



# AURORA UNIVERSITY

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DISCOVER WHAT MATTERS. AND BUILD YOUR LIFE AROUND IT.

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**About the Cover**  
Crimi Auditorium on the Aurora campus reflects the vibrant colors of fall.



*Rebecca L. Sherrick*  
**REBECCA L. SHERRICK**  
**PRESIDENT**

Welcome to the 2020–2021 academic year! While classes in Williams Bay and Woodstock are F2F (face-to-face), many Aurora students engage in remote formats. Those programs that include significant clinical components, such as nursing and athletic training, rely upon both options. Numbers in online graduate programs continue to swell as busy parents balance their children’s school schedules with work, family, and personal obligations. Our Spartans are engaged in intensive conditioning workouts, preparing with anticipation for the possibility of competition in the spring. It is fall at AU — a little different for sure — but nonetheless a good and invigorating time on campus.

Recent months required an intensive focus on strategies for protecting the health and welfare of the university family. Summer also brought many reminders that the full promise of America is yet to be realized. The human toll exacted by these twin crises was readily apparent as our students and families struggled to meet routine household expenses. AU responded by pushing federal CARES Act relief dollars out the door quickly. Then we mobilized giving through establishment of the new WeAreOneAU Fund. This effort will continue throughout the year ahead as we put the needs of members of the AU community first. Thank you so much!

As we navigated through the summer, we began also to make our way into the future. Our first feature story introduces you to a constellation of initiatives relating to the growing number of potential college students on the autism spectrum. After years of careful study and preparation, we have identified a number of important goals:

- » First, we want to ready undergraduate and graduate students for emerging careers supporting individuals on the spectrum.
- » Second, we intend to launch new summer programs for neurodiverse high school students, designed to help participants contemplate the possibility of higher education.
- » We look forward next to welcoming our first cohort of college-capable students on the spectrum to the Aurora campus as freshmen.
- » Finally, the university will collaborate with students and their families as well as prospective employers to ensure successful transitions into the workforce.

In all likelihood, our student body already includes a number of students on the spectrum. Our broader initiative will have the added benefit of deepening awareness of the disorder and equipping faculty and staff with the knowledge and understanding necessary to help these students realize their goals and aspirations.

This work comes naturally to us at Aurora University, for ours is a rich tradition of working at the intersection of hope and need. This academic year we will build upon this history in exciting new ways as we move **forward together**.

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# THE BRIDGE TO HOPE

Helping Students With Autism Find Their Path to College and Beyond

Two summers ago, a small group of high school juniors and seniors with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) gathered at Geneva Lake for the first Aurora University camp created specifically for college-bound students on the autism spectrum.

For many of the teenagers it was the first time they had ever lived away from home. They took part in typical summer camp activities: nature walks, canoe rides, art classes, cooking demonstrations, robotics, and coding. But, more importantly, they learned new social skills, practiced living independently, and left with a newfound belief in themselves.

The 10-day summer camp, called the Summer Transitional Enrichment Program, offered a glimpse into what was possible when need meets hope. High school students on the autism spectrum have a pressing need for services in order to attend and succeed in college. AU is offering the hope that students with ASD who seek to earn a college degree can reach their potential.

“As a parent of a very bright child with ASD, I’m always gratified to find people who ‘get’ my kid,” said Amy Lechner, whose son attended the summer camp. “And you folks definitely ‘get it.’”



Making the transition from high school to college is daunting for most teenagers. For individuals with ASD and their families, it can be an intimidating endeavor.

While many of these students have the cognitive ability and desire to succeed in college, communication and social impairments stand in the way. The challenges of navigating new social situations, managing their own schedules, and coping with academic pressure — stressful for any teenager — are magnified for students on the autism spectrum.

According to data released earlier this year from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the rate of ASD diagnosis in the U.S. is one in 54 children, more than double the rate of 1 in 110 children a decade earlier — making ASD the fastest-growing developmental disability in the country.

The U.S. Department of Education released similar findings in March showing that the percentage of American schoolchildren receiving special education services as a result of an autism diagnosis have doubled over the 10 years ending in 2018.

Yet, services for teenagers with ASD come to a virtual halt after high school, just as families need them most. Researchers describe this support deficit as a “services cliff,” because parents often feel as if their children are about to fall off a cliff, with little help in sight.

AU is stepping into the gap with the launch of an autism initiative aimed at serving college-bound students on the autism spectrum. The broad-based program, called Pathways, will provide a bridge for students and their families to make the transition from high school to college and from college to a career. Bolstered by the success of the 2018 summer camp pilot program, AU is developing a complete path for students with ASD, including summer camps and enrichment programs during high school, immersive support services at college, and early career assistance after graduation.

**THE PATHWAYS PROGRAM WILL OFFER A COMPLETE PATH FOR STUDENTS WITH ASD FROM HIGH SCHOOL SUMMER CAMPS TO COLLEGE SUPPORT SERVICES TO EARLY CAREER ASSISTANCE.**

“Our goal at Aurora University is to create a clear pathway for neurodiverse students,” said AU President Rebecca L. Sherrick. “We want to walk at their sides as they navigate the transition from high school to college

and later from the campus to the workplace. We are ready to do this work and find joy in introducing new students to the benefits of higher learning.”

**Welcoming New Populations of Students**

As a private school with a public mission, AU has a long tradition of closing the divide between students’ ability to succeed at college and the obstacles preventing them from seizing the opportunity.

From its founding in the 19th century, AU has been welcoming new populations of learners to higher education. When few women were admitted to college, AU served both men and women. In the years immediately following World War II, the university’s pioneering evening school program allowed returning veterans to blend study with work and family obligations. Later, an expanded version of this program enabled other adult students to do the same.

Today, AU’s enrollment reflects the changing face of America itself. For the past decade, AU has made a concentrated effort to strengthen its ties to the Latino/a community, leading the U.S. Department of Education to recognize AU as a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Meanwhile, almost half of the university’s current undergraduates will be the first generation in their families to earn baccalaureate degrees.

“Society has an increasingly important stake in not only supporting individuals with autism, but also welcoming them into our communities,” said **Brianne Jonathan ’11, MA ’15**, director of AU’s autism initiative. “It would be irresponsible to set aside or apart a portion of our population because of neurological differences. Our goal is not to make autism disappear for our students. Instead, we hope to build a community in which individuals with autism can thrive.”

Autism Speaks, an advocacy group, predicts up to 1.1 million teenagers will enter adulthood and age out of school-based autism services over the next decade. An estimated 44 percent of individuals with ASD have average or above-average IQs, according to the CDC, and a portion of these students are capable of succeeding academically at a university — if only they have the right support.

Few universities offer the support services necessary for students on the autism spectrum to attend and succeed at college. An estimated 60 to 70 colleges nationwide, or less than 2 percent of U.S. colleges and universities, offer some form of services for students with ASD, according to the College Autism Network. Fewer still provide the full-scale, well-rounded individualized assistance needed to shepherd students on the autism spectrum from high school to college and on to a job.

*(continued on page 6)*

## SIX THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT AUTISM

### 1. WHAT IS AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), commonly known as autism, is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges. A diagnosis of autism does not reflect a person’s cognitive ability. The learning and problem-solving abilities of people with ASD span a broad range, from gifted to severely challenged. Individuals with autism may display a great attention to detail and a desire to engage in repetitive tasks, as well as have difficulty processing everyday sensory information. Some people with ASD need a lot of help in their daily lives, and others need less.

### 2. WHO IS AFFECTED?

The number of children and teenagers diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder has increased in the past decade. About one in 54 children born in the U.S. is diagnosed with ASD, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. ASD occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, but is about four times more common among boys than among girls.

### 3. CAN AN INDIVIDUAL WITH AUTISM ATTEND COLLEGE?

Individuals on the autism spectrum have a wide range of cognitive abilities. Many participate in general education, attend advanced and honors courses in high school, and have a strong interest in pursuing a college degree. Yet, there are also many examples of students who, despite having the cognitive ability and desire to succeed in college, struggle with the complexities of the college experience, and later, with the transition to the workforce.

### 4. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE OBSTACLES?

The transition from high school to college is one of life’s biggest challenges. Learning how to live independently in a dorm or

apartment while also managing homework, meals, scheduling, and social interactions is stressful for any college freshman, but can be utterly overwhelming and sometimes debilitating for a student with autism. Most college students on the spectrum have “invisible” struggles, making it difficult for those around them, including professors and peers, to understand or interpret their differences and needs. All of this can lead to a frustrating, scary, and isolating experience that may become almost impossible to manage all alone.

### 5. ARE THERE SUPPORT SERVICES AVAILABLE TO HELP COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH ASD?

There is a marked drop-off in the services available after high school graduation, sometimes referred to as the “services cliff.” This means people with autism are facing the transition from childhood to adulthood with fewer supports than they had through most of their schooling. For many students, these supports are the only way they can attend college. Even though there has been a spike in the number of people diagnosed with autism, few colleges and universities have support programs in place to address the growing need.

