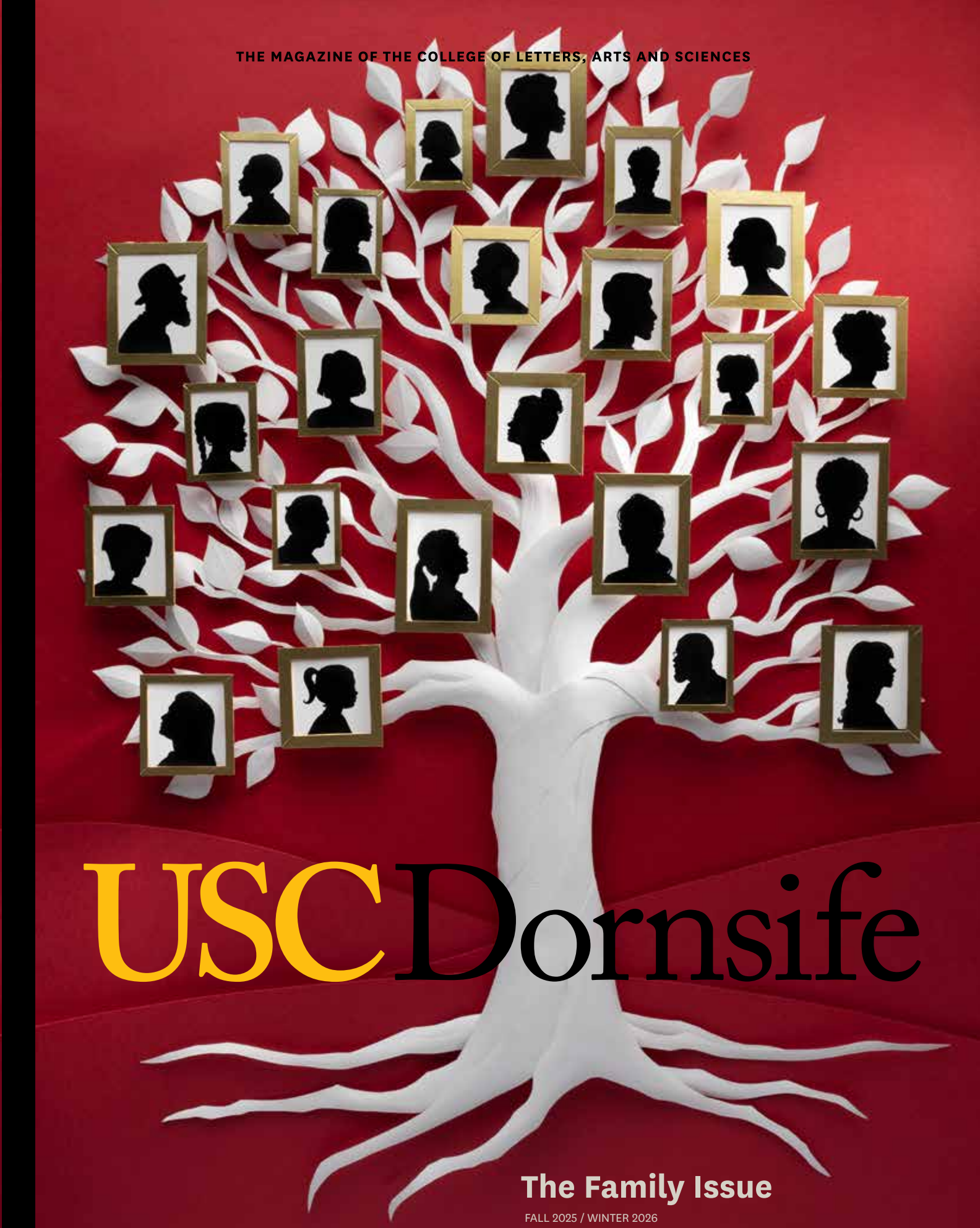
THE MAGAZINE OF THE COLLEGE OF LETTERS, ARTS AND SCIENCES



USC Dornsife

The Family Issue

FALL 2025 / WINTER 2026


UNO
UNO

A THOUSAND WORDS

Family Dynamic

As part of USC's Faculty in Residence program, Brittany Beasley (third from left), associate professor of the practice of psychology, opens the doors of her home in McMorrow Residential College to the students she lives alongside. The program strengthens campus community by bringing faculty into the heart of student residential life, transforming hallways into hubs of mentorship, friendship and everyday support.

A musical-theatre enthusiast, Beasley keeps the calendar packed with shared adventures: local shows, a downtown Los Angeles walking tour and Halloween karaoke. "I love being a mentor and creating a home-away-from-home where students can bond over their passions — and discover new ones," she says.

Enjoying a game night are (from left) students Nnaemeka Opara (computer science and business administration), Olivia Dien, (psychology and fashion) and Abram Garces (sociology.)

02 inside

FALL 2025 / WINTER 2026

"Family is our most intimate and emotional bond. It implies trust, loyalty and identity."

p.30

THEME ILLUSTRATIONS: MARISA WARE

PREVIOUS PAGE PHOTO: OLGA BURYMSKA

p.08

engage

connect

discover

p.12

Learn about the colorful cultural riturals transforming milestones into meaningful celebrations that strengthen family bonds.

How infants and young children come to understand the world and the role that others play in their cognitive growth is at the heart of Henrike Moll's research.

p.14

p.40

"Any class that didn't require you to write — *that* was a class I was interested in. Given my current career, that's pretty ironic."

ROGER LYNCH '85
CEO, CONDÉ NAST

MOLL PHOTO: SIMON KOELBL; ILLUSTRATIONS KLAAS VERPLANKE AND CAROLE HÉNAFF

USC Dornsife MAGAZINE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Susan Bell

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
Letty Avila

SENIOR ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR COMMUNICATION AND MARKETING
Jim Key

ASSOCIATE EDITOR, ALUMNI AND PLANNING
Margaret Crable

WRITER AND EDITOR
Darrin S. Joy

MULTIMEDIA NEWS DIRECTOR
Katie Kim Scott

VIDEOGRAPHER AND PHOTOGRAPHER
Mike Glier

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT
Crisann Smith

CONTRIBUTORS
Alysha Boone, Olga Burymska, Misha Gravenor, Stephen Koenig, Gabriel Sakoda, Daniel P. Smith, Ileana Wachtel, Tomas Weber

DEAN, USC DORNSIFE
James Bullock, Anna H. Bing Dean's Chair

USC DORNSIFE MAGAZINE
Published twice a year by USC Dornsife Office of Communication at the University of Southern California The diverse opinions expressed in *USC Dornsife Magazine* do not necessarily represent the views of the editors, USC Dornsife administration or USC. *USC Dornsife Magazine* welcomes comments from its readers to magazine@dornsife.usc.edu or *USC Dornsife Magazine*, SCT-2400, Los Angeles, CA 90089.

UPDATE YOUR ADDRESS
alumni.usc.edu/stayconnected/

OPT OUT OF PRINT MAGAZINE
communication@dornsife.usc.edu

FSC STAMP HERE

Above: While watching USC beat Michigan 31-13 at the Coliseum on October 11, Dean Bullock met recent art history graduate Emma Tei '25, and her father, Changho Chong '95, '21, who holds master's degrees from USC Viterbi School of Engineering and USC Marshall School of Business.

Above: Students in freshman "Physics Discovery Series" (PHYS 190), taught by Kris Pardo, assistant professor of physics and astronomy, enjoy a visit from Dean Bullock. Below: Bullock stays on after class to chat with first-year physics majors.

TOP PHOTO: COURTESY DEAN BULLOCK INSTAGRAM; CENTER AND LOWER PHOTOS BY VAIDIK VADHAVANA/ EL RODEO / DAILY TROJAN

MEET OUR DEAN

What Sets the College Apart

ASTROPHYSICIST AND FORMER UC IRVINE DEAN JAMES BULLOCK DISCUSSES WHAT DREW HIM TO USC DORNSIFE, THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP — AND WHY ASKING LIFE'S BIGGEST QUESTIONS MATTERS.

BY JIM KEY AND STEPHEN KOENIG

PHOTO: MISHA GRAVENOR

What inspired a leading physicist to take the helm of USC's liberal arts college?
For James Bullock, it was the opportunity to lead an institution renowned not only for its world-class research and societal impact, but also for its interdisciplinary approach to learning — one that prepares students to thrive in both their lives and their careers.

Before becoming a Trojan, Bullock served as dean of the School of Physical Sciences at the University of California, Irvine. Since stepping into his new role as dean of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences on July 1, he has been listening to faculty and staff, connecting with students, and familiarizing himself with the College from the inside out.

What interested you in leading USC Dornsife?
What really excited me is the College's combination of intellectual breadth and shared purpose. We've had multiple Nobel Prize winners, and two of our current professors have Pulitzers. That's impressive. And once I got to know the place, met the faculty, staff and students, it was immediately obvious that people here aren't just doing excellent work — they believe in the mission. That's not something you can create from scratch. It was already here, and I found that incredibly energizing.

It's true that USC Dornsife is the academic heart of the university; that's not just a slogan. We're the engine of discovery, the foundation of the student experience, the place where disciplines collide in meaningful ways. Even amid the challenges we're experiencing, I've seen how people here link arms and move forward together. That kind of resilience and commitment tells me everything I needed to know about the type of community this is.

In a world where jobs and workplaces are changing rapidly, how does a liberal arts education prepare students for success?
If we're being honest, no one really knows what the world will look like 15 years from now. So, the best thing we can do for our students is give them the kind of education that stays perpetually relevant and equips them with the agility to lead through change. That means teaching them how to think critically, communicate clearly, and make decisions based on evidence — whether that evidence is historical, cultural or scientific.

Whatever careers they pursue, including careers that don't currently exist, those skills will never be obsolete.

We're also exploring new ways to formally recognize the transferable skills that USC Dornsife students develop, especially those that have tremendous practical value in the workplace. We want students to leave here with more than foundational degrees that prepare them to thrive well into the future. We also want them to graduate with documented evidence of specific capabilities that bring practical value from day one.

Beyond preparing students for career success, do you think there's a deeper role the liberal arts play in our lives and in society?
Without question. In today's society, we often define progress in terms of curing diseases, improving technology, building more sustainable energy systems, etc. The liberal arts are essential to all of that. They provide the context, ethical grounding and creative thinking that make those breakthroughs possible and impactful. Beyond that, they help us grapple with some of life's biggest questions — questions about meaning, morality and our place in the world.

So, while we're inventing new cures and addressing climate change, we're also cultivating the human spirit. That's what the liberal arts make possible.

> "The best thing we can do for our students is give them the kind of education that stays perpetually relevant."

What do you see as USC Dornsife's greatest strengths? And what is a strength that this community might not recognize about itself?
First off, the level of talent here is extraordinary. Faculty, staff, students — across the board, we're operating at a very high level. There's intellectual excellence, but also a real commitment to each other and to the mission of the College. That's not something you can take for granted in academia.

And the way I've seen this community respond to challenges is genuinely inspiring. People here don't fracture under pressure. They pull together. That's the kind of environment where people do their best work. It's also the kind of culture I try to foster as a leader: collaborative, steady, and always focused on what we can accomplish together.

That said, I think there's still a lot of excellence that flies under the radar. Sometimes, even within USC Dornsife, we don't realize what's happening just one hallway over. I'd love to see more of that brilliance brought to light, across departments and disciplines.

What excites you most about the role of USC Dornsife in today's world?
We're in one of the world's great global cities, which offers us incredible opportunities. The problems we grapple with here

in Los Angeles are the same challenges — or a preview of the challenges — confronting cities around the world. Rising temperatures, access to clean air and water, inequality, misinformation and cybersecurity, to name just a few.

What helps make USC Dornsife powerful is that we're not just studying those issues, we're exploring solutions. If we can make something work here, there's a good chance it can work in Mumbai, Mexico City or Manila. That's the feedback loop. This region strengthens our relevance globally, and our global perspective makes our local work even stronger.

Of all the challenges the world is facing, what's one that you believe USC Dornsife is especially well-positioned to tackle?
There are many, but one that really resonates with me is sustainability. But I'm not just talking about carbon capture or climate modeling, though those are crucial. I'm talking about the kind of solutions that only emerge when scientists, economists, historians, policy experts and artists are all in the same room, working together. That's where USC Dornsife excels.

When we ignore the cultural and societal dynamics behind a problem — whatever the issue — even the best science can fall flat. That's where the liberal arts come in. We ask not only "Can we?" but also "Should we?" and "How do we make this work for everyone?" Across nearly every department at USC Dornsife, our experts are asking these questions. And when it comes to sustainability, they're helping shift the narrative from doom and gloom to one of hope and possibility.

JAMES BULLOCK
is the 23rd dean of USC Dornsife. He holds the Anna H. Bing Dean's Chair and a faculty appointment in the Department of Physics and Astronomy.

How important is it for scholars to share their expertise beyond academia?
It's incredibly important, especially now, when public trust in institutions is shaky. Scholars have a powerful role to play, not just as researchers or teachers, but as communicators. When someone has a talent for explaining complex ideas in a relatable way, that's something we should celebrate and support.

For a long time, some academics worried that public engagement might make them seem less "serious" in their field. But that perception is shifting — and for good reason. Sharing knowledge beyond the academy isn't just good PR; it's how we help solve real problems and strengthen democracy. USC Dornsife is helping lead that shift. The more we open the door and let people see what we're working on and why it matters, the stronger our society becomes.

As a cosmologist, how has your research shaped the way you see the world?
You can't spend your life studying the structure of the universe without feeling a little humbled. You start to see how small we really are; just a tiny flicker on a rock orbiting a star in a galaxy among billions. And yet, here we are, trying to understand it all. That's kind of beautiful.

What's also fascinating is how the biggest questions about the cosmos often come down to human impulses: curiosity, wonder, imagination. In that way, I think science and the arts have more in common than people realize. They're both ways of seeking truth, just through different lenses.

So, what do you do when you're not working?
Well, I've got a 13-year-old and a 16-year-old. So these days, I mostly try to convince them to hang out with me. It's hit or miss.

I like to swim in the ocean, not competitively or anything. Just jump in and float for a while. It clears my head. I read a lot. And I still spend time on cosmology research when I can. That's the fun part now — research brings me a lot of joy and the chance to work closely with students. It's something I can't see giving up any time soon.

I've also discovered that my daughters are much more excited about me working at USC than they ever were about me being an astrophysicist. So I guess I've finally made it. D

Scan here to learn more about Dean Bullock.

PHOTO: DEAN BULLOCK INSTAGRAM

"The whole idea behind the 10,000 steps was actually a marketing campaign for a company in Japan that developed a pedometer."