### 6. WHAT IS AU DOING TO HELP FILL THE VOID?

Aurora University understands that college is not a stand-alone experience for students, and that it is accompanied by two major transitions — the move from high school to college and the shift from college into the workplace. The new autism initiative at AU offers lengthy and extensive plans to bridge these transitions. Going well beyond providing a menu of support services, AU will offer structured enrichment and support in the key areas of academics, executive functioning, social interactions, and independent living, as students make their way through one of AU’s undergraduate degree programs and discover their pathway to fulfillment and success.

**1 IN 54**

The number of children in the U.S. diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder

**NO. 1**

Autism spectrum disorder is the fastest growing developmental disability in the U.S.

**44%**

Almost half of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder have IQ scores in the average to above-average range

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
2020 Community Report on Autism

“AT AURORA UNIVERSITY, WE SUBSCRIBE TO THE BELIEF THAT NEUROLOGICAL DIFFERENCES ARE TO BE RECOGNIZED AND RESPECTED AS ANY OTHER HUMAN VARIATION.”  
—AU PRESIDENT REBECCA L. SHERRICK

First of Its Kind

When AU Pathways debuts, it will be one of the first programs of its kind in Illinois and will be among the most comprehensive options nationwide.

“We are confident that individuals on the autism spectrum have meaningful contributions to make to society and the world of work,” said President Sherrick. “At Aurora University, we subscribe to the belief that neurological differences are to be recognized and respected as any other human variation.”

The students who will most benefit from AU’s autism initiative are those who first and foremost have a desire to pursue higher education and who meet the AU admission requirements on their own merit. Next, these students will have a diagnosis on the autism spectrum, indicating needs for support with executive functioning, social and emotional skills, and independent living.

The Pathways program recognizes that the college experience is not a stand-alone event in an individual’s life. It is woven into the fabric of important transitions, including the transition out of high school as well as the transition into the workforce. AU’s mission is to provide lengthy, meaningful, and immersive experiences leading up to each of these transitions.

“Change can be difficult for anyone,” said Jonathan. “The challenges with change are often magnified for individuals on the spectrum.”

One of the key components of the Pathways program is getting students familiar with new environments and experiences gradually over time. The program begins when students are in high school, with summer camps and continuing enrichment programs that provide a preview of college life. Students have opportunities for continued exposure to campus life and for conversations with

Pathways staff. Should students choose to pursue college life, they will feel less stress, and the transition will be more comfortable, thanks to these early experiences.

Once students are admitted to AU, they will spend their first two years focused on learning and practicing even more executive functioning, social and emotional development, and independent living skills.

As Pathways students move into their junior and senior years, they will expand their focus to prepare for their next big transition — into the workplace. A career exploration experience while still in college will allow students to connect with workplace professionals to observe, learn, and practice job skills.

These thoughtful and intentionally designed supports during important transitions are meant to provide a gentle easing in and out of life’s biggest adjustments. AU recognizes and understands the anxiety and anticipation involved with change and wants to find ways for Pathways students not only to become more comfortable, but also to thrive during these times.

Sensory-Friendly Design

College life is full of new experiences. For students on the autism spectrum, many of these experiences can contribute to heightened anxiety. Individuals with autism often process sensory input more intensely than others and can experience sensory overload. Certain lights, sounds, tastes, and smells can be overwhelming. At the same time, hyposensitivities, or under-responsiveness, can be a part of ASD, and lead to a need for stimulation.

Sensory regulation is key to both the physical and psychological comfort of individuals with ASD.

For that reason, AU plans to dedicate a portion of a residence hall specifically for AU students on the autism

(continued on page 8)

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

In any social setting, there are covert rules and social norms. In a school setting, these are referred to as the “Hidden Curriculum.” Subtle social cues are often missed or misunderstood by individuals with autism, leading to confusion, frustration, anxiety, and sometimes social isolation.

AU’s Pathways program will provide support for students with ASD to help them navigate the college experience in three areas:

- Executive Functioning:** the mental process that enables the ability to plan, filter distractions, control impulses, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks
- Social/Emotional Development:** the ability to understand and manage emotions, feel and show empathy toward others, and establish positive relationships
- Independent Living Skills:** the basic skills needed for daily living at home, school, and work, and in the community

- At AU, some examples of the Hidden Curriculum could include:
- » What is appropriate participation in class
  - » How loudly to speak in class versus at the library
  - » What are subtle ways to step out of class if I need to
  - » How to approach the professor to discuss a grade
  - » How long to converse with my professor or peers after class
  - » How to choose a partner or group for an assignment
  - » How many texts are too many when it comes to a new friend
  - » When and how to invite someone to hang out
  - » What hygiene habits help others feel comfortable being around me
  - » When it is my turn to shower in the residence halls
  - » How to balance my time between personal or social activities and homework
  - » Which topics to save for discussion with only the people closest to me





spectrum. The area will be “sensory friendly” with pale, cool colors that have been identified as calming and soothing for individuals with ASD, acoustic panels on ceilings and walls that reduce auditory distractions, special lighting, flooring to reduce sound, and patterns that limit visual stimuli.

“Our goal is to help alleviate anxiety in order to allow our students to focus their energy and emotions on a positive college experience,” said Jonathan.

### Big Hearts, Big Opportunities

AU began work in the field of disability studies almost a decade ago with the establishment of a number of helping academic programs and majors.

While the Pathways program is designed to support the current needs and growth of students with autism, it has also been intentionally designed to benefit many other facets of the AU community. By creating an environment in which a more neurodiverse student population can thrive, AU is opening the door to the unique thinking and skill sets that individuals on the spectrum bring to any community.

From the summer camps to the college experience to the workplace, Pathways will offer opportunities for involvement from other academic programs at AU. Students majoring in Social Work, Special Education, Therapeutic Recreation, Human-Animal Studies, Parks and Recreation Leadership, or the new Autism Studies program may volunteer, intern, or apply for student-worker positions serving AU Pathways.

“Having a program like this illustrates not only that we value diversity, but that we also value inclusion,” said Kris Johnson, associate professor of therapeutic recreation and chair of therapeutic recreation and autism studies. “It serves the individuals with autism and their families, while also enhancing the education of all AU students.”

The ultimate goal at AU is to increase the understanding and acceptance of individuals with ASD, said Jonathan.

“AU’s mission is about being an inclusive community and being dedicated to transformative learning,” said Chetna Patel, professor of chemistry and the Smith distinguished chair of the physical sciences department. “This is what we believe in, and we continue to find ways to demonstrate this mission. AU can play a pivotal role at a time when society is looking to educational systems to bring about change. We can inspire and strengthen our communities.”

Tina Fasano recalls the effect that AU’s 2018 summer camp had on her teenage son as he prepared to graduate from high school and find his way as an adult living with ASD. After camp ended, he joined the Special Olympics basketball team, participated in a peer buddy program, gave a speech,

opened a business in his community, and started taking college classes.

“It gave him the confidence to step up and be himself,” said Fasano. “He’s been making his own choices ever since and being his own person. It was the opportunity of a lifetime.”

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## FOUR GOALS OF AU’S AUTISM INITIATIVE



### Train professionals in Autism Studies

AU will prepare undergraduate and graduate students for careers in fields that support individuals on the autism spectrum. A new Autism Studies program will complement existing AU majors including Social Work, Special Education, Therapeutic Recreation, Parks and Recreation Leadership, and Human-Animal Studies.



### Host summer camps for high school students

Through the Pathways Summer Camps and Ongoing Enrichment program, AU will help high school students on the autism spectrum who have a long-term interest in seeking a college degree to take their first steps toward the college experience.



### Offer a four-year college experience

AU will welcome a first cohort of college-capable students on the spectrum to the Aurora campus as freshmen and transfer students.



### Prepare students to enter the workforce

AU will collaborate with students, their families, and prospective employers to ensure AU students on the autism spectrum are prepared for a successful transition from the college experience to a job.



## MEET BRIANNE JONATHAN '11, MA '15, DIRECTOR OF AU'S AUTISM INITIATIVE

### Q: What is your background?

**A:** I have spent over a decade working in the fields of special education and therapy for individuals with special needs. The majority of individuals I have worked with have been on the autism spectrum, ranging from ages 18 months to adulthood. The truth is, for the past 10 years, I have spent more time with people who are on the autism spectrum than with those who are considered neurotypical. It is a field that I somewhat “fell into,” but it did not take me long to fall in love with working with this population.

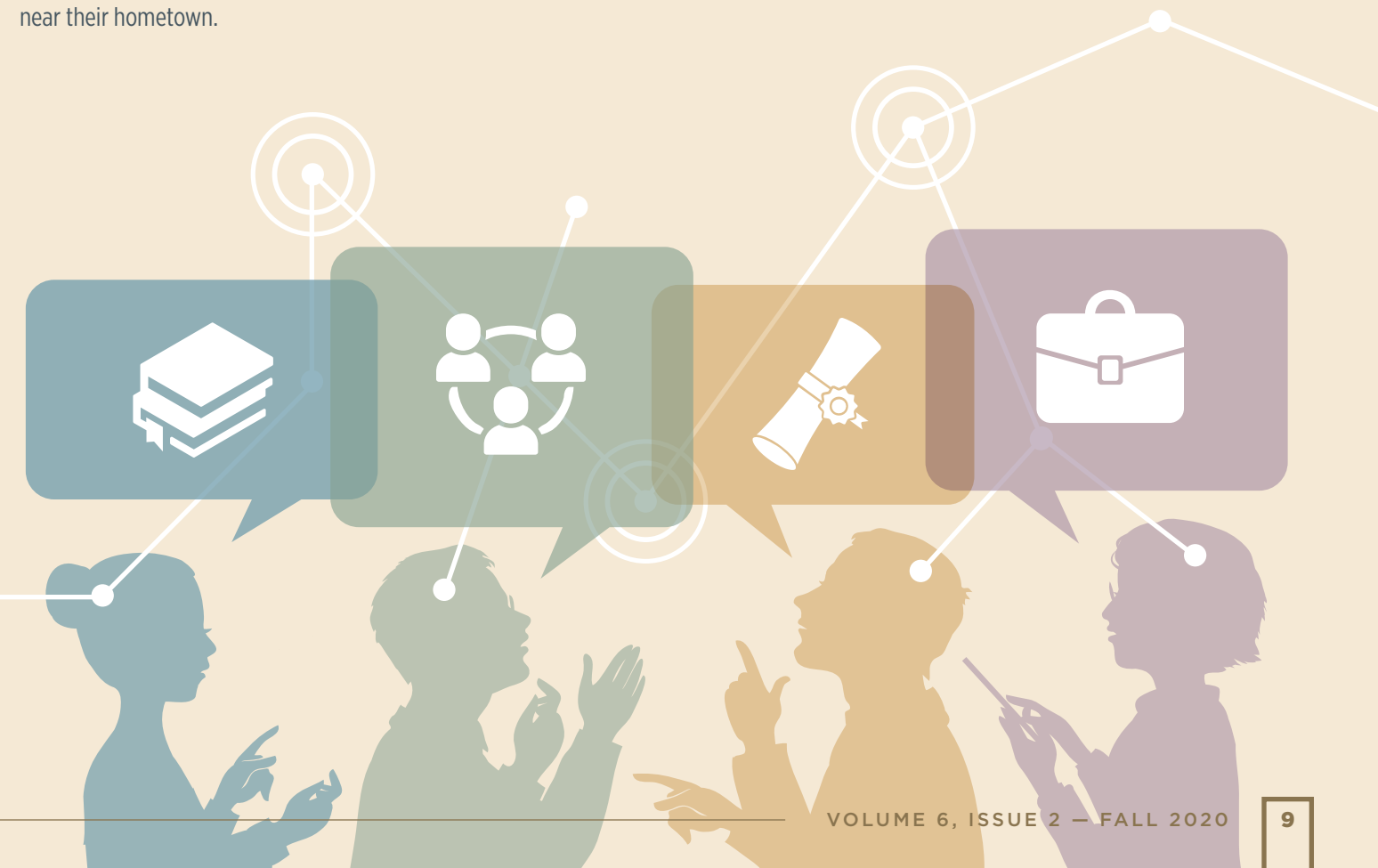
### Q: What drew you to AU’s autism initiative?

**A:** When the concept paper for AU’s autism initiative was first shared with me, my first emotion was elation. I was filled with joy in knowing the university I had called home for multiple degrees of my own was planning to serve a population I held so dear. However, shortly after the elation, I also felt my heart sink. I thought of many students of mine from years ago who graduated high school and entered college (or avoided college) without the support of a program such as this. I wished I could rewind the clock for them and tell them there would be a place for them to thrive in college, right near their hometown.

### Q: You often talk about a “shift in mindset.” What do you mean?

**A:** In order to support individuals on the spectrum in a university setting, a mindset shift is key. Oftentimes, when an individual struggles in college, it is natural to focus on academics. As we know, however, there are so many other components to success in college. These include executive functioning, social and emotional development, and independent living skills. While it is true that all college students are being exposed to a new level of these at college, neurotypical individuals usually develop and advance these skills more naturally than those with ASD.

We know that these skills don’t exist in a vacuum; they intertwine and feed off one another. We do not want to wait until students are struggling with any of these components. Our goal is to proactively address each of these through explicit learning and practice opportunities as well as ongoing support. This approach truly provides an immersive experience for students on their pathway leading up to, during, and following their time in college.







AS COVID-19 TOOK HOLD IN MARCH, LITTLE WAS KNOWN ABOUT THE VIRUS EXCEPT THAT IT WAS EXTREMELY CONTAGIOUS AND COULD BE FATAL.

*That's when the Aurora University community stepped up to serve.*

# HEROES

*among us*

*Six AU alumni tell their stories from the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.*



**W**e gathered six stories of AU alumni who leaned into the early days of the crisis and found ways to help some of the most vulnerable populations — children, the mentally weary, the elderly, the sick, and the homeless. These stories represent only a small sample of the many ways members of the AU community have worked to improve lives during the pandemic. There are heroes all around us. Here are just a few.





## Helping Children Through the COVID-19 Crisis, One Meal at a Time

**Sarah O'Donnell '05** could not have imagined that her bachelor's degree in recreation administration would lead to her becoming a hero in her community. But it did.

When the coronavirus pandemic forced Illinois schools to shut down in mid-March by order of Gov. J. B. Pritzker, O'Donnell faced the Herculean task of keeping thousands of students from going hungry.

As CEO of the Tri-Town YMCA in Lombard, O'Donnell quickly stepped up to help feed K–12 children in and around the communities of Lombard, Villa Park, and Oakbrook Terrace who rely on free and subsidized school lunches.

Within three days of the state order to close schools, O'Donnell had amassed an army of more than 300 volunteers ready to ride on a fleet of school buses and man curbside delivery of 32,000 meals to 3,200 children each week.

She established four distribution sites for the delivery of the grab-and-go breakfasts and lunches, and she convinced a moving-truck rental agency to rent her a refrigerated truck, at a discount, to store the meals. (She and a community partner have since landed a grant to cover the cost of the refrigerated rental truck.)

Never one to sit still, O'Donnell, 40, assisted the volunteers on the buses, helped deliver the meals herself, and even dug out her sewing machine to make masks for staff, volunteers, and children in the community.

"One of the best things I ever learned at AU was that in the world of recreation you need to pivot, and no two days are ever similar," said O'Donnell. "I also learned to network, network, network, since you never know who can suddenly become a part of your working world."

Since that March day, the Tri-Town YMCA has expanded its effort to respond to other pressing needs.

O'Donnell led the charge to create emergency childcare sites for children of essential workers and to deliver school supply kits for students who did not have the means to purchase school supplies for home learning.

The Tri-Town YMCA also partnered with the Northern Illinois Food Bank to establish a curbside family meal pickup program in neighborhoods where the need is great. O'Donnell is also keeping an eye on the elderly members of her community with a wellness service where volunteers make phone calls to check on seniors facing social isolation.

"I was always taught at AU to think outside of the box — to be a problem solver and to find people's strengths when you are leading others," said O'Donnell. "I took that to heart and use that advice today."



## 'I Won't Turn Them Away': Offering Free Telehealth Sessions to Frontline Workers

**Katie Johns MSW '09** recalls the day that the COVID-19 crisis first felt real to her. During a conversation with her sister, an emergency room nurse, Johns was struck by the imprints on her sister's face left by the personal protective equipment she wore throughout her 17-hour workdays.

The imprints were physical. But Johns wondered about the emotional imprints the grueling shifts were leaving behind. Johns knew then that she needed to use her skills honed in AU's **Master of Social Work** program to help health care workers and first responders manage their mental health.

"I felt like they needed a space to be able to talk and work through things," Johns said. "As a licensed clinical social worker, I want to give my time and service to the industry that is showing up and working hard to keep us safe and well."

Soon after the COVID-19 outbreak was deemed a pandemic, Johns, 37, became a first responder to the first responders, offering free telehealth counseling sessions to frontline workers. She created a flyer announcing free

sessions and posted it on social media (the posts were shared more than 200 times), handed the flyer to her sister to distribute at the hospital, and shared it with a 911 dispatcher. Quickly, word of the free sessions spread.

Johns is a behavioral specialist focusing on toddlers to 8th graders. She squeezes in telehealth appointments with emergency medical technicians, nurses, doctors, and firefighters during her off hours — in the mornings before she leaves for work, when she gets home at night, during lunch breaks, and on the weekends.