DAVID RAICHLEN (BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES, ANTHROPOLOGY) TO THE ***LOS ANGELES TIMES*** ABOUT WHETHER 10,000 STEPS SHOULD BE A LEGITIMATE FITNESS GOAL.

"AS LONG AS WE HAVE THIS HUGE GROUP OF HOUSING-INSECURE RESIDENTS IN L.A., WE'RE GOING TO ALSO BE HIT HARDER BY NATURAL DISASTERS."

KYLA THOMAS (CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RE[illegible] TO THE ***LOS ANGELES DAILY N[illegible]*** HER LABAROMETER SUR\ WILDFIRE DISPLACEMENT

"It's a day-by-day opera, and just like a soap opera, you get relief, then it heats up again."

JONATHAN ARONSON (COMMUNICATIO[illegible] INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS) TO THE ***LOS A*** ON HOW TARIFFS IMPACT LOCAL BUSINESSE

ILLUSTRATIONS: KLAAS VERPLANCKE

"WOW … L.A. TREES ARE KICKING ASS."

WILLIAM BERELSON (COASTAL AND MARINE SYSTEMS, EARTH SCIENCES, ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES, SPATIAL SCIENCES) TO THE ***LOS ANGELES TIMES*** ON SEEING HIS STUDY DATA SHOWING HOW EFFECTIVELY CENTRAL L.A.'S TREES ABSORB CARBON DIOXIDE EMISSIONS.

"We have been here before, and we would be wise to heed history's caution."

WILLIAM DEVERELL (HISTORY, SPATIAL SCIENCES, ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES) IN A ***LOS ANGELES TIMES*** OP-ED REGARDING CALIFORNIA'S HISTORY OF MILITARIZED REACTION TO PEACEFUL PROTESTS.

"Instead of just a choral group in a chapel, now it's a rock group in a mausoleum."

DAVID SLOANE (PUBLIC POLICY, HISTORY) TO ***THE GUARDIAN*** REGARDING THE REVITALIZATION OF CEMETERIES AS COMMUNITY SPACES.

"While improving nutritional literacy is important, food companies also need to be part of the solution — whether through reformulating healthier options or reconsidering how sugary foods are marketed and priced."

TADEJA GRACNER (CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH) TO ***THE WASHINGTON POST*** ON SUGAR INTAKE AND ITS LONG-TERM HEALTH CONSEQUENCES.

IN THE FIELD

Crisis Science

HOW FREE SOIL TESTING IS HELPING FAMILIES REBUILD AFTER L.A. WILDFIRES.

BY ILEANA WACHTEL

After flames swept through California's Pacific Palisades and Altadena communities in January, many residents returned to damaged or destroyed homes, blackened hillsides and an invisible hazard beneath their feet: toxic soil.

Ash and debris from burned buildings can release heavy metals and chemicals that linger long after the flames are out. For families hoping to rebuild, the risk is more than structural. It's about the safety of their yards, their children and their pets.

USC Dornsife scientists quickly mobilized. "After the fires, we immediately began testing soil for lead," says Seth John, associate professor of Earth sciences. "We soon realized there was a tremendous need for residents — and business owners — to have a reliable, affordable way to check their own properties for contamination."

With backing from USC Dornsife Public Exchange and in collaboration with the Keck School of Medicine of USC, the team created Containment Level Evaluation and Analysis for Neighborhoods (CLEAN). The program offers free soil testing, filling a critical gap created when government aid falls short and private testing proves costly.

Collection boxes were placed across burned neighborhoods. "We were inundated — we couldn't test samples fast enough," says project co-lead Sam Silva, assistant professor of Earth sciences.

In June, a $1 million gift from FireAid expanded CLEAN's reach. The program now screens for multiple contaminants and can process samples more efficiently, helping more families and businesses in need.

"This work lays the foundation for how scientists can respond to environmental crises," says project co-lead Josh West, professor of Earth sciences and environmental studies. "It demonstrates what research universities can do when communities are at their most vulnerable."

PHOTO BY NICHOLAS NEUMANN / WRIGLEY INSTITUTE

GROUND ZERO
Earth scientist Seth John collects samples of soil for free testing from an Altadena neighborhood ravaged by the January wildfires.

Learn more about USC's free soil testing program.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SETH JOHN

TAKE SIX

Rite on Time

AROUND THE WORLD, COLORFUL CULTURAL RITUALS TRANSFORM MILESTONES INTO MEANINGFUL CELEBRATIONS, STRENGTHENING BONDS OF FAMILY, TRADITION AND COMMUNITY.

BY MARGARET CRABLE

2 AGRAHADIG/ ATAMHATIK

To celebrate a baby's first tooth, Armenian families sprinkle boiled grains of wheat (symbolizing teeth) on a veil held above the child's head. In a similar manner as Doljabi, the child then selects from special objects to prophesy their future. These traditions symbolizes a fruitful and fortunate life for the child, says Shushan Karapetian, director of the Institute of Armenian Studies.

1 DOLJABI

At a Korean baby's first birthday, guests gather to watch as the child crawls toward a table of symbolic objects — for instance, a pencil for scholarship, thread for longevity or a ball for athletic success. In this charming tradition, the item the child chooses is believed to predict and bless their future, says Sunyoung Park, associate professor of East Asian languages and cultures, and gender and sexuality studies.

3 QUINCEAÑERA

Widely celebrated across Latin America, this lavish party is thrown on a girl's 15th birthday to mark her transition into womanhood. It also serves to strengthen family and community ties. "Among immigrants in the United States, godparents often sponsor key elements — such as the cake — symbolically joining the family in the process," says Xochitl Ruiz, lecturer in anthropology.

ILLUSTRATIONS: CAROLE HÉNAFF

4 POLTERABEND

On the eve of a German wedding, guests gleefully smash porcelain — a ritual originally meant to bring good luck and scare off bad spirits. The couple's job? Sweep up the mess together. "Breaking pottery and then joining forces to clean it up symbolizes the cooperation and shared effort that will define their marriage," says Tok Thompson, professor (teaching) of anthropology.

6 GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY

This term can be traced back to medieval Germany, when husbands presented their wives with a golden wreath to celebrate 50 years of marriage. In the West, 50th wedding anniversaries hold special significance, both for their rarity and for the symbolic weight of the number 50 in our base-10 number system, says Thompson.

5 KANREKI

In many East Asian countries, reaching the age of 60 is considered a symbolic rebirth as it marks a return to one's birth sign in the Chinese zodiac's 60-year cycle. In Japan, this milestone is celebrated as "kanreki." A red vest worn by the honoree is meant to ward off evil, as well as evoke the complexion of a newborn. Friends and family offer toasts for longevity, says Jason Webb, professor (teaching) of comparative literature and East Asian languages and cultures.

"Through ritualized rites of passage, a community witnesses the transformation of the child to adult or the unmarried to the married. Such social events help solidify each new identity as we age."

TOK THOMPSON, PROFESSOR (TEACHING) OF ANTHROPOLOGY

MENTOR

The Sponge Child Myth

BY DANIEL P. SMITH

A common understanding of human development likens young children to sponges — soaking up information, behaviors and experiences from the world around them. Henrike Moll, director of USC Dornsife's Minds in Development Lab (MIDLA), says that metaphor misses the mark. Children, she contends, are far from being passive receptacles — they are active participants in their own growth.

"Children know they need to learn to grow into mature beings. They know they must work to gain skills and knowledge and they know they cannot do it alone," says Moll, professor of psychology and philosophy.

At MIDLA, Moll collaborates with colleagues in philosophy, sociology and education and leads a team of motivated student researchers to explore how young children make sense of their social worlds and how others shape their cognitive development.

While acknowledging the vital role adults play in promoting children's development, Moll urges a move away from the idea of "one-way transmission." Children, she says, yearn to learn, and they drive their own knowledge acquisition.

Her research backs this up. In recent studies, Moll and her team found toddlers consistently asked for help when facing problems they couldn't solve alone. Importantly, they weren't seeking help with simple tasks — they wanted assistance with challenges just beyond their current abilities.

"Children demand knowledge by asking tons of questions and by turning to others when they hit a wall," Moll says.

Her research also finds children understand much more about teaching and learning than previously assumed. By age 4, she says, they not only benefit from others' instruction, they start returning the favor, eagerly sharing what they know about dinosaurs, bugs or Lego bricks with siblings, friends, even adults.

"This shows that children are not simply impressionable or quick to endorse knowledge," says Moll, herself a mother of two youngsters. "They actively contribute to the circulation of knowledge in their communities."

Moll is now exploring a related question: How aware are children of their own need for social learning? One of her goals is to reframe help-seeking, which she says is too often dismissed as a sign of weakness.

"Help-seeking is a clever strategy," she says. "It reflects the self-awareness to recognize your limits and the determination to grow beyond them. That's what fuels an upward spiral of learning."

In a recent study funded by the Caplan Foundation for Early Childhood, Moll's team gave children especially challenging tasks and tracked whether they sought help from a familiar adult. Those who didn't were shown short videos of peers doing just that. The results were clear: After watching another child model help-seeking, the toddlers were far more likely to do the same in subsequent tests.

"By asking questions and turning to others as resources, children don't just take ownership of their learning — they accelerate it," says Moll.

Her ongoing research looks at how children recruit others as tutors and guides to support their personal and intellectual growth.

"We're driven to understand how children think and act as learners and how they chart their path toward confidence and competence," Moll says.

Henrike Moll studies how infants and young children come to understand the world and the role that others play in their cognitive growth.

PHOTOGRAPHY: SIMON KOELBL

PHOTO: MIKE GLIER

MENTEE

Mentorship and AI

A former elementary school teacher, Fanxiao Wani Qiu ’25 joined USC’s Minds in Development Lab in 2021 while pursuing a PhD in developmental psychology under the direction of Henrike Moll, professor of psychology and philosophy. Her dissertation, which she successfully defended last May, examined how children understand the act of teaching.

What did working with Professor Moll teach you, not just as a researcher, but as a person?

Dr. Moll struck a thoughtful balance between guidance and independence. She was there when I needed her, but she also gave me the freedom to pursue my own research ideas. She emphasized the importance of confidence and resilience in research, and her encouragement helped me see mistakes not as failures, but as valuable parts of the research process.

Why is your research especially relevant today?

As artificial intelligence increasingly shapes children’s lives and education, it raises important questions about how we design learning environments. My research reminds us to center human creativity and innovation — skills that will remain uniquely valuable, even in an AI-driven world. *—D.P.S.*

RESEARCH PULSE

Discover Our Scholars' Latest Research

— FROM SOLVING SCIENTIFIC MYSTERIES TO CREATING MICROSCOPIC TOOLS, INVESTIGATING EVOLUTIONARY PLOT TWISTS AND LEARNING EMPATHY.

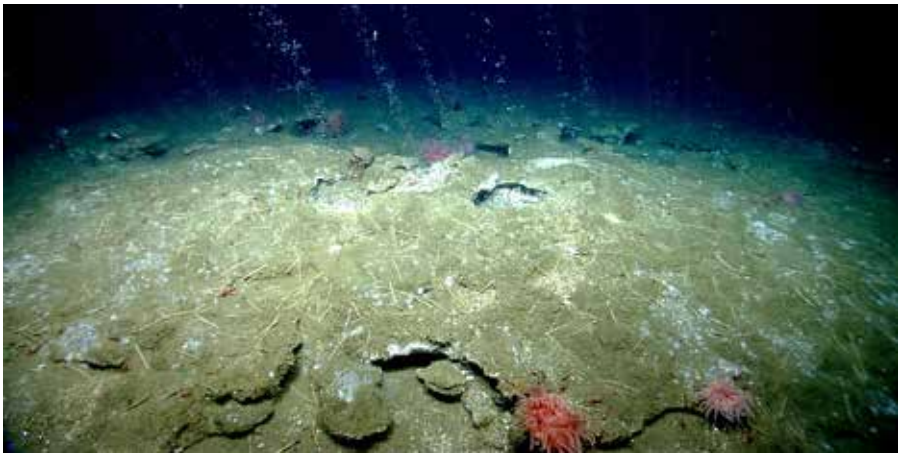
Earth's Deep-Sea Defenders

Far below the ocean's surface, invisible forces are quietly fighting climate change. Microscopic organisms living in the seafloor are consuming methane — a greenhouse gas that's over 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide — before it can escape into the atmosphere.

Now, USC Dornsife scientists have revealed how these methane-consuming microbes work their magic. A team led by Moh El-Naggar, Dean's Professor of Physics and Astronomy and professor of physics and astronomy, chemistry and biological sciences, has uncovered the bioelectric process that enables two distinct species of deep-sea microbes to collaborate in neutralizing methane.

Working alone, neither organism can consume the gas, but together they form an electrical network that enables them to do so by acting as a microscopic methane filter on the ocean floor.

This discovery not only solves a long-standing scientific mystery but could also inform future strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It's a striking example of how life in one of Earth's most extreme environments has evolved in surprising ways to protect the planet we all share.



Honey, We Shrunk the Lab

A new device smaller than a speck of dust could one day drive next-generation tech — in science, medicine, security and beyond — all while using a fraction of the energy today's machines consume.

Working with fellow scientists at Cornell University, USC Dornsife's Kelly Luo, Gabilan Assistant Professor of Physics and Astronomy, Chemistry and Chemical Engineering and Materials Science, created a microscopic tool that can detect and control magnetic signals in electrons using only electrical current — without lasers or oversized magnets.

The breakthrough, reported in *Science*, could enable faster, ultra-secure wireless communication, significantly sharper medical imaging and improved airport security scanners — all while consuming dramatically less energy. And researchers say that's just the beginning: Systems that once relied on room-sized machines could eventually run on tools just atoms thick.