During these telehealth counseling sessions, she hears the fear, the confusion, and the difficulty that so many frontline health care workers across the country have processing long, strange days. Some are confused by the constant changes at work. Some are worried about the lack of personal protective equipment. Some are losing their jobs at hospitals due to the delay in elective surgeries as care for COVID-19 patients takes first priority. And some are depressed that they have to avoid close contact with their children and families for fear of spreading the virus to them.

**“EVERYONE NEEDS TO FEEL LIKE THEY’RE CONNECTED TO OTHER PEOPLE, LIKE THEY’RE SUPPORTED, ESPECIALLY AMID TOUGH TIMES. THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING A COMMUNITY AND WORKING AS A COMMUNITY IS SOMETHING I LEARNED AT AU.**

**—KATIE JOHNS MSW '09**

In her work with frontline clients, Johns said that she has drawn on the ethical principles of service, integrity, and social justice that she learned at AU. She teaches clients the importance of taking care of themselves, but also of keeping a strong community.

Her time at AU is a big reason why Johns knows the vast power of connection.

"Everyone needs to feel like they're connected to other people, like they're supported, especially amid tough times," she said. "The importance of building a community and working as a community is something I learned at AU."

In caring for herself, Johns has leaned on her own community of fellow social workers, many of whom she met more than a decade ago as a student at AU, where she now teaches as an adjunct professor. Johns says that her mentor Brenda Barnwell, dean of AU's School of Social Work, has been essential to her career, helping her stay connected to others and grow as a social worker.

Johns continues to offer free sessions, sharing her flyer and social media posts in an attempt to help more people. Like everyone else, she doesn't know when the pandemic will end, but she knows that there will be deleterious mental health effects for years to come. Frontline health care workers will need support long after COVID-19 is no longer a threat.

"I won't turn them away," she said.



## Advocating for Aging Patients, AU Social Worker Forges Community

Whenever patients are admitted to Riverside Miller Rehabilitation, **Caleb Lane '17** meets them at eye level and asks them about themselves — their hobbies, their interests, their lives. Lane, a medical social worker, wants his patients to feel respected as equals. Most of all, he wants them to have a positive stay and go home healthy.

But in March, as COVID-19 became a global health crisis and public officials began to order quarantines and lockdowns, Lane said that the pandemic "changed the game entirely." His elderly patients were at great risk of contracting the virus.

Quickly, the rehabilitation center limited visitation, and then banned visits entirely. Residents began taking their meals and receiving treatment in their rooms. No one was allowed in the dining hall or the gym. Then, the staff cordoned off two of its wings for COVID-19 patients and started moving them in. They used negative pressure — which allows air to move inward but not escape back into general circulation — to keep the airborne disease from reaching healthy residents.

Over the next two months, as isolation rose and the number of positive cases at the facility increased, Lane, 28, noticed the morale of his patients dropping. Although COVID-19 can be deadly, Lane knew how disastrous loneliness could also be for the elderly.



Lane chose to go into elder care as a medical social worker because he felt an affinity for the aging population — as if he had many, many grandparents.

He wants to keep residents feeling as connected to other people as possible, even during a virus that seems bent on keeping people apart. Social isolation and loneliness are particularly harmful for older adults and can negatively affect nearly every biological system, experts say.

“The residents thrive off of social interaction and get motivation from knowing exactly what they’re working toward to get home,” Lane said. “To pull that from them, that pulls the motivation away. The boost to morale was gone.”

It was a big challenge. But, rather than getting overwhelmed, Lane drew on his training from the **Bachelor of Social Work** program at AU. The program taught him the importance of connection and a person-centered approach to care, especially with vulnerable populations, Lane said.

Even at times when the uncertainty and the seriousness of the pandemic can seem overwhelming, Lane intentionally starts his day by remembering to connect with each person under his care.

“The values of a person-centered approach are to not judge others, to try to expand their experiences, to try to be in their shoes, in their point of view, while honoring them in a genuine, heartfelt way,” Lane said.

**I WANT TO BE THEIR ADVOCATE WHO BRINGS A SENSE OF COMMUNITY, A SENSE OF COMFORT. TO BE ABLE TO DO THAT EVERY DAY, IT’S THE GREATEST THING.**

**—CALEB LANE ’17**

Lane and his coworkers have helped patients feel connected with family visits through the facility’s windows. A husband pulled up a chair to the window to visit his wife. A family held up a new baby to show her to her great-grandmother. The most heart-wrenching experience for Lane was when a woman kissed her palm and pressed it to the window to say goodbye to her husband when he passed away — an experience that brought Lane to tears.

Despite the sometimes-joyful, sometimes-difficult scenes, Lane said that allowing window visits at that time was the best thing they could have done for patients. Morale rose as patients were able to see their loved ones.

“It was so eye-opening to me,” Lane said. “It tells you how precious time is.”

Lane said his work with the aging population is teaching him the importance of connection and the value of each individual — lessons he first learned at AU and hopes to pass on to others.

“I want to be their advocate who brings a sense of community, a sense of comfort,” Lane said. “To be able to do that every day, it’s the greatest thing.”



## Defying the Odds: How an AU Grad Helped a Homeless Shelter Stop an Outbreak

**Julianna Stroup ’16, MPA ’20** was working her way through AU graduate school as a bartender in March when the COVID-19 crisis prompted public officials to shut down all bars and restaurants in Illinois. Out of a job and looking to help, Stroup quickly moved to the front lines of the pandemic as assistant program director at Hesed House in Aurora, filling the gap left behind as volunteers — many of them older and at risk of infection — pulled back from their work at the homeless shelter.

When the pandemic reached Hesed House in April, Stroup, 24, put the skills she acquired in AU’s **Bachelor of Social Work** and **Master of Public Administration** programs to work, doing everything from sanitizing surfaces to deescalating conflict among guests.

As the second-largest homeless shelter in Illinois, Hesed House takes care of some of the most vulnerable populations—the elderly, homeless, and immunocompromised, the same populations most susceptible to the coronavirus. By mid-April, after four people, a combination of guests and staff, tested positive for the virus, public health officials arranged for the shelter to move to a temporary home at a nearby hotel, where guests could have their own rooms and follow social distancing and quarantine protocols.

On a day that Stroup described as “insane but incredible,” she and the Hesed House staff leapt to action,

loading 200 guests and staff into school buses — along with food, supplies, and the guests’ possessions — and moved the shelter to the hotel. Living onsite, Stroup worked the overnight shift for 60 to 80 hours a week. She made sure guests remained isolated while also seeing to it that they received food, clean clothing, and medical care.

Meanwhile, Stroup continued taking graduate classes at AU, which at that point had moved online due to the pandemic. After her 12-hour night shift, she would go back to her hotel room to attend class, study, and sleep.

When Stroup was an undergraduate, her mentor Don Phelps, a professor of social work at AU, encouraged her to take an internship at Hesed House. She was hesitant at first, but Phelps explained that she would have the chance to work with every population and learn more than she could ever imagine.

“And I did,” she said. “I absolutely fell in love with it. All of my social work classes, all of the experience that I have learning about trauma, learning about psychology and psychiatry, the different factors that play into people’s behaviors and sociology, it all makes me so much better at my job.”

After a month at the hotel, the potential outbreak was quelled. No guests tested positive for COVID-19; surely, Stroup and Hesed House staff saved lives. Guests were all able to move back to Hesed House in Aurora, and the staff back to their own homes.

**WE DEFIED THE ODDS. HESED HOUSE MIRACLES ARE A REAL THING.**

**—JULIANNA STROUP ’16, MPA ’20**

Stroup finished her degree in May. Draped in protective gear, the Hesed House staff held a makeshift graduation ceremony as guests cracked open their doors and cheered.

By July, she received a promotion to food ministry manager, where she is responsible for planning, coordinating, and cooking meals, along with other responsibilities. Stroup was nervous about coming into an executive position so young, especially a role that seemed to matter so greatly to people’s lives. But her MPA classes at AU taught her how to manage other people and her own time, she said.

“We defied the odds,” Stroup said. “Hesed House miracles are a real thing.”



## What an AU Nursing Professor Wants Her Students to Learn Amid the Pandemic

As a teacher and a nurse, **Stephanie Yelton ’08** knew that she needed to help her nursing friends deal with the coronavirus.

“Nurses, we’re all altruistic,” Yelton said. “We’re like firefighters — we want to run to the fire instead of running away from it.”

An assistant professor of nursing at AU, Yelton, 35, keeps current on the nursing profession by working part time as an emergency room nurse at Rush Copley Emergency Center in Yorkville. She had been working every third weekend when the COVID-19 crisis hit. As the demand for health care workers soared, Yelton stepped up and put her name in Rush Copley’s labor pool, a list of workers available for extra shifts.

She quickly became a PPE coach, monitoring doctors and nurses as they put on and took off their personal protective equipment — glasses, scrubs, and masks. At the beginning of the pandemic, the symptoms of the virus were so vague that nurses and doctors dressed head to toe in PPE, even when patients came in with minor pains.

Dressing and undressing in personal protective equipment was an overly familiar activity to nurses and doctors, who were often tired and run ragged during the height of the pandemic. Yelton watched out for them, letting them know if they were skipping any steps, keeping her coworkers safe from potential infection.

Yelton also took on extra shifts doing forward triage, which required sitting outside of the ER and screening patients before they came into the hospital. Forward triage also meant crowd control. To the chagrin of many visitors, Yelton told them that they weren’t allowed inside to visit patients.

“It was confusing and sometimes scary for everyone,” Yelton said. “I worked as a nurse during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, and it was different. We didn’t have this level of fear. At the start of the coronavirus, everything was so uncertain, so new. The rules kept changing.”

Yelton recalls checking her email and finding four policy changes made in a 24-hour period at the hospital. As more people became sick, Yelton became busier. One week, she taught a full load of classes and worked 36 hours as a nurse.

But even with the confusion and fear, Yelton relished her nursing shifts. Since so little was known about the virus at that time, doctors and nurses would frequently discuss research they read and better ways to treat patients. It was a “team approach,” she said — the comradery felt amazing.

Yelton also loved the discussions she had with her nursing students at AU. They would talk about how to read nursing and medical research and what it takes to keep working through a crisis. They also discussed how important it is to take the extra time to interact with patients, especially at a time of uncertainty and anxiety.

“We need to connect and be caring and compassionate,” said Yelton. “I don’t think that can be fully taught, but it definitely needs to be reinforced.”



### When Lessons Went Virtual, an AU Special Ed Teacher Got Creative

As a special education elementary school teacher, **Jimmy Boyle ’15, MASE ’19** works hard to create a family atmosphere in his classroom so his students feel at home.

When Illinois closed its schools in March due to the COVID-19 outbreak and moved instruction online, Boyle knew that the upheaval would be particularly difficult on his students. He would have to get creative if he wanted to

keep them connected when they no longer were coming into the classroom.

“A sense of family and community during a pandemic is just as important as academic instruction,” said Boyle.

Boyle, 27, teaches students in the third, fourth, and fifth grades at the Kaneland School District. He learned the importance of personally connecting with students when he was at AU, where he earned a **Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration** and a **Master of Arts in Special Education**.

At AU, Boyle found the small class sizes and professors’ accessibility to be engaging, which led him to love learning. He appreciated that he could send a message to a professor and be assured that he would receive a response. He intends to pass this love of learning on to his students with a similar style of engagement.

Last spring, as teachers experimented with ways to teach their students online, Boyle discovered that giving his students multiple ways to complete work and communicate with him improved their experience. They could connect with him for help or feedback through live video chats, ongoing dialogue on Google Docs, or a video learning tool called Flipgrid, among other platforms.

He created short video challenges for his students — for instance, how many math problems could students solve in a minute-long video? Students wrote to Boyle, telling him how much they liked the challenges. Do more, he recalls one of his young students saying — she wanted to see how many she could get right next time. Boyle was thrilled; if students were having fun, that meant they were engaged and learning.

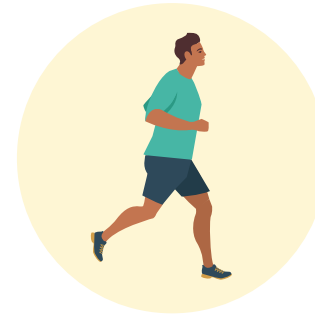
**A SENSE OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DURING A PANDEMIC IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION.**

—JIMMY BOYLE ’15, MASE ’19

Above all, Boyle wanted to make sure that all his students felt that they were still part of a family, whether they were learning remotely or in the classroom. He held nonacademic video meetings for students, filling with joy upon seeing the children and hearing them excitedly talk with each other.

“AU drove home to me the importance of close relationships, family feel, and a small setting,” Boyle said. “That’s what I continue to try to deliver to my kids.”

A



## WHAT HOBBY DID YOU DISCOVER DURING THE PANDEMIC SHUTDOWN?

When the COVID-19 crisis first began, the stay-at-home order and the closure of all but essential businesses left many of us at loose ends in the evenings and on the weekends. Attending movies, plays, sporting events, concerts, fitness classes, and even hosting large parties at home were out of the question, so what could we do to unwind? We asked several Aurora University faculty and staff members how they passed the time.

“One unexpected pleasure for me in this stressful pandemic time has been developing the practice of **taking long walks** with my husband almost every day. We had to find a different way to get some exercise, since all the gyms were closed, and the walks not only fill that need but also give us time to talk and process all of the national events and the new challenges in teaching and parenting.”  
—Sara Elliott, associate professor of English

“I kept busy by completing a **1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle** and two **paint-by-number** projects. I also **planted flower seeds** to germinate for planting in May. I tried some **new recipes** in the kitchen too.”  
—Alison Arendt, associate professor of social work, director of graduate studies, School of Social Work

“What I am most proud of is my focus on **walking long distances** to tone up my body and lose weight. In July I walked over 1 million steps, the equivalent of more than 500 miles, and lost 30 pounds. That’s in addition to the 100 pounds I have lost since 2009.”  
—Andrew Carr, assistant professor of business and finance

“For the past several months (years really) I have been working on a book titled “7 Highly Effective Police Leaders.” The time during the quarantine allowed me to **work toward completion of the last chapter**, which coincidentally connected with the mass police protests. I also added research related to the 1918 flu pandemic to a chapter that I wrote on August Vollmer, the first police chief of Berkeley, California, and the father of the police professionalism movement.”  
—Brandon Kooi, professor of criminal justice

“Friends and I started doing **informal readings of plays** once a month on Zoom. We don’t do it for an audience. We do it as a social gathering. People propose shows they love and that are hopeful and inspiring. We read them for no reason other than to speak the words and hear them out loud. Some plays we have read for absolutely no reason include Kate Hamill’s ‘Sense and Sensibility’ and Lauren Gunderson’s ‘The Book of Will.’”  
—Stacy Joyce, associate professor of theatre

“Spending more time at home gave me an opportunity to complete some house projects. I **built a storage bench area** in my garage to house boots, coats, and sports gear for my kids. I **constructed a lofted bed** for my daughter and a **couple of tables** for my back patio. All in all, I’ve had many productive evenings!”  
—Ryan Lakin, head men’s soccer coach

“I learned how to **use Zoom in new ways to connect with friends and family**, from Greece to Los Angeles.”  
—Penny Petropoul, assistant vice president for alumni relations and student success advisor

“I developed a passion for **getting fit with jogging and weight training**. As an added bonus, I lost 75 pounds and feel 20 years younger.”  
—Richard Boniak, associate professor of environmental and general science, assistant academic dean, and assistant chair of biology, George Williams College

A



## ART CLOSE-UP: Schingoethe Center's New Curator Launches Virtual Exhibits

*The pandemic sparks a wave of creativity among the AU community and local artists.*



In February, the exhibit “Figurism” opened at Aurora University’s Schingoethe Center, showcasing the many ways that Illinois artists envision the human body. By March, the museum closed to the public due to the pandemic, and the exhibit’s figurative bodies quarantined and socially distanced, just like everyone else.

Natasha Ritsma, who had been in her new role as director of the Schingoethe Center for less than six months, was thrown for a loop. The COVID-19 pandemic imposed its will on her new job — the exhibit was delayed, and all accompanying events were canceled. But that didn’t stop Ritsma, who had previously worked as curator of Loyola University Museum of Art, from moving forward with her plans.

Even before the pandemic, one of Ritsma’s priorities was to digitize the 4,000 objects in the Schingoethe Center’s collection. The pandemic simply made the digitization process more urgent.

“Digitization is essential for art museums today,” Ritsma said. “Many museums are producing engaging and fascinating content, strongly based on their own collections. It’s a great way to educate people about art. Even when there’s no pandemic, people can listen to a fascinating lecture during lunch or see a renowned exhibit amid a moment of boredom.”



Opposite page, **Theresa Daunheimer '18**, “A Method to the Madness: Squares.” This page, top left, **Kylie Tevonian**, “Chemical Coffee”; top right, **Kristen Bilbruck '11**, “Birds of a Feather Quarantine Together”; bottom left, **Amy Nelson '19**, “Father and Son”; bottom right, **John Lo**, “Spirit Vase, Ginkgo Bowl, and Bucket Base.”

With the museum temporarily closed to the public, the Schingoethe team got to work digitizing the collection and adding online programming. They focused on short and engaging exhibits suited to capturing the attention of virtual visitors.