IMAGE SOURCE: NOAA OFFICE OF OCEAN EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH; MARGARET CRABLE VIA GOOGLE GEMINI; PHOTO: MIKE GLIER
ON FACING PAGE: PHOTOS: NICHOLAS NEUMANN AND KARL HIGGINS / WRIGLEY INSTITUTE; ILLUSTRATION: LETTY AVILA, IMAGE SOURCE: ISTOCK

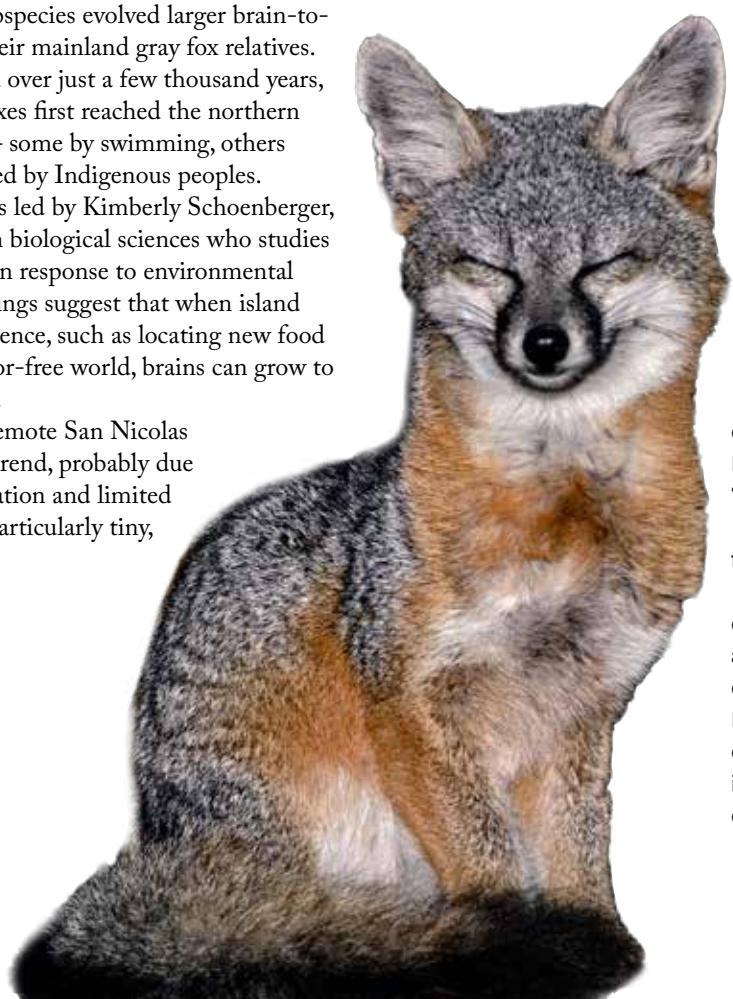
Evolution Outfoxed

Foxes living on Southern California's Channel Islands have pulled off an evolutionary plot twist: Their brains have got bigger, not smaller. That according to new study findings that challenge long-held beliefs about evolution on islands.

By scanning more than 250 skulls from museum collections — including the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County — researchers found that five out of six island fox subspecies evolved larger brain-to-body ratios than their mainland gray fox relatives. The shift happened over just a few thousand years, beginning when foxes first reached the northern Channel Islands — some by swimming, others probably transported by Indigenous peoples.

The research was led by Kimberly Schoenberger, a PhD candidate in biological sciences who studies how brains evolve in response to environmental pressures. Her findings suggest that when island life rewards intelligence, such as locating new food sources in a predator-free world, brains can grow to meet the challenge.

Only foxes on remote San Nicolas Island bucked the trend, probably due to the extreme isolation and limited resources of their particularly tiny, windswept home.



Pavlov's Heart

Can empathy be learned? Researchers say yes — if our brains learn to link others' joy to personal reward.

In a series of experiments published in *Psychological Science*, study participants watched a cartoon character experience the emotional highs and lows that might be felt when playing with a dog or falling off a bike. After each scene, a number on screen went up or down — reflecting a gain or loss of points for the participant.

Over time, those who gained points when the character was happy began to associate its emotions with reward. Later, even without any points involved, participants reported stronger feelings of empathy toward the character.

In a final test, participants chose digital gift cards for the character — sometimes giving up points to select a gift it would prefer. Those who had linked the character's happiness with reward were more likely to make generous choices, even if it cost them points.

"It's a social twist on Pavlov's classic experiment," says lead researcher Leor Hackel, assistant professor of psychology. "Just as a dog learns to salivate at the sound of a bell, our brains may learn to feel good when someone else is happy."

This research sheds light on how environments, such as classrooms, families and teams that link others' joy to our own, can nurture genuine compassion. It has implications that go beyond human connection, too — even offering insights into designing AI that responds with emotional intelligence.

ARTWORK BY MARISA WARE

The Circles We Keep

We equate families with love, and in the best of worlds, that is true. But families can also bring hurt, jealousy, anger. As comedian George Burns quipped, "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city."

The old saying "blood is thicker than water" doesn't always hold. Depending on the circumstances, sometimes the bonds we choose can prove stronger — and truer — than those we inherit.

As an only child of older parents, who in the 1960s counted as positively elderly and whose three siblings each also produced only children, my own family is tiny. It's not hard to understand why a chosen family composed of dear friends is so important to me — relationships that often feel as close (at least in my heart and imagination, though how would I know?) as the siblings I've never had.

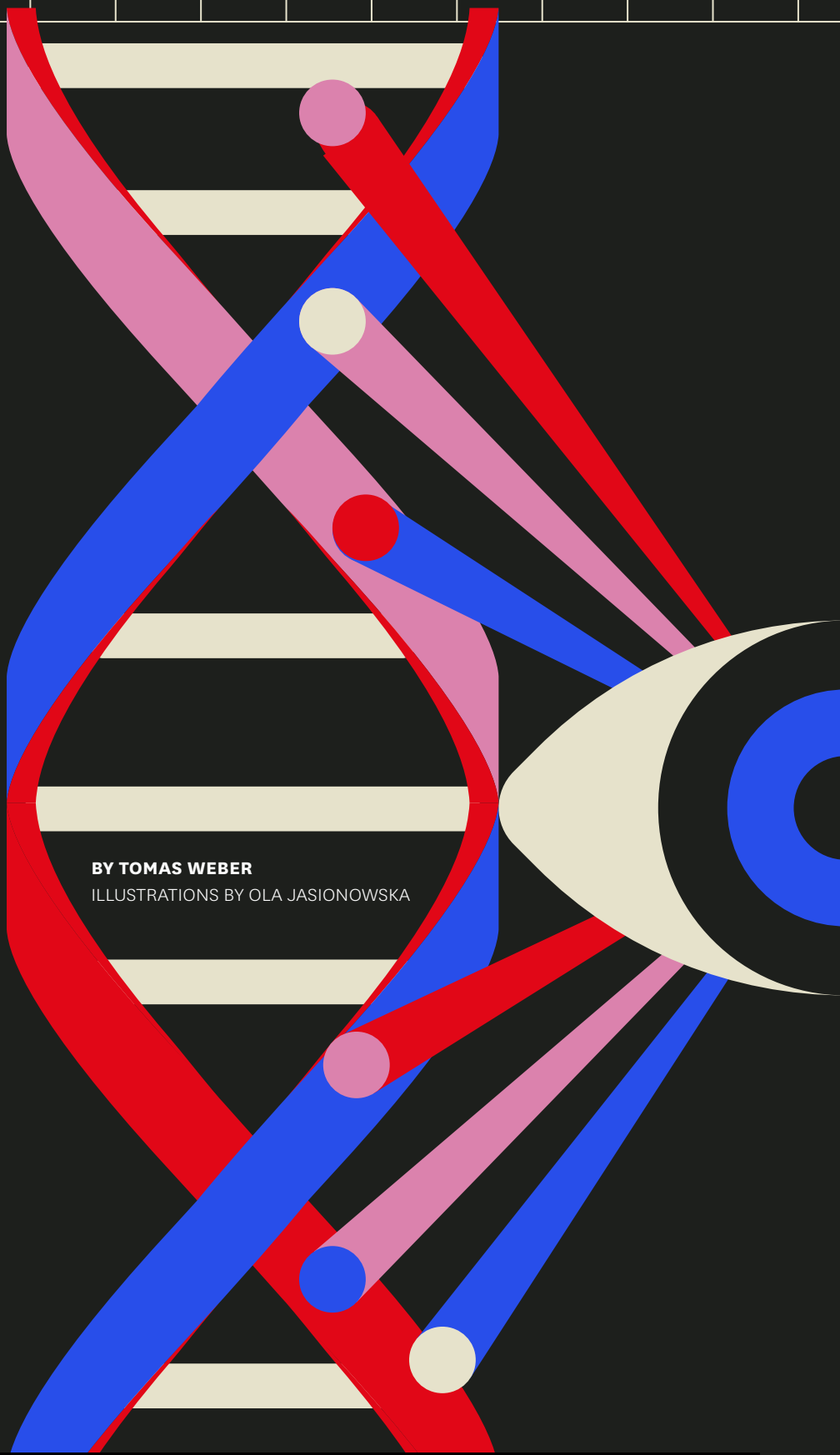
In this issue, we touch on the topic of chosen family as we explore our scholars' pioneering research on family through the lenses of neurobiology, psychology, economics and policy. We examine the far-reaching implications of the accidental creation of what amounts to a national DNA database and challenge the myths about what DNA can truly reveal. We meet generations who connect to the Trojan Family through USC Dornsife's Joint Educational Project. We also consider the universal power of family-based political rhetoric to include — but also exclude. And we hear faculty reveal how their academic journeys were inspired by their own families.

Look closely at this issue and you will find some less immediately obvious family connections woven through it. Our stunning cover, designed for us by artist Marisa Ware, depicts family in all its layered complexity. It also bears a deeper connection to the Trojan Family than is evident at first glance — Ware's grandfather, Arnold Ware, was a professor of biochemistry and pathology at Keck School of Medicine of USC.

Speaking of legacy: Readers who share our fascination with typography may be excited to recognize our theme font for this issue is Garamond — a family of old-style serif typefaces that has been adapted and revived over centuries since its creation by French engraver Claude Garamond in 1532. Five centuries later, it remains a popular choice for its readability in both print and digital use.

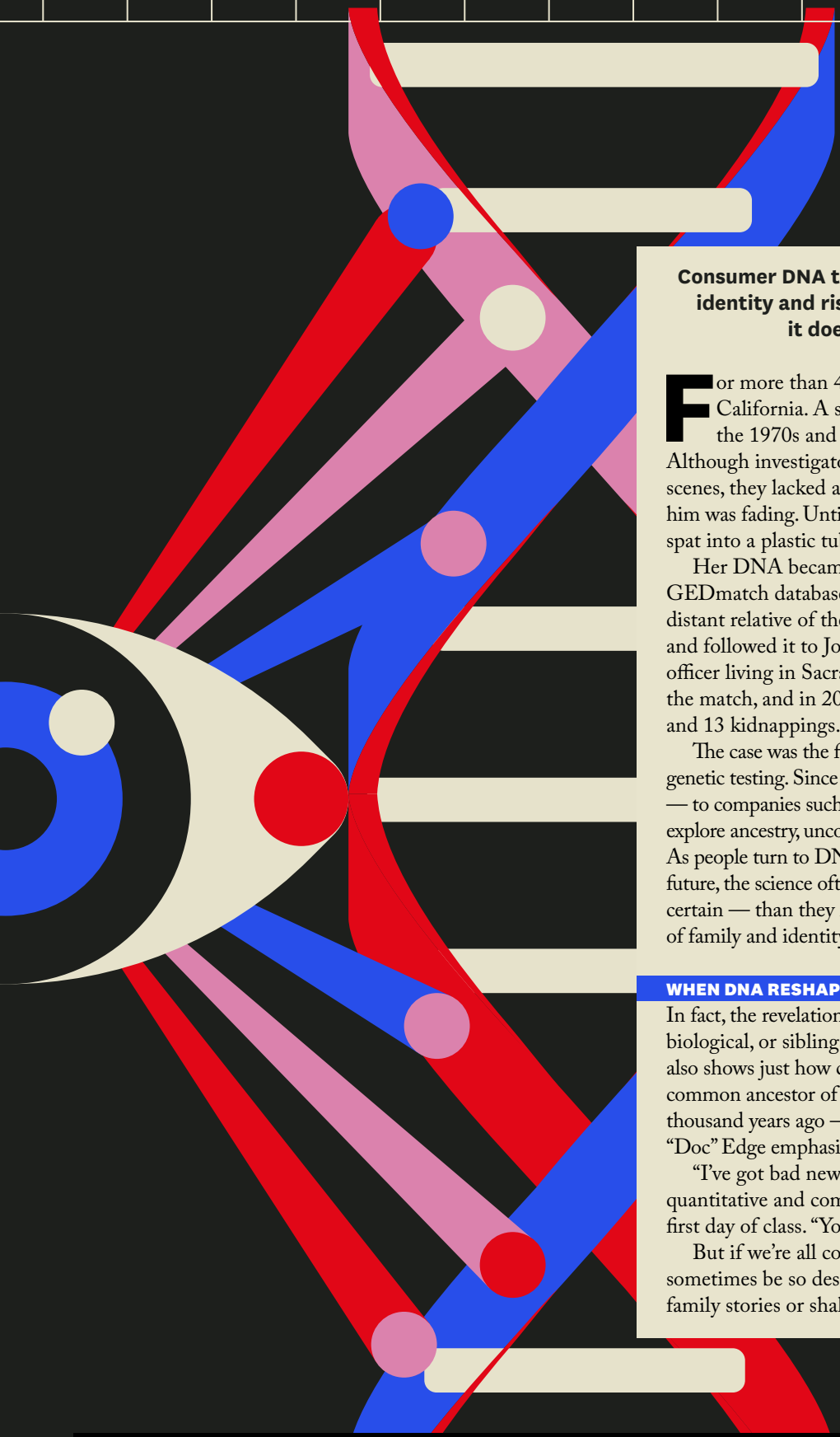
Whether we imagine kinship as rippling, interconnecting circles or as the growth rings of an old oak, reminding us of family trees that record generations and lineage, writer Alex Haley captured the enduring legacy of family beautifully: "In every conceivable manner," he wrote, "the family is link to our past, bridge to our future."

SUSAN BELL *Editor-in-Chief*



BY TOMAS WEBER
ILLUSTRATIONS BY OLA JASIONOWSKA

Who Do You



Think You Are?

Consumer DNA testing is reshaping notions of family, identity and risk. But what it reveals — and what it doesn't — may surprise you.

For more than 40 years, the Golden State Killer haunted California. A serial rapist and murderer active in the 1970s and '80s, he eluded detectives for decades. Although investigators had collected his DNA from the crime scenes, they lacked a match, and by 2018 hope of identifying him was fading. Until a woman — curious about her ancestry — spat into a plastic tube and mailed it to a genealogy company.

Her DNA became the key. Using the publicly available GEDmatch database, investigators discovered she was a distant relative of the killer. They built a sprawling family tree and followed it to Joseph James DeAngelo Jr., a former police officer living in Sacramento. A tissue he discarded confirmed the match, and in 2020, DeAngelo pleaded guilty to 13 murders and 13 kidnappings.

The case was the first high-profile crime solved using consumer genetic testing. Since then, millions have sent in their own samples — to companies such as 23andMe and AncestryDNA — to explore ancestry, uncover health risks or trace long-lost relatives. As people turn to DNA to unlock the stories of their past and future, the science often reveals something messier — and far less certain — than they imagined. In the process, our understanding of family and identity can be upended.

WHEN DNA RESHAPES IDENTITY

In fact, the revelations can be shattering: a parent who isn't biological, or siblings who, suddenly, aren't your own. Yet, DNA also shows just how closely we're all connected. The most recent common ancestor of all humans alive today lived only a few thousand years ago — a point USC Dornsife geneticist Michael "Doc" Edge emphasizes in his genetics class.

"I've got bad news for all of you," Edge, assistant professor of quantitative and computational biology, tells his students on the first day of class. "You're related to me. We're all related."

But if we're all connected, why can uncovering ancestry sometimes be so destabilizing? Why can it unravel cherished family stories or shake a person's sense of self?

POLICE WINDFALL, PRIVACY MINEFIELD

Genetic data has proliferated at an unprecedented scale — and some of it is now searchable online. This development happened quickly, with almost no public debate.

Americans have long opposed the idea of a national DNA database, citing privacy concerns. But under the radar, consumer genetics has created something close to one. Only about 7% of Americans have taken a home DNA test, yet thanks to the mathematics of shared DNA, nearly everyone is now traceable.

"Only around 1% of the population needs to upload their DNA into a database searchable by law enforcement for virtually everyone to be findable," says Edge. "So, a small group of participants has created a de facto national DNA database."

For police, it's a windfall. But it's also a privacy minefield. When one person shares their DNA, they're effectively making decisions on behalf of their entire extended family. Edge's research has shown how bad actors could manipulate these databases, potentially exposing users — and their relatives — to phishing attacks or other malicious actions.

Meanwhile, forensic genealogists — the specialists who build family trees to identify suspects — have been caught dodging database rules. In 2023, a whistleblower revealed that some investigators routinely searched data from people who had explicitly opted out of law enforcement use.

And life insurance companies could, in theory, sift through DNA data to assess medical risks.

There's no evidence this has happened — yet. But there is no law to prevent it. "I think society still doesn't understand the risk landscape," says Edge. "And we're definitely underprepared."

GENES ARE NOT A CRYSTAL BALL

Even as genetic databases expand and researchers find new uses for them, the information DNA can reveal remains limited. Many people imagine genes as a crystal ball, predicting everything from disease risk to intelligence. But the reality is far murkier.

"We're learning that genes don't matter as much as people thought," says Patrick Turley, associate professor (research) of economics, who studies how genes influence health, behavior and social outcomes.

"We used to believe there might be individual genes that have major effects on diabetes, or even IQ. What we know now is very different: Traits are shaped by all our genes working in concert. Millions of genetic markers nudge us in subtle ways, shaping probabilities rather than certainties," says Turley, who directs the Behavioral and Health Genomics Center at USC Dornsife.

"A small group of participants has created a de facto national DNA database."

Consider our health. Some conditions, such as Huntington's disease, stem from a single faulty gene. But most hereditary illnesses involve vast networks of genes, each exerting only the faintest influence. In this chaotic landscape, predicting an individual's risk becomes extraordinarily difficult.

Still, knowing you carry a higher risk than average can be helpful. Doctors already ask about family history; genetic testing can complement that by flagging patients who might benefit from earlier screenings or more frequent monitoring.

But having a genetic risk factor is not a prediction. DNA, Turley says firmly, is not "some mythical force." Tell someone their diabetes risk is 25% instead of 20%, and that small bump can feel like destiny. "People tell themselves, 'I'm a person who is at high-risk for diabetes,'" he says. But in fact, it's a tiny difference that will have a negligible effect.

Even height — often cited as a success story of genetic prediction — reveals the limits of science. Researchers analyzed 5.5 million genomes tied to measured heights, yet their best model could explain less than half of the variation. "It's a huge effort to obtain predictions that, in the end, are simply not that good," says Turley.

The challenge goes deeper: Most genetic datasets come from people of European descent, making predictions less accurate when applied to other populations. The gap widens further for complex traits like intelligence or educational attainment. Using genetics to predict whether someone will graduate high school, Turley explains, "tends not to be useful for predicting a person's individual outcome."

Turley has also studied a new and often controversial frontier: embryo selection. Companies such as San Francisco-based Orchid Health now offer to test and rank embryos according to genetic risk factors. The potential benefit, Turley says, is modest. In the best-case scenario, choosing the "best" embryo from 10 might, for instance, reduce the risk of diabetes from

35% to 30%. Yet companies rarely communicate such caveats to their clients, leading to confusion and overconfidence.

WHEN DNA REWRITES FAMILY

DNA's influence — real or imagined — extends beyond health, touching identity, ancestry and the stories we tell about family.

Turley points to a familiar pattern: People raised to believe they had Native American ancestry discover they have no trace of it in their genome. For someone whose supposed Cherokee heritage shaped their identity — or who suddenly learns the father they love isn't biological — the fallout can be profound.

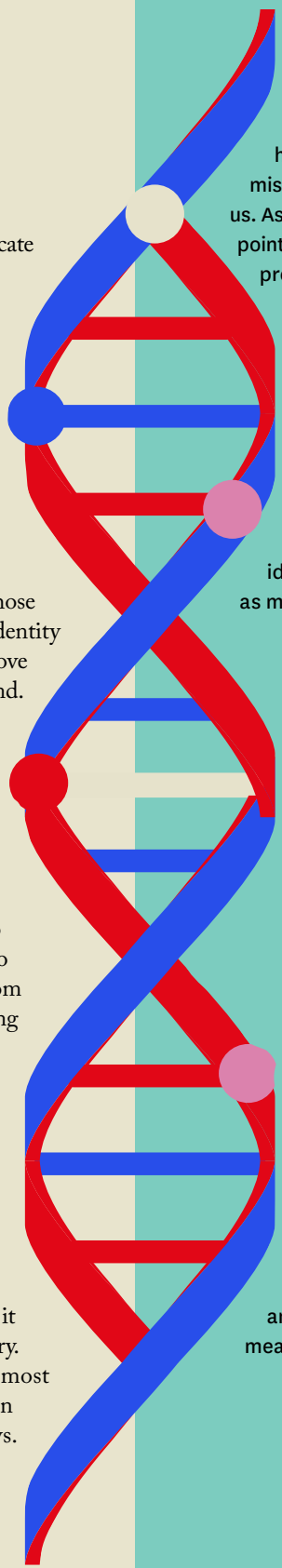
Genetic testing companies know this. They recognize that what genetic genealogists diplomatically call "nonpaternity events" can be emotionally impactful, and some provide referrals to support services when results upend families.

In his genetics class, Edge offers a different frame for family — one meant to soften the authority we sometimes grant to DNA. "When I talk about somebody's mom or dad or their cousin in this class, I'm using it as a shorthand for sources of gametes: sperm and eggs," he says. "In reality, there are many other ways to define a family, and those other definitions are sometimes more meaningful."

On the bonds that truly make a family — the shared experiences, the chosen commitments, the lives lived together — DNA is silent, Edge notes. And while genetic testing promises to reveal who we truly are, it also shows how little of our ancestors we carry.

"You don't share any more DNA with most of your ancestors 12 generations back than you do with a random stranger," Edge says.

Even as genetic databases grow, the ties that bind remain the ones we weave ourselves, strand by strand, across a lifetime. D



DNA Mythbusters

Consumer DNA testing promises to reveal distant relatives, health risks and even personality traits. But the science is often misunderstood, with companies hyping what genes can truly tell us. As geneticist Michael "Doc" Edge and economist Patrick Turley point out, DNA is no oracle. It can't fully convey who we are or predict our future.

OUR EXPERTS DEBUNK FIVE COMMON DNA MYTHS:

1 **GENETICS DEFINE RACE** Race and ethnicity are principally social categories, not biological. Although some genetic variation is associated with the places where one's recent ancestors came from, U.S. Census categories are not a good description of that variation. "Average genetic differences between people who identify as members of different races are not nearly as large as many people imagine," says Edge.

2 **THERE IS A GENE FOR INTELLIGENCE** Traits such as intelligence are shaped by many genes — along with environment, opportunity and life experience. There is no single "intelligence gene," and no gene for personality traits, either.

3 **DNA DETERMINES YOUR FUTURE** Genes can influence behavior and health in certain directions, but they don't dictate outcomes. "DNA isn't destiny," says Turley.

4 **KNOWING YOUR GENES WILL MAKE YOU HEALTHIER** In some cases, genetic testing may backfire. Discovering a lower risk for, say, heart disease could lead someone to adopt a less healthy lifestyle. "A downside to genetic testing is that it could lead people to increase their risk," says Turley.

5 **DNA IS A BIOLOGICAL FAMILY TREE** In fact, our genome offers but a small glimpse into our ancestral past. We inherit only half of each parent's genetic material — and just a fraction of our ancestors' over time. After 12 generations, we may share no measurable DNA with most of our forebears.

Inside the surprising science of how family relationships, home life and policy shape our brains, behavior, physiology and health across generations.

Family Matters — More Than You Think

BY TOMAS WEBER
ILLUSTRATIONS BY NICOLE XU

When psychologist Darby Saxbe began studying how parenthood shapes the brain, she made a seismic discovery that upended a long-held assumption: that only mothers undergo major biological shifts after a child's birth. Her pioneering research on what's now called "dad brain" — the subject of her forthcoming book, *Dad Brain: The New Science of Fatherhood and How It Shapes Men's Lives* — revealed that fatherhood changes men's brains, too.

Saxbe's work is one example of USC Dornsife's diverse, cross-disciplinary research on family life. Through the Center for the Changing Family, which Saxbe founded in 2020 and continues to direct, scholars from 19 disciplines — including psychology, sociology, economics and neuroscience — explore how families influence everything from mental health to our life chances across generations.

Using tools ranging from brain scans and twin studies to international sociological research and economic analysis, these scholars are working to answer a central question: How do families influence who we are — and how can society better support them? Together, their work reveals just how deeply our closest relationships shape our minds, our decisions — even our physiology.

"As cultural expectations for fathers shift, men's biology changes, too."

BIRTH OF "DAD BRAIN"

When Saxbe joined USC Dornsife in 2013, she set out to study how pregnancy affects mothers' brains. But conducting brain scans on pregnant women would have been complex and potentially risky. So she flipped the question. "I thought, 'Why not scan the fathers instead?'" the professor of psychology recalls. Saxbe scanned each father during his partner's pregnancy, and then again six months after their child was born.

What she found surprised her. Regions of the cerebral cortex — areas associated with attention and executive function — had shrunk during the men's transition to parenthood. In brain science, a shrinking cortex can signal specialization: The brain is pruning and refining its connections, becoming more efficient at particular tasks. In this case, the change seemed to prepare fathers to tune in more closely to their babies' needs.

Saxbe also discovered that the more time they spend caring for their infants, the more they lost volume in the cortex. That might sound alarming, but Saxbe is reassuring. She compares the loss of gray matter to editing a draft, streamlining the brain for efficiency and perhaps preparing it to better bond with, and care for, a new child.

Her discovery reframed fatherhood as both a biological and social experience, overturning centuries of thinking and underscoring how family life, in all its forms, is written into our physiology.

But unanswered questions remain. Are fathers' brains evolving because dads now spend more time with their children than men of past generations? Or has this biological shift always been there, waiting to be measured?

The answer isn't clear. At its core, the question reflects a deeper puzzle: How much of family life is hardwired, and how much is learned? Saxbe is sure of one thing — culture and biology are intertwined. "As cultural expectations for fathers shift," she says, "men's biology changes, too."

CHORE WARS

Other USC Dornsife scholars widen the frame even further, looking at how national policies — from family leave to working hours — shape the most intimate, and sometimes the most apparently mundane, details of family life. As sociologist Jennifer Hook has shown, they can even influence who does the dishes.

Hook began exploring the impact of national policies on families more than 20 years ago while working on her PhD, when she set out to answer a stubborn question in American sociology: Why do men do so little housework?

"The conclusion at the time was that we couldn't really explain it," says Hook, the Florence Everline Professor of Sociology. Determined to find an answer, she turned to Europe for clues. Analyzing time-use surveys — questionnaires in which people describe how they spend their time — across 25 countries, Hook found a clear pattern that had nothing to do with laziness or chauvinism: Men did more housework when their workweeks were shorter.

"In the United States, we have notoriously long workweeks," says Hook. "We've structured our institutions to make it harder for men to step in. With no paternity leave in the U.S., and little systemic support, fathers simply have fewer opportunities to help out in the home." In contrast, she found that fathers living in countries with shorter workweeks spent more time with their children, while household chores were more evenly shared.

DOUBLE TAKE: THE TWIN EQUATION

While Hook's research reveals how policy shapes the dynamics of family life, psychologist Laura Baker examines how families themselves influence the individuals within them — and how much of that shaping is influenced by biology.

Few questions are thornier than nature versus nurture in

From Free Love to Postapocalyptic Survival

Chosen families are evolving but remain a cherished — and vital — lifeline for many.

Mention "communal living" and the image that may spring to mind is the free-love, back-to-the-earth hippy communes of the 1960s, complete with bandanas and fringed suede vests. But communal living is once again very much part of the zeitgeist — albeit with a very different look.

Many of the current trend's most ardent proponents are older adults buying property and land together to create their own intentional retirement communities with good friends. Their reasons for banding together to face their later years surrounded by the companionship and care of friends rather than family are driven by expediency and a desire for mutual support, seasoned by a large pinch of — often painful — reality.

"The fact is, you can't always rely on relatives — even your own children — for care," acknowledges culture critic Karen Tongson, professor and chair of gender and sexuality studies.

What was once the family norm — mom, dad and kids under one roof — has become the exception in America.

In place of the traditional nuclear family, new definitions of kinship are flourishing — close-knit households bound by love and friendship that focus on shared responsibility, connection and mutual support.

Fifty years ago, more than two thirds of adults lived in a traditional nuclear family; now less than a third do.

TOGETHER BY CHOICE

One expression of this shift is the rising appeal of communal living. In Los Angeles, the co-living community Treehouse, founded in 2016, offers buildings designed for collaborative lifestyles. Similar intentional communities are popping up across the country, tapping into a renewed appetite for connection.

In parts of Europe, young people are moving into retirement homes and assisted living facilities. These multigenerational models — fueled by reduced or free rent for the young in exchange for time spent with senior residents — are proving a hit with both age groups: Older adults gain companionship, while younger ones value the opportunity to build genuine connections across the generational divide.

The concept of chosen family, though, is nothing new. Many people have spent time living in nonbiological families, whether they realize it or not. College, Tongson notes, is often the first time people live away from home and form support networks that can last a lifetime. Consider, for example, our own Trojan Family — a community bound by support and a shared USC experience. "We're constantly creating chosen family in small ways throughout our lives," Tongson says.