One of their first digital projects was to mark the historic pandemic through local art. Ritsma and her team, in partnership with the Phillips Library, reached out to the AU community and local artists in search of objects created in the early days of the COVID-19 era, when people were stuck in their homes, and arts and culture programming had come to a standstill.

The result is “Art in the Time of Coronavirus,” the museum’s first online exhibit, running through Feb. 26, 2021.

More than 30 artists — both professional and amateur, across an array of mediums — submitted about 60 pieces to the exhibit, a large response that surprised and delighted Ritsma. Each artist also submitted a self-made video, available for online viewing, explaining the work and the inspiration for its creation.

“The artists used this time to meditate and create work that is really, really beautiful,” Ritsma said.

**Kristen Bilbruck '11** created the mixed-media assemblage “Birds of a Feather Quarantine Together” with sheet music and bird feathers she found on walks with her daughter. Photographer **Amy Nelson '19** submitted a photo of her husband and son walking together in matching T-shirts on Father’s Day, a moment of love and normalcy.





Local digital media artist Devin Trier created a tongue-in-cheek version of the famous Uncle Sam poster. Trier starts with the famous slogan “I Want You for the U.S. Army” and instead depicts Uncle Sam behind a tape measure saying “I Want You Six Feet Away.”

As for the online version of the “Figurism” exhibit, the Schingoethe staff created a program to take viewers on a digital tour of the art installation. Doug Stapleton, the Illinois State Museum curator behind “Figurism,” spoke on video from the Schingoethe Center about significant pieces from the exhibit. His hour-long tour is broken into three-to-six-minute clips, allowing viewers to select the art objects they want to explore.

“Figurism” includes works made by more than 50 Illinois artists from 1908 to the present, and features



Left, Devin Trier, “Do It For Uncle Sam”; top right, Keely Haag ’13, “Crocheted Lap Blanket”; bottom right, Lisa Youngdahl, “Hello in There.”

paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, and sculptures. The collection brings together artwork that emphasizes the power and the range of the narrative and expressive human figure in Midwestern art. Artists featured include Gertrude Abercrombie, Ivan Albright, Phyllis Bramson, Eldzier Cortor, Hector Duarte, Indiana Gybson, Mr. Imagination, Riva Lehrer, Marion Perkins, Marva Lee Pitchford-Jolly, and Ed Paschke.

Ritsma aims to have highlights of the museum’s permanent collection online by January 2021, and add more pieces — both online and to the physical collection — in the following months and years. When the museum reopens to the public next year, she also plans to bring in more traveling exhibits, prominent scholars, and members of the AU community.



Top, Katie Scarlett Coan ’11, “Paradise”; bottom left, Kristen Accardo, “Look Inside”; bottom right, Carlos Deltoro, “Paso.”

Whether the AU community engages online or in person, Ritsma wants them to see the museum as a resource, a place where students, alumni, and anyone else from the local area can come together, enjoy art, and learn something new.

And although the pandemic has presented a big challenge, Ritsma is inspired to see the power of art and creativity come alive in the AU community.

“Some of the best art is created during some of the most difficult times,” Ritsma said.



To visit the online exhibits, go to [aurora.edu/virtualexhibits](http://aurora.edu/virtualexhibits) and [aurora.edu/coronavirusart](http://aurora.edu/coronavirusart).

## Schingoethe Center's Main Gallery Named for Meg Bero



The main gallery at the Schingoethe Center was renamed The Meg Bero Gallery in honor of the longtime director, who retired last year. A former elementary art school teacher, Bero joined AU in 1996 as a museum educator and rose to executive director and chief curator. During her tenure, she elevated the collection of North American art with exhibits that demonstrated great respect for the Native American community.

In 2017, the Smithsonian Institution granted the Schingoethe Center Affiliate status — one of only a handful of Smithsonian Affiliates in Illinois — making possible new opportunities for collaborative exhibits, artifact loans, research, and educational programs. The museum was founded on campus in 1990 with the donation of the Native American art and artifact collection by Herb and Martha Schingoethe and moved to its current location in the newly constructed Hill Welcome Center in 2015.





Rendering of the new Kimberly and James Hill Center for Student Success

## New Center for Student Success Demonstrates the Power of Giving

Through the combined power of giving in many ways — lead gift, estate gift, class reunion gift, and direct donations — the Aurora University community helped turn a vision into reality.

The new Kimberly and James Hill Center for Student Success, currently under construction, is a compelling reminder of what will happen when a constellation of generous donors comes together to support AU students.

It started with a lead gift from the Hill family in memory of their children Kimberly and James, and a vision to build a place where AU students will receive counsel, guidance, and inspiration to discover their path in work and life. A generous commitment from the estate of Ann and Dick McWethy was instrumental in moving the project forward.

Members of the Board of Trustees were early investors in the project, with significant commitments. The Class of 1968 chose the Hill Center for Student Success project for their 50th reunion class gift, which aims to honor their experience at AU by supporting today's students. Many AU administration and staff also made donations.

“When we all come together as a community, we will make exciting things happen in behalf of our students,” said AU President Rebecca L. Sherrick.

Construction began on the center in August. The 7,000-square-foot building, expected to be completed by late spring 2021, will stand on the southwest perimeter of campus, adjacent to the Wackerlin Center for Faith and Action.

**A**

## An Interview with Historian Susan L. Palmer '71 on AU's Early Years in Mendota

In 2005, Aurora University President Rebecca L. Sherrick turned to **Susan L. Palmer '71**, a longtime history professor at AU, with an invitation to write the story of AU's founding.

As Palmer set to work, she discovered a treasure trove of information among the papers in the university library's Jenks Memorial Collection of Adventual Materials and the university's archives — a cache of student publications, catalogs, newspapers, photos, and other original source material about college life at the turn of the 20th century.

The project soon developed into a book entitled “Occupy till I Come”: *The Origins of Aurora University in Mendota, Illinois, 1893–1912* published in September. The book tells the story of AU's early years as Mendota College, a Bible college created to prepare Advent Christians for the ministry, an education that included the liberal arts along with religious studies. The small, financially vulnerable Advent Christian school had a brief existence, only 19 years (1893–1912), before moving to its current home in Aurora to become Aurora College, and later Aurora University.

**Q: How would you describe this book?**

**A:** The story of Mendota College is not just about how an institution grew and matured academically. It is a very American story about how a religious group founded and shaped a college that would gradually become a much larger, more stable, secularized, four-year school with graduate programs, but that in its formative years was thoroughly religious in nature. Religion was its reason for being and was intertwined with virtually every aspect of the school.

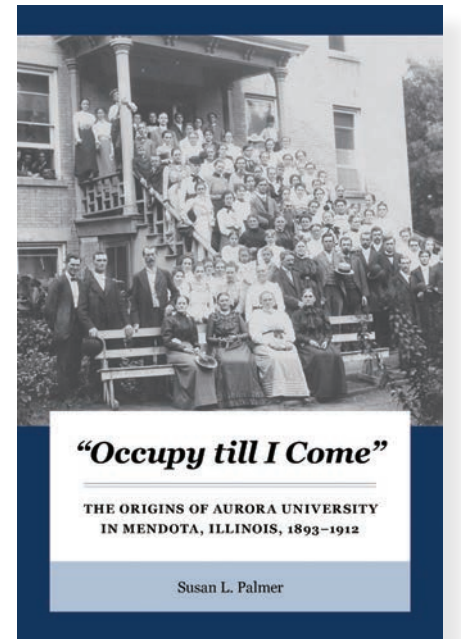
**Q: Tell us about the title, ‘Occupy till I Come.’ How did you choose it?**

**A:** This was something that Jesus said, which was used by William Miller, a New York farmer who founded the 1840s Millerite Movement that preached the imminent return of Christ. Some people wanted to give up their jobs and possessions and simply await Christ's return. Miller used this Bible verse to convince them to continue with their normal lives till the end. The Advent Christian denomination, one of whose publication societies founded the college, grew out of the Millerite Movement (along with several other denominations).

When the creation of a college was being discussed in the early 1890s, some people argued that Adventists should not create such a permanent institution because of their belief that Christ would return soon. Those who believed in the need to establish a college went back to their Millerite roots by using the argument about occupying — doing God's work till the end. This verse shows up in school sermons, speeches, and publications throughout the Mendota era, so I thought it was a good representation of Mendota College's mission.

**Q: Your roots run deep in the Adventist movement as well. How did those roots affect how you approached this project?**

**A:** I grew up in an Advent Christian home with Adventist roots going back four generations, so I already knew a lot about the denomination and have empathy for some of its beliefs and its earnest sense of mission about bringing others to God. On the other hand, I am no longer Advent Christian and am a trained historian,



so I would like to think that, as an outsider, I was able to approach this topic with a wider lens. I tried to put the history of the college, denomination, and Millerism within the broader context of American history. Writing this book gave me both greater insight into my ancestors and a more nuanced understanding of American religious history.