Today, as traditional family structures fade, chosen families are showing up on our screens, where television reflects shifting ideas about society and what family means.

SCREEN REFLECTIONS

Take the sitcom *Modern Family*, which aired from 2009 to 2020. The show follows three diverse, interconnected Los Angeles households, recasting the nuclear family to include adoptive ties, queer relationships and deep friendships. For Tongson, professor of English and American studies and ethnicity, it was a defining sitcom of the Obama years — one that presented "a liberal fantasy of family."

The series captured hopes that the national family might move beyond racial divisions, while exposing audiences to a new normal in which nonbiological connections could be just as meaningful and enduring as traditional ones.

Professor Emerita of Psychology Gayla Margolin sees that message reflected in real life. "Families are put together in all sorts of different ways," she says. "But families of every kind want the same thing: a better life for their kids — security, the basics and the chance to avoid repeating mistakes."

Yet, the optimism of *Modern Family* proved fragile. "That fantasy of repair did not come to fruition," notes Tongson. In today's era of bitter polarization, environmental crises and pandemic trauma, portrayals of nonbiological kinship have shifted. No longer a hopeful metaphor for society, Tongson says, they've become a survival strategy.

SURVIVAL BONDS

It's a shift reflected in some of today's most discussed shows. *The Last of Us* and *Station Eleven* are two examples of a growing number of postapocalyptic stories in which strangers must form makeshift families to overcome catastrophe.

As Tongson notes, the trend for postapocalyptic TV doubles as a metaphor for a divided nation — a reflection of how fractured communities must still find ways to care for one another.

"Many shows now depict people with no ties forced to create new families in order to survive," she says.

This mirrors real life. For many nonbiological families, living together isn't a choice but a necessity — a response to crisis, not a lifestyle trend. For LGBTQ+ people disowned by relatives, chosen families remain essential. For those facing unstable housing, poverty or weak social services, they're a lifeline.

"When support systems fail," Tongson notes, "people create circles of mutual aid to get through difficult times. That's why survival has always been at the heart of chosen families." —*T.W.*

"Every parent … believes nurture is more important than nature — until they have their second child."

families, and Baker has spent decades trying to solve the mystery.

In 2000, she launched the USC Twin Study, following 750 pairs of 9-year-old twins from Los Angeles. Now in its third decade, it remains one of the largest and longest-running studies of its kind. Unlike adoption research, which examines children raised apart, Baker focuses on twins raised together, creating a powerful laboratory for exploring how traits like aggression, ADHD and even psychopathy emerge.

"We study the personalities of both identical and fraternal twins to see how similar they are to one another," says Baker, professor of psychology. "If genetic influences are important, then you would expect to see greater similarities between identical twins, who share virtually all their DNA."

Her findings challenge the widespread assumption that shared environments are the primary drivers of personality. In study after study, identical twins are more alike than fraternal ones — especially when it comes to troubling traits such as low empathy, manipulativeness and psychopathy — suggesting a strong genetic influence.

"For most personality traits," she says, "family similarities can be explained more by genetics than by shared experience."

For parents with more than one child, that might come as little surprise. Siblings often have wildly different personalities despite growing up under the same roof. As Baker wryly notes, "Every parent is an environmentalist — someone who believes nurture is more important than nature — until they have their second child."

Still, she cautions against genetic determinism. A nurturing home environment can protect against harmful traits, just as stress and conflict can amplify genetic predispositions. "You need genes and you need an environment," she says. "Both are crucial."

Her work dovetails with Saxbe's: Biology may set the stage, but family life — our daily interactions, stresses and supports — determines much of the script.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

That interplay between biology and environment is also central to Gayla Margolin's research. The Professor Emerita of Psychology has spent decades studying how key elements of family relationships — especially conflict and communication — shape emotional development. Her work also explores how character traits play out in families and how cycles of conflict can be interrupted.

Since the 1980s, Margolin has analyzed families' daily interactions, beginning with videotaped arguments in the lab and later using smartphones to record real-life moments at home. These snippets helped her track how patterns of conflict and stress escalate or resolve — and how, left unchecked, they can evolve into more serious problems, including violence and child abuse.

As both a clinician and a researcher, Margolin focuses on practical tools, such as communication and conflict resolution skills, that help families shift their dynamics. "As a clinician, I can't change what people grew up with," she says. "But I can help them in their day-to-day, moment-to-moment ways of interacting."

Her research also shows how parents' relationships set the stage for their children's future partnerships. "What a child experiences growing up affects what they bring to relationships as an adult," she says.

The data bears this out. Children who grow up in risky families, with high levels of conflict, emotional and physical abuse, and little support, are more likely to show hostility to their partners later in life. Those patterns can lead to relationship difficulties. Yet, Margolin resists the notion of inevitability.

"Some people believe that it's destiny," she says. "But most people break these cycles."

Her work highlights the tools families use to break free from harmful legacies. Chief among them: better communication. Learning to talk about difficult topics helps reduce tension and prevents destructive patterns. Margolin has seen it happen time and again.

"When we monitor people's physiology while they talk about the hard things," she says, "we can actually see their physiological arousal decline. This decline in arousal between romantic partners can be contagious, especially when partners experience each other as a 'safe haven' as they reveal heartfelt information. That's where change begins."

IT TAKES A ZIP CODE

While Margolin examines family life within the home, economist Ashlesha Datar explores how families interact with the world around them. Her research shows that the neighborhoods children grow up in play a powerful role in determining their health.

As director of the Program for Children and Families at the USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research, Datar studies how both family life and the broader environment influence children's risk of obesity. Research has long shown that kids who live near parks or green spaces tend to be healthier. But Datar questioned whether that was cause or coincidence.

"It's all very correlational," she says. Families who live near a park may already prioritize health or simply have the means to choose such a neighborhood. "It's not as if the park was randomly dropped next to them."

What she wanted was a way to study what happens when families are, in effect, randomly assigned to different neighborhoods — an experiment too impractical to design. But then she remembered her own childhood in a military family. Frequent moves, dictated by postings rather than preferences, created what's known as "a natural experiment."

Analyzing health data from military families, Datar noticed a striking pattern: Moving from a low-obesity area to a high-obesity one increased a family's risk of weight gain — and vice versa.

Her findings make a clear case that neighborhoods influence health. But Datar stresses that, just as genetics or family history aren't destiny, the environment isn't, either. Family matters, too. Teenagers with stronger self-control — a trait influenced by both genes and upbringing — gained less weight than their peers, even in high-risk neighborhoods. Personality acted like armor against the environment.

"And that," she says, "is where family comes back into play — shaping the people we become, and the futures we're able to create." D

TIME WELL SPENT

The Case for Paid Family Leave

Paid family leave allows parents to bond with their children while supporting their development, health and emotional well-being. Countries with generous family leave policies also report higher workforce retention and gender equality.

As a result, paid leave shouldn't be limited to new mothers, experts argue. Psychologist Darby Saxbe's research on "dad brain" is creating awareness that fatherhood deserves far more support than society currently affords it. "Understanding the profound neurobiological changes of fatherhood and knowing how transformative this period can be helps us argue that opportunities such as protected time to bond are highly valuable — and urgently needed," Saxbe says.

At a time of declining birth rates, family leave can also influence family planning. "If raising that first child was easier with government support, people might be more likely to have a second," says sociologist Jennifer Hook. "The most effective way of moving the needle on fertility is to help people follow through on their intentions."

Here we look at how family leave policies vary widely around the world. —*T.W.*

CANADA: Parents share up to 18 months of leave, receiving 55% of pay for the first year.

CHINA: Mandatory 98-day paid maternity leave; many provinces offer 158-day extensions. Paternity leave: 15 days paid.

GERMANY: Parents receive 14 weeks of fully paid leave, but can share up to three years of leave, partially paid.

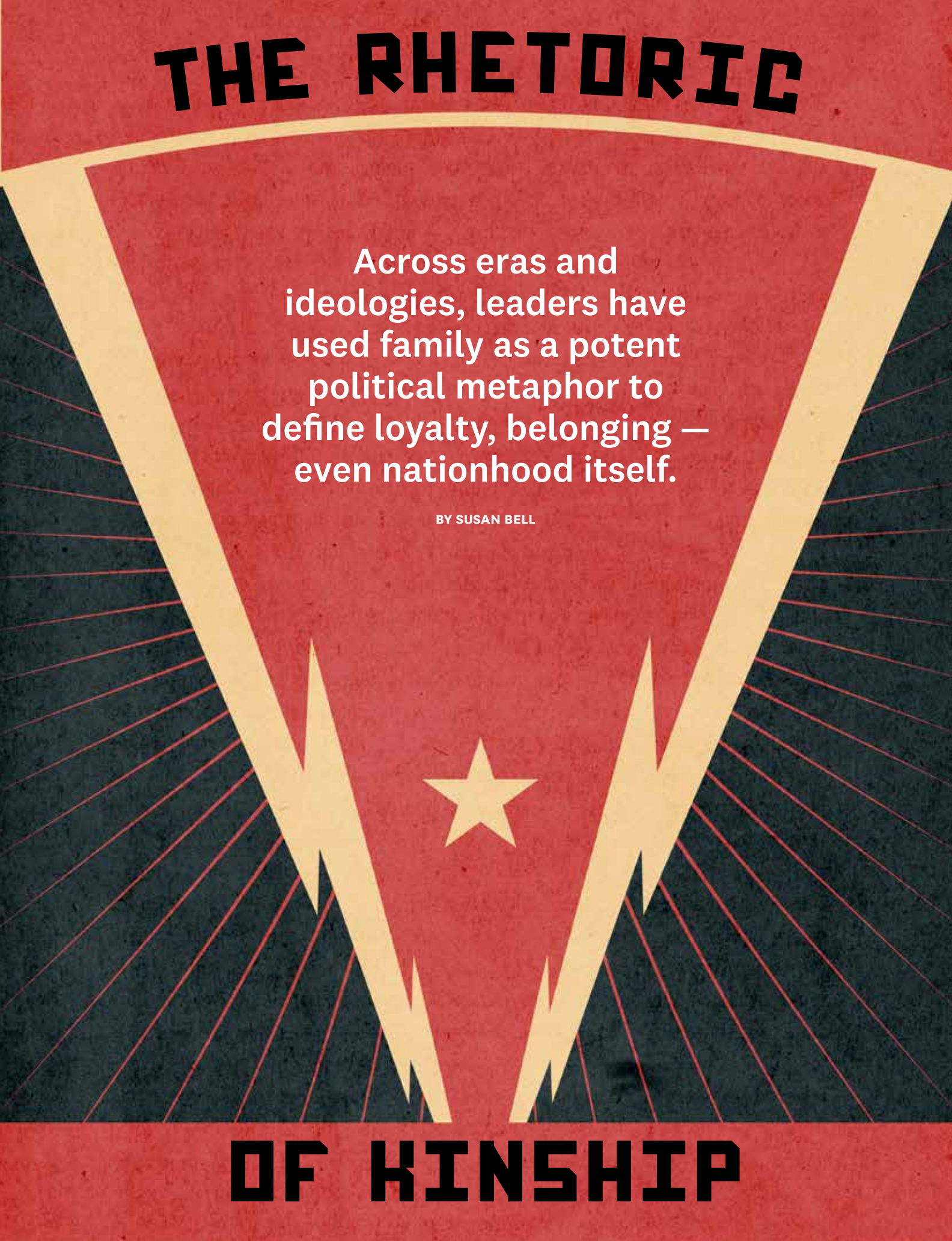
MEXICO: Mothers receive 100% of their salary for six weeks before and six weeks after the birth.

NORWAY: 49 weeks of fully paid parental leave. Each parent gets a set quota to encourage shared caregiving, and the rest can be split however they choose.

UNITED KINGDOM: Parents can share up to 50 weeks total family leave, with 37 weeks paid at a weekly flat amount.

UNITED STATES: No federally mandated family leave. Most states also offer no paid family leave. However, California operates an insurance program offering 70% to 90% of pay for up to eight weeks, and job protection for up to 12 weeks.

THE RHETORIC OF KINSHIP



Across eras and ideologies, leaders have used family as a potent political metaphor to define loyalty, belonging — even nationhood itself.

BY SUSAN BELL

We've all heard it — from history teachers celebrating America's Founding Fathers to wartime movies invoking the Nazi "Fatherland" to politicians on the evening news pledging to defend "family values."

Across cultures and centuries, leaders have turned to family as a powerful and enduring political metaphor. From the earliest monarchies to today's polarized political landscape, the language of kinship remains very much alive. We can trace it across cultures from "Mother Russia" to the affectionate nickname "Tonton" (uncle) given to France's former president François Mitterrand to the widely used honorific "Baba" (father), used to address respected leaders in parts of the Middle East and Africa.

What makes this metaphor so potent and enduring, says Robert Shrum, director of the USC Dornsife Center for the Political Future, is not just its familiarity but its flexibility.

"Using family as metaphor in political rhetoric can have many different layers of meaning," says Shrum, Carmen H. and Louis Warschaw Chair in Practical Politics and professor of the practice of political science. "It can be malevolent and exclusionary, or inspiring and inclusive."

He offers two stark examples. "Think about the Nazis and the phrase 'Fatherland,' which argued that to be a true German, you had to be 'of the blood and the soil.' Then, in contrast, recall Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's Day of Affirmation speech in South Africa: 'Those who live with us are our brothers. … They seek, as do we, nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and in happiness.'"

The idea that Kennedy expresses here "is a very inclusive one that sees the family as the family of humankind" Shrum says.

WHEN KINSHIP SERVES POWER

Democracies and autocracies alike draw on the language of family — but for very different ends.

Authoritarians such as Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un frame family as a way to sanctify nationalism, casting their nations as sacred bloodlines that must be defended at all costs and employing family-based rhetoric as a tool to exclude and to justify aggression. Democracies, in contrast, often invoke Founding Fathers or even Founding Mothers to honor shared creation and collective belonging.

From America's earliest days, family metaphors that intertwine God and country have been central to political rhetoric — especially on the conservative right — legitimizing authority and appealing to emotional unity.

"The term 'Mother Russia,'" Shrum notes, "is a call to Imperial Russia — an invitation to see the nation as sacred in and of itself, justified in doing whatever it wants for its own glory, including the belief that Ukraine must belong to it."

Invoking family in politics has long served to forge identity, justify power and mobilize citizens — for better or worse. "It can be deployed to advance our best ideals," Shrum adds, "or to appeal to the darker impulses of the human spirit."

AN ENDURING METAPHOR

Why is the language of family such a persistent and powerful force across political divides? Because it works.

"Family is our most intimate and emotional bond," says Steve Ross, Dean's Professor of History. "It implies trust, loyalty and identity."

Shrum agrees, arguing that its universal relevance and resonance give the metaphor exceptional power. "Family is central to everyone's life," he says. "People think not just with their heads but with their hearts. Even if someone never marries or has children, they were still born into a family. It's no surprise that the theme appears so often in political rhetoric."

WHEN KINSHIP BECOMES DANGEROUS

The same language that binds can also divide. Family metaphors become perilous when they draw lines between who belongs — and who doesn't.

Shrum describes the fact that family metaphors in political rhetoric are often used as exclusionary or "othering" tactics as "a misuse of the metaphor" — one that persists through history.

"It's happening today with Putin. It went on 80 years ago with the Nazis," he says. "And it's a choice, not an inevitability. Like all language, a family metaphor can either enrich and lift our vision or pollute and sour our view of the world."

Such rhetoric also naturalizes political authority, making power seem inherited rather than earned. Some of these tropes are very old — Mother Russia, the Fatherland — so politicians turn to them instinctively, Shrum notes.

"Political leaders have often been cast as father figures — protective yet disciplinary, channeling hierarchies of obedience, duty and dependence," says Ross, Distinguished Professor of History and author of *Hitler in Los Angeles*. "Many still frame themselves as parental figures, while their citizens are cast as obedient children."

Still, the same imagery can express a radically different ideal. "In other cases," Shrum says, "family metaphors echo the parable of the Good Samaritan — that all of us are brothers and sisters, bound by an obligation to one another. That's a call to our best selves."

"There's a huge difference," he adds, "between believing America is an idea that welcomes anyone who shares its values, and insisting it is primarily — or even exclusively — simply a place and that it belongs only to those born here."

EXPANDING THE CIRCLE

Shrum points to Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and Presidents John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama as leaders who spoke of the human family, not just the American one. But, he adds, inclusive rhetoric isn't confined to the political left.

"Ronald Reagan gave a terrific speech at the end of his presidency about immigrants enriching America," Shrum recalls, "echoing the idea long voiced by JFK, George McGovern and others that America is an idea, not just a place."

He also cites George W. Bush's PEPFAR initiative, that saved millions of lives in Africa by providing medicine to fight AIDS, as another act of global kinship.

"The real question," Shrum says, "is how broadly we draw the circle. Are we talking about the human family or just *my* family? White American families or all American families? It all comes down to how people choose to define what family means."

Family values, he adds, can be used to exclude those deemed "illegitimate" or to promote empathy and respect for difference.

"I wouldn't discourage a political candidate from using family metaphors just because they're often associated with the right," says Shrum, a veteran Democratic consultant. "That language should never be conceded. All politicians try to reach people's emotions, not just their brains."

THE FAMILY WE CHOOSE

Used wisely, family rhetoric can be a powerful call to empathy and to a kind of

PREVIOUS PAGE: IMAGE SOURCE WIKIMEDIA COMMONS AND ALAMY; THIS PAGE IMAGE SOURCE: ALAMY

caring that reaches beyond the garden gate. "I think of Martin Luther King Jr.'s words," Shrum says. "The beauty of genuine brotherhood and peace is more precious than diamonds or silver or gold."

But Shrum also laments how cynicism often dulls that moral language. "People are now very skeptical of politicians," he says. "In my experience, some leaders genuinely use family rhetoric because they really do want to build a more perfect union, a better democracy, a better society. We shouldn't be wary of that — we should wish for more of it."

In the end, the family metaphor endures because it speaks to both our frailty and our hope. When used with care, it reminds us that belonging isn't something we're born into, it's a choice we make and a bond we build together — one ideally forged in empathy and compassion. D

1. *Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?* World War I British recruitment poster. **2** *Thanks to dear Stalin for a happy childhood!* 1936 Soviet propaganda poster. **3.** Former North Korean leaders Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong-il appear surrounded by children on a 2009 propaganda poster. **4.** Nazi Party 1930s propaganda poster portraying an Aryan family.

IMAGE SOURCE: ALAMY; ST PETER IMAGE SOURCE: THE MET, ROBERT LEHMAN COLLECTION, 1975

The Medieval Roots of "Family Values"

When American politicians speak of "family values," the phrase is often intended to convey a narrow, traditional ideal — one long tied to Judeo-Christian notions of family as fixed and eternal.

But Maya Maskarinec, associate professor of history and classics, reminds us that the family model familiar to many — nuclear, biological and largely self-contained — is itself a modern invention.

"In the Middle Ages," she explains, "family wasn't a tidy bloodline. It was about networks — who you lived near, who you worshipped with, who you claimed as a relative." The familiar image of the patriarchal family tree, with lineage branching neatly through fathers and sons, developed later, alongside rigid systems of inheritance and control of property.

Maskarinec's research explores how powerful families in medieval Rome used saints to elevate their own status. "They claimed descent from holy figures who had lived centuries earlier," she says. "These connections weren't biological — they were symbolic, even geographical. If a saint's shrine stood in their neighborhood, they might infer that he was their ancestor."

In a world where geography became genealogy, sanctity and prestige reinforced one another. "It was a way of rewriting history," Maskarinec notes. "By attaching themselves to saints, families made their power seem ancient and divinely sanctioned."

Her work reveals how "family" has always been a flexible construct, not just a private bond but a potent tool for constructing identity and authority. "Even spiritual communities were imagined as families," she says. "It's a reminder that belonging has always been something we build — not something we simply inherit." —*S.B.*

A Family Album

We reveal how the families of top scholars influenced their research.

By Susan Bell

Above: Natalia Molina's grandmother, Natalia Barraza (fourth from left), and mother, Maria Perea (far left), celebrate at the Nayarit in 1968.

A LEGACY OF BELONGING

For historian **Natalia Molina**, the family stories shared around her aunt's kitchen table were the compass that guided her toward a career exploring race, immigration and belonging.

"I grew up in a family of storytellers," says Molina, a MacArthur Fellow. Many tales focused on her grandmother, Natalia Barraza, a Mexican immigrant who founded the Nayarit — a beloved restaurant in Los Angeles' Echo Park neighborhood that became a refuge for the marginalized, including immigrants and the city's LGBTQ+ community.

"My grandmother strove to build a welcoming community where Latino immigrants could make a new home," Molina says. "She sponsored many herself so they could work at the restaurant and live lives of joy and dignity."

The world Molina experienced growing up, rich with culture and connection, stood in stark contrast to the few, flat portrayals of Latinos that she saw in media and popular culture. "I was inspired to tell stories about Latinos that were more complex and three-dimensional," she says.

At home, education reigned supreme. Her grandmother's mantra — "Get a good education. No one can take that from you" — shaped family priorities. Homework always came before housework, a quiet defiance of traditional gender roles.

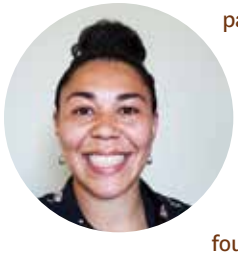
Childhood experiences also sharpened Molina's awareness of race and belonging. On family trips to Mexico to purchase restaurant supplies, she remembers the tension inherent in returning across the United States border. "We would need to perform our American citizenship," she says. "I was asked to sing the national anthem as a child."

Those moments planted a belief that would define her path: "With an education, with a title, you can speak truth to power." That conviction led her into academia, where she blends oral history and archival research to honor her grandmother's legacy.

Molina's book *A Place at the Nayarit* preserves this history, weaving her family's story into the broader fabric of L.A. and reaffirming her commitment to making scholarship resonate far beyond the ivory tower.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATALIA MOLINA; PORTRAIT BY JAMIE PHAM

CODING AND ADVOCACY



Computational biologist **Jazlyn Mooney**'s path to academia was inspired by the pioneering women in her family. Her mother, Sonya McKeown — one of the few women to earn a degree in computer science in the 1990s — taught Mooney to code, giving her daughter the foundational skill at the heart of her future academic career. Her grandmother, Gloria Madrid, who is of Navajo and Mexican descent, was a lifelong educator. She earned a PhD in education and business administration during Mooney's childhood, and modeled advocacy through her dissertation on accessibility in higher education for marginalized students. Other family members also worked in teaching and computing, creating an environment where education, persistence and technical curiosity were the norm.

These legacies shape Mooney's research in computational biology, particularly her work on genealogical ancestry for African Americans and her commitment to ethical genomic research. She emphasizes that science is inseparable from its political and historical contexts. While she was able to trace her mother's lineage back to the early 1500s, her father's side was a different story.

"My father is African American. And in that case, very quickly, we are no longer able to trace anything because of the lack of genealogical records," she says.

In an effort to rectify that, Mooney led a landmark study of African American ancestry, using mathematical and computational analysis of publicly available genetic data.

As a professor, she carries forward her family's values by fostering inclusive classrooms, setting high standards, and encouraging her students to pursue excellence with kindness.

Mooney sees her role as not only advancing science but also mentoring the next generation to be critical, compassionate and unafraid of hard problems. "I think the biggest gift that my family gave me was encouraging me to never say I can't do something, no matter how hard it might be."

Ultimately, she hopes her legacy will mirror those of her mother and grandmother: not in accolades, but in the happiness and success of those she has taught and mentored.

"I think the biggest gift that my family gave me was encouraging me to never say I can't do something, no matter how hard it might be."

Above: Jazlyn Mooney with her mother, Sonya McKeown.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF JAZLYN MOONEY

A LIFELONG QUEST

Physicist **Peter Kuhn** traces the roots of his research career to a moment of intense fear and confusion. He had just turned 17 when his father told him that Kuhn's mother, Rosi, had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She was 48.

"While I had no idea what it really meant, somehow it was clear that everything had changed from one moment to the other," Kuhn says.

Although his mother underwent experimental treatment and survived, her hospital roommate wasn't so fortunate, suffering an early relapse.

"During one of our last conversations, the roommate told me, 'Keep doing what you are doing in physics, and one day you will help other moms to not suffer from this disease anymore,'" Kuhn recalls.

That comment — and the decades of lingering fear and uncertainty his mother endured, wondering if every ache or pain signaled the cancer's return — stayed with him, inspiring him to dedicate his life to cancer research.

As he grew into his vocation as a physicist and cancer researcher, Kuhn remained motivated not only by his mother's survival but by the losses of others, including some of her friends. He became determined to understand why cancer recurs, how it spreads and how detection could be improved. Eleven years ago, that mission brought him to USC to become founding director of the USC Michelson Convergent Science Institute in Cancer.

There, Kuhn's personal history helped shape his pioneering work in "liquid biopsy" technology — a simple blood test designed to detect cancer earlier, monitor its progression, and ease the burden of uncertainty for patients. This minimally invasive alternative to tissue biopsies is now an important tool in managing late-stage cancers. It also holds promise for making screening for new cancers and recurrences more accessible and routine. "Developing a way to screen for cancer across the lifespan was always my ultimate goal," Kuhn says.

Left: Peter Kuhn with his mother, Rosi Kuhn.

KUHN PHOTO: COURTESY OF PETER KUHN

A REFUGEE CHILDHOOD

Born during the Vietnam War, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and University Professor **Viet Thanh Nguyen** escaped Vietnam with his family at age 4, when Saigon fell to the Communists.

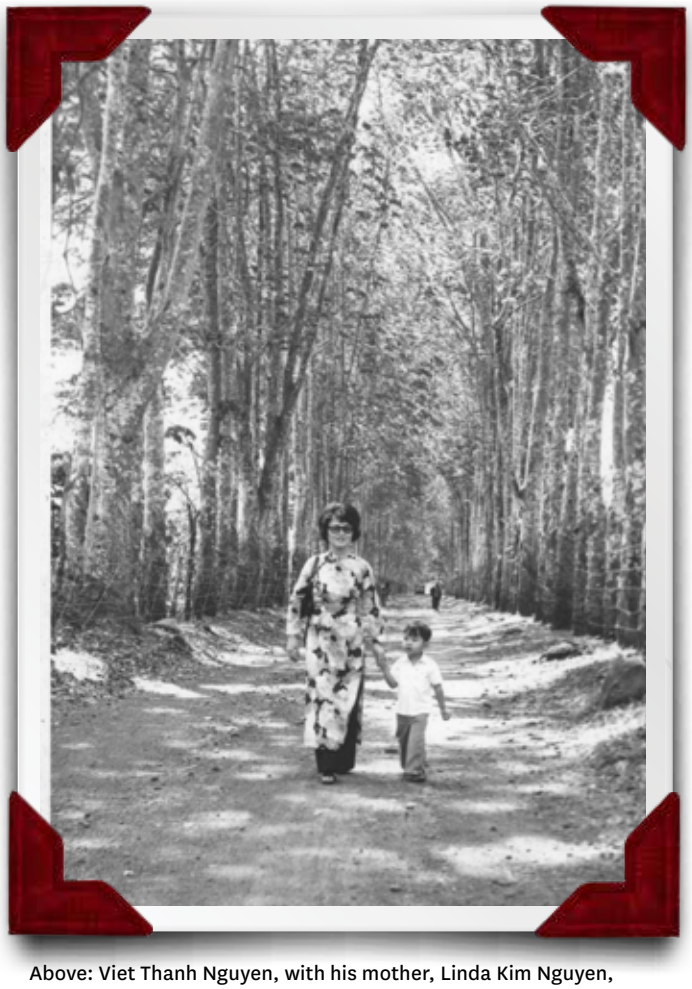
Growing up as a refugee in San Jose, California, where he watched his working-class parents struggle to run a small grocery store, deeply influenced both Nguyen's emotional world and his future writing, including the novel *The Sympathizer* and the books *Nothing Ever Dies* and *The Refugees*.

He describes himself as "an eyewitness to eyewitnesses," shaped not by direct memories of war, but by his parents' trauma and his community's anti-communist politics. Literature first captivated him with its beauty, but refugee history gave it weight. "Beauty had enormous meaning in the context of all the history and suffering," says Nguyen. "Those 13 years of childhood and adolescence, very much shaped by the refugee context, indelibly imprinted on me all kinds of emotional issues that have provided the energy for a lot of my writing."

He hid his literary ambitions from his parents, who nursed expectations that he would study medicine, law or engineering. "For me, being a writer was always the fantasy, while being an academic was the day job," says Nguyen, a MacArthur Fellow. When he chose to pursue a PhD in English, his parents valued the title "doctor" more than the scholarship.

"The only thing that really impressed my parents about me becoming a writer was the fame," he says. "When I won the Pulitzer for *The Sympathizer*, my father rang the next day: 'The villagers in Vietnam called — you won the Pulitzer Prize.'"

Now, Nguyen says he hopes that in the future the evolving lens of age and experience will enable him to revisit his family's legacy from new perspectives. He has already written one memoir, *A Man of Two Faces*, but is a firm believer that childhood memories offer "an endless well of material."