**Q: Are there lessons from AU's early years that are applicable for us today?**

**A:** Absolutely. Although the school is no longer Advent Christian, it too has a strong sense of mission and works to ensure that students receive something greater than just training for a job — a greater sense of the world in all its diversity and struggles and a greater ability to think critically and help solve its many problems. As Mendota's students were, AU individuals are nourished as such, but they also are encouraged to see themselves as part of something larger, as servants to the larger society.

**A**





Above photo: bottom row, Joan Watkins (left), Caddy Jackson, Lisa Jackson, Jerry Watkins; second row, Betty Jackson (left), Jon Jackson, Beth Trumbull, Mark Trumbo, Jr.; third row, Bob Jackson (left), Roger Watkins, Grace White Watkins, Mark Trumbo; top row, Jim and Alice Watkins (left), Nita and Dan Watkins.

Right photo: Hall of Famer James Laurie “Deacon” White is the patriarch of some two dozen descendants and relatives who have attended AU.

Photos courtesy of the Watkins family



## Five Generations of Watkinses Trace Their AU Roots Back to Mendota College

There are very few Spartans who can trace their roots back to the beginning of Aurora University — then called Mendota College — at the turn of the 19th century.

**Haley Versluys Draper MSW ’20** is one of them.

Draper earned her **Master of Social Work** in May, marking the fifth generation in a long line of family members who have graduated from AU. Rooted in faith, the Watkins family tree is brimming with teachers, ministers, social workers, and business leaders keen on supporting their communities.

The family legacy begins with Draper’s great-great-grandfather — James Laurie “Deacon” White, a legend of early baseball and a barehanded catcher who is listed in the National Baseball Hall of Fame. White played for the Chicago White Stockings (the precursor to the Chicago Cubs), and helped the team win its first pennant, in 1876. He was nicknamed “Deacon” for his strong religious convictions.

In 1909, almost two decades after retiring from Major League Baseball, White and his wife, Marium, moved to Mendota, Illinois, to be near the couple’s only daughter, Grace, who was enrolled at Mendota College. While they didn’t attend the college as students, the couple took jobs on campus — Marium serving as a houseparent and James working as a member of the grounds crew.

When Mendota College moved to Aurora in 1912, James and Marium White accompanied AU’s first president, Orrin Roe Jenks, in the lead car in the auto parade from the Aurora train station to the new campus, where AU stands today.

More than a century later, some two dozen descendants and relatives of Deacon and Marium White have attended AU.

“One of the university’s biggest assets is its professors, who are really advocates for their students, a theme that has been mentioned by so many family members through the years,”



Left to right, Joan Watkins, whose grandfather Roger Watkins was an early supporter of AU, stands in front of the namesake residence hall with nephew-in-law Fred Versluys and Fred’s children Haley Versluys Draper and Ben Versluys.

“Rooted in faith, the Watkins family tree is brimming with with teachers, ministers, social workers, and business leaders keen on supporting their communities.”

said Draper. “The faculty genuinely care that you get an education.”

Among the most influential graduates was Roger Watkins, the namesake of the freshman dorm Watkins Hall. Both Watkins and the Whites’ daughter, Grace, graduated from Mendota in 1911, just one year before the college moved to Aurora. They married in August 1912.

Eight years later, **Roger and Grace Watkins** moved to Aurora, where they operated the Strathmore Company, a printing business, and supported the growing college. Grace served as the first secretary of the alumni association, which was formed in 1913. Roger served on the board of directors from 1927 until 1971.

All four of the Watkins children attended AU, then called Aurora College: **James ’35, Marium ’37, Elizabeth ’43, and Daniel ’50**. And each of the four children married Aurora College classmates. One of those classmates was **Mark H. Trumbo ’37**, who married Marium Watkins in 1941. Trumbo worked at AU for 37 years as professor, dean of the college,

acting president, and vice president. The Marcus and Mark H. Trumbo Award for Excellence in Teaching is named after him and his father, Marcus.

Among the other members of the family tree who graduated or attended AU include: **Alice Young Watkins ’38, Marie Peters Clark Watkins ’41, Bob Jackson ’43, Jan Clark Gilbert ’64, Denny Clark ’69, Beth Trumbo Dell ’66, Caddy Jackson ’68, Jerry Watkins ’69, John Jackson, Liz Jackson Zane ’73, Joan Watkins ’70, James Jackson ’77, and Barbara Watkins Kile ’77**.

Haley’s father, **Fred Versluys**, received his **Master of Arts and Education Leadership** in 1998, and her brother **Ben Versluys** began his undergraduate career at AU in 2018 as a member of the men’s basketball team.

It is this legacy of service to the community that Draper continues; she began working earlier this summer with Omni Youth Services in Buffalo Grove as a prevention specialist.

**A**



## Remembering Richard Hamlin

Richard “Dick” Hamlin, former president of George Williams College, passed away this spring at his home in Naples, Florida. He was 94.

Hamlin was a prominent leader in the YMCA movement when the call came from his alma mater, GWC, to assume its presidency in 1961. He set aside his own plans and piloted one of the most successful eras in the institution’s history. In the years that followed, GWC developed an outstanding faculty that wove together the values of the Y movement with cutting-edge methodologies in research, practice, and pedagogy. Hamlin served as GWC president for 22 years.

“As president, Dick played a vital role in educating a new generation of leaders for careers in human service and youth development organizations,” said Aurora University President Rebecca L. Sherrick. “It would be hard to overestimate the impact of his work. At one point, literally all of the leaders of Chicago’s major human service nonprofits were graduates of George Williams.

“At the helm of GWC, he also pioneered in the recruitment and education of international students,” she said. “Many of these men and women left to become leading human service advocates in their home countries. Thanks to his leadership, a small Illinois college had global impact.”

In 2009, AU saluted the Hamlin legacy by opening its new Welcome Center on the GWC campus and naming the building in honor of Dick and Joan Hamlin. The building was dedicated on a gala weekend when the Hamlins celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary with family and friends.

Hamlin was born in Royal, Iowa, in 1925, where his father was a Presbyterian minister. In 1943, he graduated from high school in Aurora, Missouri, then served in the Navy for three years as a psychiatric technician. He received a Bachelor of Science in Group Work Education from GWC in 1949, a Master of Arts in Psychology from the University of Omaha in 1951, and a PhD in Educational Psychology from the University of Nebraska in 1956.

He spent more than a decade working at the YMCA, including as executive director of the South Omaha YMCA and associate director of research for the National Council of YMCAs, until he began his presidency of GWC in 1961.

After retiring from the presidency of the college, he was named chairman and CEO of the Bank of Yorktown and was a member of senior management of Cole-Taylor Banks. He served in various executive capacities with the holding company. Upon retirement he was named an honorary director of Cole-Taylor Banks.

In more recent years, Dick and Joan Hamlin divided their time between a winter home at Bentley Village in Naples, Florida, and a summer home in Williams Bay, Wisconsin. Their summer residence, known as the “Hamlin Hideaway” sits at the edge of the GWC campus. Soon after the couple moved in, their home’s screened porch became a popular stop for current and past members of the GWC community.

Hamlin is survived by Carol Joan (née Dahl), his wife of 70 years; his son, Robert E. Hamlin, and Robert’s wife, Cynthia, of Ft. Myers, Florida; daughter, Betsy (GWC ’86), of Los Angeles; and grandsons, Richard Will



“Thanks to his leadership, a small Illinois college had global impact.”  
—AU President Rebecca L. Sherrick

Hamlin and his wife, Mei, of Guam and Singapore, and Trevor Hamlin of Ft. Myers, Florida.

Memorial gifts in his memory may be made to the Richard E. and C. Joan Hamlin Scholarship Fund at George Williams College, P.O. Box 210, 350 Constance Blvd., Williams Bay, Wisconsin, 53191.



## GWC Students Discover the Healing Power of Plants

Poets, naturalists, and philosophers have long understood the restorative power of nature. Take a walk outside and “nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees,” said America’s most famous naturalist, John Muir.

Two George Williams College professors have teamed up to create a course that teaches students how to design gardens that improve mental health.

Horticulture for a Healthy Life, held during the month of May, is a hands-on class that combines social work and environmental sustainability for students interested in the growing field of horticulture therapy. The class is the brainchild of Richard Boniak, associate professor of environmental and general science, assistant academic dean, and assistant chair of biology; and Joan Fedota, associate professor and assistant dean of social work.

The class combines the science and botany of garden design and maintenance with the well-researched therapeutic and healing aspects of gardening and simply being in nature.

Among the projects students have designed: a story-time garden for a children’s library, a welcoming garden for a medical center, and a restorative garden for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. One student envisioned a prison garden where incarcerated mothers and their visiting children could plant together. Another student applied for and received a grant to teach residents of a homeless shelter in Kenosha, Wisconsin, how to plant potted vegetables.