Above: Viet Thanh Nguyen, with his mother, Linda Kim Nguyen, at a rubber plantation in Ban Me Thuot, Vietnam 1973.

FEATURED FACULTY

Natalia Molina, Distinguished Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity and Dean's Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity

Jazlyn Mooney, Gabilan Assistant Professor of Quantitative and Computational Biology

University Professor **Peter Kuhn**, Dean's Professor of Biological Sciences and professor of medicine, biomedical engineering, aerospace and mechanical engineering and director of the USC Michaelson Convergent Science Institute in Cancer

University Professor **Viet Thanh Nguyen**, Aerol Arnold Chair of English and professor of English, American studies and ethnicity and comparative literature

Alison Dundes Renteln, professor of political science, anthropology, public policy and law

FROM FOLKLORE TO POLITICAL FREEDOM

Alison Dundes Renteln, a legal scholar, political scientist and anthropologist, was inspired to become an academic by her late father, Alan Dundes, a professor of anthropology and folklore at the University of California, Berkeley.

"My father was a professor for more than 40 years. From him I learned the great joy of exploring libraries, conducting interdisciplinary research and mentoring students. I also saw the benefits of belonging to a vibrant intellectual community," Renteln says.

She remembers the lively gatherings hosted with university colleagues in their home — a house overflowing with books. "Growing up in an environment where people were so enthusiastic about their research and their ideas influenced me," she says.

Renteln accompanied her father on research trips, living in Denmark for a year and spending three months in Siena, Italy. At 14, she joined him at an international folklore conference in Helsinki, followed by a trip to the former Soviet Union — travels that deepened her early fascination with other cultures.

"My father was strongly opposed to censorship and considered no topic taboo," she says. "When he tried to give out copies of a paper analyzing anti-Soviet jokes and his Russian colleagues were afraid to accept it, that experience sparked my interest in political freedom and human rights, topics on which I continue to focus."

Dundes often used the word "worldview," reminding his daughter that not everyone sees the world through the same cultural lens. Together they coedited a two-volume collection of essays, *Folk Law*. Renteln has written and coedited many other books since, among them *The Cultural Defense, Cultural Law, Multicultural Jurisprudence, Bioethics and Human Rights*, and *International Human Rights: A Survey.*

"From my father, I learned the importance of identifying ethnocentric attitudes, so we can be more compassionate and accepting of people who come from diverse backgrounds," says Renteln, who today researches the legal protection of cultural traditions. "Inspired by my father, I encourage students to reconsider their tacit assumptions, appreciate different points of view and use their research to make the world a better place." D

Right: Alison Dundes Renteln with her father, Alan Dundes.

NGUYEN PHOTOS COURTESY OF VIET THANH NGUYEN; RENTELN PHOTO: COURTESY OF ALISON DUNDES RENTELN

Coming Home: The House on 34th Street

From left to right: Nicole Plancarte, Patricia Perez, Sophia Plancarte, Patricia Perez, Juan Carlos Whyte-Lira and Itzel Whyte-Aguayo.

BY MARGARET CRABLE PHOTOS BY OLGA BURYMSKA

FAMILY LEGACIES
Scan to learn more about JEP's 50 years of neighborhood impact.

Patricia Perez grew up just down the street from USC in the 1990s. She fondly remembers being tutored in math and English by Trojan undergraduates through USC Dornsife's Joint Educational Project (JEP). Now a special education assistant for students with behavioral issues, she recalls accompanying her mother — who worked at USC's School of Early Childhood Education and is also named Patricia Perez — to campus for JEP-hosted potlucks as a child. "I would run around the JEP House," she says with a smile.

Decades later, Perez is watching history repeat itself. Her daughters, Nicole Plancarte, 14, and Sophia Plancarte, 11, have participated in JEP since preschool. They now benefit from several JEP initiatives at their school, the James A. Foshay Learning Center near USC. These included WonderKids, a hands-on STEM education program, and Little Yoginis, which teaches children the basics of yoga.

What began more than 50 years ago as a modest, community service program designed to serve USC's surrounding neighborhoods, JEP has evolved into one of the university's most enduring initiatives — one whose impact spans generations. Today, some 2,000 USC students volunteer annually in nearly 120 K-12 classrooms.

The Plancarte-Perez family exemplifies JEP's multigenerational influence. When her daughters first started WonderKids, both were shy and rarely spoke in class, Perez says. By the end of their WonderKids journey, they were asking questions and had much more confidence when speaking to adults. "JEP has instilled values in my girls and given them tools that they'll use throughout their lives," Perez says.

> "JEP has instilled values in my girls and given them tools that they'll use throughout their lives."

For some Trojan families, volunteering with JEP has also become a multigenerational legacy.

Juan Carlos Whyte-Lira '94, an immigrant from Guatemala whose parents are of Jamaican and Latin American descent, served as a classroom tutor at the Foshay Learning Center in the early '90s. Then majoring in music recording before later switching to sociology, he encouraged his students — many of whom were Black or Latino and came from working-class families — to see USC as a place they belonged. "I would talk to them and say, 'Hey, you guys can make it too, like me,'" says Whyte-Lira, who is now an ownership services specialist at the Los Angeles County Office of the Assessor.

Three decades later, his daughter, Itzel Whyte-Aguayo '25, is following in his footsteps. Also a sociology major, she became a JEP tutor while an undergraduate. Now pursuing a master's in public policy at the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, she says encouraging the young people she tutors to dream big and providing representation for them are also core motivations for her JEP service.

"As a Latina USC student, I hope my presence in these young students' classrooms not only shows them that pursuing college is possible but also affirms that they belong in institutions like USC," she says.

Meanwhile, her father, Whyte-Lira, says JEP provides more than just an opportunity for students to give back. It also offers them a chance to gain a deeper understanding of the neighborhoods that surround USC. Volunteering helps students — who often arrive on campus with little knowledge of South L.A. — build a sense of shared investment in the broader community.

"USC can feel like a bit of an island," he says. "But when students step off campus and into local classrooms, a new world opens up."

That kind of bridge building is central to JEP's mission, says Susan Harris, executive director of JEP.

"When students form real relationships with the community around them, it changes how they see their education — and their responsibility to the world," she says. "That's what JEP is about." D

ALUMNI INSIGHT

From Paperboy to Publishing Powerhouse

Roger Lynch's path from newspaper delivery boy to CEO of Condé Nast took many twists and turns. A physics major, he launched his career in aerospace and defense, moved into banking and then led tech startups before taking the helm of one of the world's most powerful and iconic media companies as its first global CEO. There, he uses his physics training to solve problems with insight, grit and no small measure of courage. What makes him tick?

BY SUSAN BELL

Meet
Roger Lynch

When Roger Lynch '85 was tapped to lead Condé Nast in 2019 — the first global CEO in the media giant's history — the magazine world expected a publishing veteran. Instead, they got a physicist, a rocker and a lifelong outsider with a scientist's talent for translating complexity into strategy.

A former research scientist who once dreamed of shredding in a rock band, Lynch didn't just pursue nonlinear paths — he thrived on them. From his childhood in a working-class Florida home to the executive suites of Silicon Valley and now *Vogue*'s elegant glass offices, his career has been less about glamour and more about pattern recognition, transformation and grit.

THE UNEXPECTED CEO

Nothing in Lynch's family background or modest upbringing predestined him for his phenomenal business success as leader of one of the world's most prestigious global media companies.

The youngest of six, Lynch remembers his early childhood in St. Petersburg, Florida, as a time of "almost perfect freedom," spent mostly barefoot, playing baseball and exploring backroads on his bicycle from dawn to dusk.

His father, a ship's engineer, struggled with alcoholism and was largely absent. His mother, Thérèse, worked as a dental assistant. The couple split when Lynch was in 5th grade and Thérèse moved the family to Baltimore. Lynch says he saw his father only a couple of times after that.

"He was not a very nice man," Lynch says. "But that ended up being a strong motivation for me to never be like him. Instead, I was determined to be a father who was there for my kids, to never become an alcoholic, and to never treat people the way he treated my mother."

By age 10, he was earning money by delivering newspapers and mowing lawns — a first glimpse of the independence, discipline and drive that would shape his career path. While his paper route failed to spark an early interest in publishing, the guitar he bought with his earnings launched a lifelong passion for music.

At home, Lynch's five sisters — the youngest seven years his senior — doted on him so much that each claims to have raised him. But it was Thérèse, their devoted mother, who held the family together, instilling in her children the values of honor, respect and integrity.

Those early lessons shaped not only Lynch's approach to family but also his philosophy as a leader. His mother's unwavering faith in him gave him the confidence to take risks. By the time he was ready for college, Lynch was eager to test himself in new environments.

PHYSICS OF LEADERSHIP

"I thought Los Angeles was the most spectacular place I'd ever seen," he says, recalling the cross-country trip that inspired him to apply to USC. A first-generation college student, he enrolled in aerospace engineering, but his first-ever physics class ignited a new passion, and he soon switched majors.

Lynch quickly developed a love for the mathematical language of physics and the beauty of problem-solving. Tackling challenging problems helped him develop grit, determination and confidence — skills that would prove vital in both his career and his love of playing music.

"Studying physics gave me confidence that while I may not know how to solve a problem, I'll be able to figure it out."

At USC, Lynch honed his ability to focus while also managing a dizzying list of responsibilities. He juggled his course work with part-time jobs and a position at Hughes Aircraft Company to help pay for college, all while rowing crew and playing club lacrosse.

A USC romance brought enduring love: Lynch met his future wife, Cathleen, a communications and international relations major, as they neared graduation. They were engaged three months later.

"We were 21," he says with a grin. "Now we have three children — Cristina, Brennen and Colin — and we're celebrating our 40th anniversary." Colin Lynch joins USC in January when he starts the Post-baccalaureate Premedical Program.

BREAKING THE MOLD AT CONDÉ NAST

After graduating in 1985, Lynch earned an MBA at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business and embarked on a bold, problem-solving career that zigzagged across aerospace, banking and technology. Starting as a technology investment banker at Morgan Stanley, he then made several stops in Europe before launching Sling TV at DISH Network and later leading the music-streaming service Pandora — collecting a pair of Emmys for technical excellence along the way.

By 2019, Condé Nast was searching for a leader to revitalize the company. Lynch, a tech-savvy outsider, stood out.

"The media and publishing industries have been undergoing disruption for over 20 years," he says. "Condé Nast hadn't embraced that and needed someone willing to challenge the status quo."

FROM RIVALRY TO UNITY

Until Lynch's arrival, Condé Nast operated as two separate businesses, with the U.S. arm run from New York and its international counterpart from London. "They were owned by the same family since the 1950s but operated like competitors," Lynch says.

Even the marquee titles like *Vogue* functioned as rivals in each market, with no shared values or global strategies.

Appointed in 2019 as Condé Nast's first global CEO, Lynch was charged with unifying the company across both U.S. and international operations — and restructuring it from the ground up. His biggest challenge? How to unite such a diverse global family in a world of contrasting cultures.

Lynch approached it like a physics problem: Isolate the variables, model a new structure and test the results. His solution? Unite Condé Nast under one global framework, define common values around creativity, excellence and curiosity, and empower each region to express those values in ways that resonate locally.

Fueled by a lifelong passion for playing guitar, Roger Lynch lights up the stage as he shreds with the all-CEO rock group The Merger at a 2023 benefit concert in Denver.

The structural shift was daunting, but Lynch says the bigger challenge was cultural. The fierce independence and focus on local voices that once fueled Condé Nast had become unsustainable. However, Lynch says, "The ideas I had to rectify this were completely antithetical not only to the existing structure, but also to the culture of the company."

His answer was to create local editorial teams that are also part of a global ecosystem, enabling their work to be featured in other markets and paving the way for global collaborations like Vogue World.

The restructuring wasn't painless — sweeping layoffs followed — but Lynch insists the tough approach was necessary. "If we had tried any other method, we'd have been fighting culture battles for five years."

NEW MEDIA

Lynch also moved quickly to meet audiences where they are. When TikTok exploded, Condé Nast had no business model for the platform.

"But we knew our audiences expected our brands to be there because people were already creating content around them," he says. Today, Condé Nast is the largest publisher on TikTok and one of the biggest on YouTube.

"The mistake companies make is starting with what's good for their business and trying to mold customers to fit. A key lesson I learned is that you really have to start with your audience."

He draws a parallel to the music industry's rocky adaptation to streaming. "They fought piracy instead of embracing streaming," he says. "I didn't want Condé Nast to make that mistake."

THE CONDÉ CODE

Lynch's turnaround has been cultural as well as financial. When he arrived, Condé Nast was operating at a loss. Today, it's profitable. But for Lynch, numbers only tell part of the story.

"I'd like Condé Nast to be one of the most admired companies — not just for our work, but as a creative, inclusive global employer that attracts top talent," he says.

Central to that goal is what he calls the Condé Code: a set of aspirational values — creativity, excellence, respect and honesty — developed with employees across the company.

Under Lynch's leadership, Condé Nast has made a big push into digital and global markets, which came with its own challenges.

"We had to build basic digital infrastructure," he says. "Now we're seeing the benefits."

Although technology played a crucial role in his strategy, Lynch bristles at the idea of Condé Nast being labeled a tech company.

"We're a creative company. We're journalists. Technology is a key enabler but what we sell is creativity in our journalism."

LIFE LESSONS

Lynch's success has never come at the expense of his family — a commitment rooted in his early resolve to break his father's cycle.

"Family is the most important thing to me," he says. "One of the strongest motivations in my life is setting an example for my kids. I take it very, very seriously."

That devotion extends to music, his lifelong passion. "Most nights I unwind by playing guitar. I don't ever remember a time I picked one up and didn't feel better afterwards, however difficult a day I've had."

Today, he fulfills his teenage dream of playing on stage by moonlighting as lead guitarist of The Merger, an all-CEO rock band that has raised $8 million for charity.

The key leadership lesson music taught him? "Don't confuse the roles. If you're a CEO, don't be a CEO to your children or to your wife — or to your bandmates, especially if *they're* CEOs."

TROJAN VALUES

Despite a demanding schedule that keeps him traveling half the year, Lynch remains deeply connected to the Trojan Family and USC Dornsife. He serves on the Board of Councilors and delivered the College's 2025 commencement address. "USC gave me a lot," he says. "It took a chance on me, supported me when I changed majors and never rests on its laurels. I like being part of that."

Lynch's story is one of pattern recognition, the courage to reimagine what's possible, and the confidence to enact it. From paperboy to publishing powerhouse, he has built his career — and his life — on a simple, scientific truth he learned as a USC Dornsife physics major: With clarity, creativity and perseverance, it's possible to solve even the most complex problems. D

PHOTO: COURTESY OF ROGER LYNCH

ALUMNI NEWS

1970s

Robert Reiss (BA, Slavic languages and literatures, '71; MD, '75) was named the 2025 Los Angeles Take Steps Honored Hero by the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation.

1980s

Susan Polizzotto (BA, psychology, '89) was selected by The Salvation Army Women's Auxiliary as a 2025 Women of Dedication honoree.

Liane Schirmer (BA, humanities (drama), '80) co-founded the Voces del Teatro Oral History Archive, which utilizes theatre to illustrate the Los Angeles Latinx experience.

Mark Slavkin (BA, political science, '83; MA, political science, '86) was elected board chair for Communities in Schools of Los Angeles.

1990s

David Bowman (BS, geology, '93; PhD, geology, '99) was appointed dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Portland State University.

Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award finalist **Laila Lalami (PhD, linguistics, '97)** published a new novel, *The Dream Hotel*, which was longlisted for the 2025 Women's Prize for Fiction.

Pamela Pearce (BA, psychology, '94) played a key role in the 2025 legislative session in advancing landmark legislation that established Oregon's first statewide strategy for primary substance-use prevention.

Matthew Rifat (BA, political science, philosophy, international relations, '91) was ordained a permanent deacon in the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego.

Devi Zinzuvadia (BA, English (American literature), '99; MSL '20) was appointed communications director of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission.

2000s

Ava Chin (MA, English, '05; PhD, literature and creative writing, '05) was named a visiting scholar at the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing at Wolfson College, University of Oxford. Her most recent memoir, *Mott Street*, was a PEN Open Book Award finalist.

Janice Rhoshalle Littlejohn (MPW, '08) won two awards in the magazine category at the Los Angeles Press Club's Southern California Journalism Awards for her essay "For Catherine": first place for magazine commentary and third place for race and society reporting. Littlejohn is associate director of the Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities at USC.

Leila Marchbanks (BA, anthropology, '05) was promoted to Equity + Belonging Program chair at Turning Point School in Culver City, CA.

Shveta Mujumdar (BA, economics, '00; MA, economics, '00) joined the USC Dornsife Board of Councilors in March. A founding member of lynda.com, she is vice president of corporate development at Intuit and interim head of strategic partnerships at Intuit Ventures.

Warren Wachsberger (BA, economics, '03; BS, business finance, '03; MA, accounting, '04) joined the USC Dornsife Board of Councilors in April. He is the co-founder and CEO of Eldridge Acre Partners, a real assets investment firm that operates in strategic partnership with Eldridge Industries.

Inderpal Randhawa (BS, biological sciences (biochemistry), '97) joined the USC Dornsife Board of Councilors in July. Randhawa is the founder and CEO of The Translational Pulmonary and Immunology Research Center and the Food Allergy Institute (FAI).

Using customized edible gummies, FAI patients are gradually introduced to protein structures similar to those in allergens, but with the more harmful parts reduced. According to Randhawa, this enables patients to safely develop a tolerance over time, and he says his institute has put some 15,000 patients into remission from severe allergic reactions using this method.

Randhawa is also the founder of B.A.R.I.C. Data Loop, a system used to streamline patient data. He is the medical director of the Pediatric Pulmonary Institute and of Clinical Immunology and Allergy at Miller Children's and Women's Hospital in Long Beach, CA.

2010s

An Enduring Ethos

Growing up, **Justin Benjamin (BS, environmental studies, '23)** developed an early fascination with animals. At USC Dornsife, he conducted research into animal behavior and morphology and enjoyed dragon boat racing, scanning for dolphins as he rowed.

Before his senior year, Benjamin spent a formative summer working on conservation initiatives with the Catalina Island Conservancy. This experience deepened his commitment to helping natural environments prosper in harmony with the people who depend on them.

Shortly after graduation, Benjamin died peacefully at home due to cardiac arrest. He was preparing to begin his career at Bain & Company, where he hoped to expand his understanding of environmental regulations and sustainability.

The Justin Benjamin Foundation continues his legacy by supporting students in the summer internship program at the USC Wrigley Institute for Environment and Sustainability — helping others pursue the same passion for conservation and environmental stewardship.

RANDHAWA PHOTO COURTESY OF INDERPAL RANDHAWA; BENJAMIN PHOTO COURTESY OF BENJAMIN FAMILY

Esmy Jimenez (BS, environmental studies, '17) earned a Livingston Award for national reporting for her work on the NPR podcast *Lost Patients*.

Dieuwertje Kast (BS, biological sciences, '11; MAT, '14; EdD, '20) was named a 2025 Leader of Impact by Women Impact Tech in recognition of her work with the STEM program at USC Dornsife's Joint Educational Project.

Joyce Watson (BA, history, '11) won the Leonardo Award from the Society for Marketing Professional Services San Antonio in recognition of her excellence in marketing creativity and innovation.

Have a professional achievement to share?

Scan below for your chance to win a $50 USC Bookstore gift card.

IN MEMORIAM

Guiding Vision

GERALD SEGAL SPEARHEADED THE CREATION OF THE LOKER HYDROCARBON RESEARCH INSTITUTE AND RECRUITED SCIENTISTS WHO BECAME NOBEL PRIZE WINNERS.

Former USC Dornsife Dean Gerald "Jerry" Segal, Professor Emeritus of Chemistry, died on Sept. 24. He was 90. Segal's research focused on developing new ways to better understand how molecules behave at the atomic level.

Segal was born in 1934 in Pittsburgh, Penn. He completed his bachelor's degree at Amherst College in 1956 and his PhD in chemistry in 1966 at Carnegie Mellon University.

As a National Science Foundation postdoctoral fellow from 1966 to '67, he conducted research under theoretical chemist John Pople. Their work together contributed to the joint Nobel Prize in Chemistry awarded to Pople in 1998, alongside Walter Kohn of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Segal joined the chemistry department at USC Dornsife in 1967. From 1989 to '93, he served as dean of the College. He received a number of awards during his tenure, including the USC Associates Award for Excellence in Teaching and the USC Raubenheimer Outstanding Senior Faculty Award. He retired in 1998.

Segal had a knack for identifying and recruiting exceptional scientists. In the late 1970s, he facilitated the formation of the Loker Hydrocarbon Research Institute at USC, a move credited with luring George Olah and his research team to USC from Case Western University. In 1994, Olah won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for his advances in hydrocarbon chemistry. It was USC's first Nobel Prize. Segal also played a pivotal role in recruiting Arieh Warshel, Distinguished Professor of Chemistry, who would go on to win the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 2013.

An avid outdoorsman, Segal often took his family along on adventures, such as hiking the narrow trails of Italy's Dolomites, says his son Alexander Segal.

"He looked at challenges with a creatively broad eye. When he saw a cold granite mountain climbing route or an osso buco recipe, he approached them all with the same mindset: 'How do I navigate that?' and then, 'I can't believe I did that.' He was successful more often than not." —*M.C.*

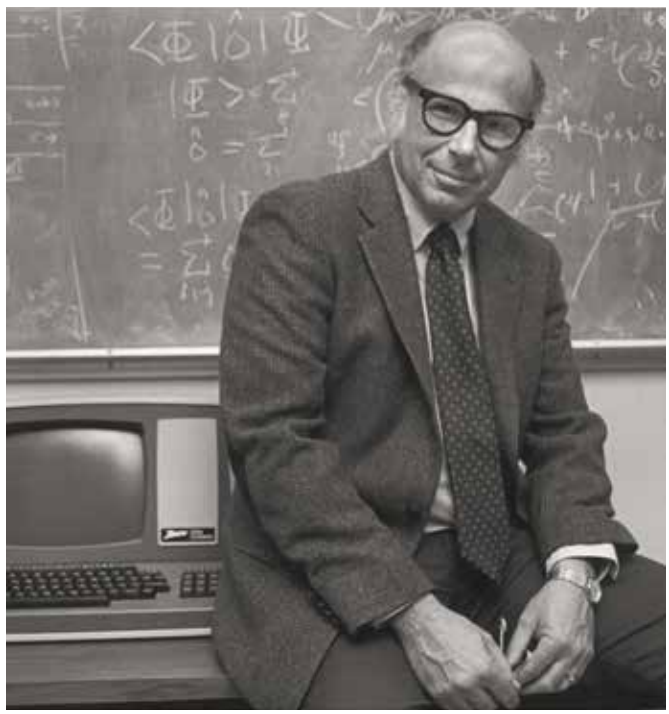


IMAGE SOURCE: USC UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, USC PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHS, COLLECTION NO. 5389.

CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST

Genealogy

BY MICAH OWENS

There are over 108,000 immigration records bearing my last name.
My roots don't reach back to any of them.

Home holds no weight when you're transplanted time and time again
until
you look nothing like
you used to.
I can survive the unknown
but I'll never understand it
or call it my own.
My father moved six times growing up,
and now I have known four countries across two continents:
some full of dust, empty pockets, and bright smiles,
others shiny shoes, masks, and entitlement;
and yet not a single home.

He doesn't remember the legacy, either.
Maybe that's why it wasn't passed down to me.
Maybe that's why I'm 21 and know nothing about who I'm supposed to be,
because I can't build from severed history,
heritage gathering dust
in the graves of our forefathers.

All I have is my father's name,
roots straining behind it,
reaching for nothing.
From the Welsh Owain, it means "young warrior."
I suppose I have been fighting my whole life
to reclaim parts of myself left behind
that prove I come from something
greater than myself.
Because what is the point of a name
if you don't live up to it?

"To forget one's ancestors
is to be a brook without a source,
a tree without a root."
So I will plant myself anew
again,
until the unknown becomes
home,
and my children
have a history
to write themselves into.

Scan to hear Micah Owens read his winning poem.

ABOUT THE WINNER

Micah Owens '26 is a creative writing major who is pursuing an M.A. in literary editing and publishing through USC Dornsife's Progressive Degree Program. Born into a devout Christian family in Adrian, Michigan, he moved to Kenya with his family when he was 10. He spent the next eight years at boarding school there before returning to the United States to attend USC Dornsife.

"Being overseas gave me a better understanding of other perspectives and broadened my worldview," Owens says. "That fostered a desire to write."

WHY USC DORNSIFE?

Owens says he chose USC Dornsife in order to study under renowned writers such as Percival Everett and Robin Coste Lewis.

"I knew I had stories to tell but hadn't found the voice for them, and so I needed to learn from those who had. USC Dornsife was the place for that."

INSPIRATION

His autobiographical poem, "Genealogy," was written in a poetry workshop during his junior year.

"The poem grapples with feeling cut off from your history but finding solace in the fact that you can start the legacy anew," Owens says.

A PROMISING START

Owens' poetry has appeared in USC Dornsife's online student publication, *Palaver Arts Magazine*, while his one-act play, *Death Goes on a Date*, was staged by Brand New Theatre, a USC student theatre organization. After graduating, he plans to pursue a career in publishing.

FROM THE JUDGES

"Micah Owens' 'Genealogy' is a deep, hopeful and far-reaching consideration of identity, reminding us that our roots can guide us, but they don't define us. Our power is in defining ourselves."

DANA JOHNSON, CHAIR OF ENGLISH AND FLORENCE R. SCOTT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

ENTER THE NEXT CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST

Get inspired by the theme of our next issue — "America's 250th Anniversary" — and submit your entry by **March 15** for a chance to have your creative writing published in *USC Dornsife Magazine*.

Open to alumni and students of USC Dornsife, the contest is judged by Dana Johnson, chair of English and Florence R. Scott Professor of English; David Ulin, professor of the practice of English and editor of USC Dornsife's literary magazine *Air/Light*; and Susan Bell, editor-in-chief of *USC Dornsife Magazine*.

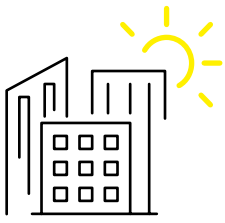
The recipient of more than 50 awards for excellence, the magazine is distributed to 60,000 alumni, faculty, staff, parents and friends of USC Dornsife.

SCAN BELOW FOR DETAILS

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MICAH OWENS

what if … we transformed Los Angeles with lifesaving shade?

A new coalition working to protect Angelenos from dangerous heat before the 2028 Olympics — and for decades to come — is led by USC Dornsife Public Exchange.

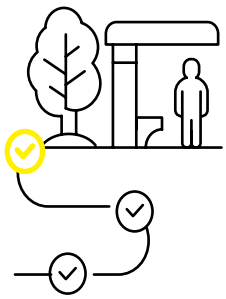


THE CHALLENGE

Los Angeles is heating up. Extreme heat is now the region's deadliest weather-related threat.

Without relief, residents face a greater risk of heat-related illness, increased energy costs and diminished quality of life — especially in neighborhoods with little or no shade.

Providing cover through trees and man-made structures such as canopies is one of the simplest and most effective defenses against extreme heat. While that protection can transform blistering neighborhoods into safe, livable spaces, it's not shared equally. Communities most at risk from extreme heat are often those with the least shade.



THE PLAN

With nine major sporting events on the horizon (including next year's FIFA World Cup, the 2027 Super Bowl and the 2028 Olympics), the region has an unprecedented opportunity to invest in solutions that will protect residents, workers and visitors alike while creating a lasting legacy.

ShadeLA — led by USC Dornsife Public Exchange in collaboration with UCLA, the city and county of Los Angeles, and nonprofits and community groups — is an effort to bring much-needed shade across L.A.

Together, these partners are identifying where shade is most urgently needed, protecting the shade we already have, and cutting through the red tape to add more. By providing tools, guidance and technical support, ShadeLA is also making it easier for residents, businesses, schools and public agencies to be part of the shade movement.

THE IMPACT

Expanding shade isn't just about comfort — it's about survival. Shade can reduce "feels-like" temperatures by as much as 35 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit — a difference that can protect health, save lives and significantly reduce heat-related trips to the emergency room, easing the burden on local hospitals.

The project is working closely with residents, community organizations and policymakers to ensure solutions are not only effective but embraced.

ONCE AND FUTURE TROJANS
During a recent Dornsife Day Trip, alumni, family and guests toured the USC Dornsife Wrigley Marine Science Center on Santa Catalina Island. Trojans of all ages explored laboratory facilities, heard from student researchers and even got a chance to snorkel. Here, alumna Jennifer Polhemus ’79, ’86, and her grandson, Isaac Diaz, learn about sea urchins.

PHOTO: NICK NEUMANN / USC WRIGLEY INSTITUTE

USC Dornsife
Dana and David Dornsife
College of Letters, Arts and Sciences

University of Southern California
SCT-2400
Los Angeles, California 90089

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
University of
Southern California