“This class gives students a picture of social work of the future,” said Fedota. “Healing doesn’t have to happen in an office. We can bring in the therapeutic pieces of nature.”





## Historic Eckhart Hall Tower Restored

Eckhart Hall, the oldest building on the Aurora University campus, got a face-lift this summer. The brick parapet — the towerlike feature on the roof of the building — was damaged from years of wind, rain, and snow. The new and improved parapet was reconstructed to replicate the original tower that has reigned over the Quad for more than a century.

“We found bricks to match the texture and color of the original building,” said Clint Rhodes, AU project manager. “It looks seamless.”

The landmark building, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, served as the sole academic building when Aurora College (now AU) was opened in the spring of 1912. It was named after Charles Eckhart — an Advent Christian minister and owner of the Auburn Automobile Company of Indiana — who funded construction of the original building. Today, Eckhart Hall is home to AU administration offices. It also houses the campus’s carillon, whose bells’ chimes can be heard at the top of the hour across campus.



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## MPA Plus One Students Create Economic Development Plan for Waterman

As part of Aurora University’s **Master of Public Administration Plus One** program, AU graduate students partnered with village officials in Waterman, Illinois, on a yearlong Community Economic Development initiative. The project is the first of its kind at AU.

“The MPA students completed a yearlong project with the Village of Waterman, engaging with community leaders and analyzing data to develop a comprehensive economic development plan,” said Sarah Radtke, professor and chair of athletic training and exercise science, who is also a Waterman village trustee. “They did exemplary work, far exceeding my expectations. They were incredibly professional, always prepared and engaging, and polished in their presentation skills.”

The class of a dozen students met with community members to hear their thoughts on the future of Waterman, prepared a socioeconomic profile of the village, and presented it in a special meeting to the village board. They also drafted

survey questionnaires that were administered to residents, and they hosted a community visioning session.

The project culminated in the Waterman 2020 Comprehensive Plan, which outlines the first steps in generating a new wave of economic growth while preserving the small town’s historic character. The students presented their plan to the village board at the end of their MPA program.

“The students engaged in a sustained, high-impact experiential learning project that combined their classroom learning with the development of management skills and networking opportunities with area professionals,” said Matthew Dabros, associate professor of political science and public policy.

AU’s Plus One graduate programs allow students to complete their master’s degree in one year. In addition to public administration, AU offers Plus One programs in business administration, criminal justice, digital marketing and design, and exercise science.

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## Sundays @ 7 Career Conversations With Alumni

The Office of Alumni Relations and the Center for Student Success launched a new series, Sundays @ 7: Career Conversations with Alumni, in which AU students have the opportunity to engage in a conversation about careers, gain insights into the graduate school application process, and build their professional network. The program is offered live via Zoom at 7 p.m. on Sunday evenings.

Topics featured have included the fields of computer science, accounting, education, psychology, and business. Among the alumni guests: **Elizabeth Crane ’94**, **Ximena Cortez ’17**, **Arlette Millan-Chavez ’12**, **Amir Kirkwood ’94**, **Shaka Rawls ’99**, and **Tomas Valadez ’12**. If you are an AU alumna or alumnus interested in assisting with Sundays @ 7, please email [alumni@aurora.edu](mailto:alumni@aurora.edu).

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## Graduates Recognized With Virtual Commencement

More than 1,500 Aurora University graduates were honored this summer in the university’s first virtual commencement experience. The COVID-19 pandemic called for an alternative to in-person ceremonies in order to comply with public health guidance prohibiting large gatherings. Three virtual ceremonies — undergraduate, graduate, and George Williams College of Aurora University — were broadcast online in July and August.

Much of the pomp and circumstance remained the same as in traditional commencement ceremonies, including remarks by President Rebecca L. Sherrick and Board of Trustees Chair **Hilary Brennan ’83**, conferral of degrees by Vice President for Academic Affairs Frank Buscher, and performances by the AU Chorale. Instead of walking across the stage, graduates appeared on screen in a personalized slide highlighting their name, degree, photo, and honors distinction.

Prior to the ceremonies, AU sent graduates their regalia along with a special “Celebration Box” containing



their diploma, commencement program, and several AU mementos, including a university medallion — allowing graduates to celebrate the day at home with family and friends.

The ceremonies are available for replay through links at [aurora.edu/commencement](http://aurora.edu/commencement).

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## Just in Time for the Holidays: AU’s First Virtual Alumni Cookbook

Keep an eye out for Aurora University’s first-ever alumni virtual cookbook. Since the onset of the pandemic, many Spartans have been spending less time eating out and more time in the kitchen. With the holidays approaching, what better time to share the gastronomic delights of AU home cooks?

From decadent desserts to healthy vegetable dishes, these Spartan recipes will inspire you. The Office of Alumni Relations will be sending the digital cookbook to alumni via email. To receive your copy, be sure your address is updated by contacting [alumni@aurora.edu](mailto:alumni@aurora.edu) or visit [alumni.aurora.edu/alumniupdate](http://alumni.aurora.edu/alumniupdate).

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## AU Awarded National Science Foundation Grant to Expand STEM Education Programs

Aurora University is a recipient of the 2020–2021 National Science Foundation Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program Capacity Building grant to establish infrastructure for subsequent Noyce Scholarship and Stipends programs.

The \$74,910 award will help AU increase the recruitment of high school and transfer students to the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. It will also be used to recruit existing AU students into STEM education majors. The goal is to create a pipeline for new math and science teachers to work at elementary and secondary schools in Illinois serving Hispanic students.

The AU faculty team of **Chetna Patel**, Smith distinguished chair in science and mathematics, chair of physical sciences, and professor of chemistry; **Alma Estrada Rodriguez**, associate professor of biology; **Aubrey Southall**, chair of secondary education and ESL/bilingual education and assistant professor of education; and **Sebastian Wyman**, associate professor of mathematics, was instrumental in securing the grant. **Matthew Kneller**, chair and director of general education and associate professor of communication, will serve as the internal evaluator for the project.

**Jaqueline Babb**, director of graduate studies and assistant professor of digital marketing, was a guest instructor for the HubSpot Academy social media strategy certification program.

**Karol Dean**, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, was elected a fellow through the American Psychological Association. Fellow status is awarded, in part, on the basis of evaluated evidence of outstanding contributions in the field of psychology.

**David Dial**, chair and associate professor of criminal justice, had two articles, “A Police Witness to Protests: Conflict Persists Between Tension, Duty” and “In a Word, Dishonor,” published in the Daily Herald.

**Marissa Happ**, associate professor of social work and coordinator of the Master of Social Work health care track, worked with AU students to provide support for those working in the health care field during the pandemic.

**Denise Hatcher**, chair of foreign languages and professor of Spanish, wrote a teacher’s resource guide for the Teacher’s Discovery reader “Cinco Pesos.”

**Kris Johnson**, associate professor of therapeutic recreation and chair of therapeutic recreation and autism studies, was invited to present the keynote speech at the Illinois Park and Recreation Association’s Therapeutic Recreation Leadership Summit 2020 held virtually in October.

**Dawn Livorsi**, assistant professor of social work, is working with the Aurora Police Department and Family Service Association of Greater Elgin to evaluate their newly launched Crisis Intervention Team Enhanced Program, a co-response policing model in which law enforcement brings a mental health professional on calls to assess, intervene, and make necessary community referrals.

**John McCormack**, assistant professor of religion, “gamified” his Latin American History course, asking students to play roles in games that illustrated course content. The games offered students an alternative to the traditional format of lecture and discussion, and prompted them to become more engaged in critical thinking and oral communication.

**Austin Pickup**, assistant professor of education, authored “Embodied Phronesis: Conceptualizing Materially Engaged Practical Wisdom in Teaching, Teacher Education, and Research” in the Journal of Thought. He also contributed the chapter “Endless Babbling and the Contradictory Nature of Truth in the Rise of Trump” to the new book “On the Question of Truth in the Era of Trump,” edited by **Faith Agostinone-Wilson**, professor of education.

**Aubrey Southall**, chair of secondary education and ESL/bilingual education and assistant professor of education, is scheduled to copresent three sessions at the virtual National Council for the Social Studies: College and University Faculty Assembly in December.

**Stephanie Whitus**, professor of criminal justice, reviewed grant proposals and constructed assessment measures for research and evaluation applications submitted to the U.S. Department of Justice for its solicitations for the Upholding the Rule of Law and Preventing Wrongful Convictions Program and Mentoring Opportunities for Youth Initiative.

**Scott Zinzer**, assistant professor of mathematics, presented at the Mathematical Association of America’s Mathematical Education of Teachers as an Application of Undergraduate Math webinar in May. Zinzer’s Math for Elementary Teachers course was also highlighted in the American Mathematical Society’s “Living Proof” blog.

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*We Are One*  
**AU**

### Students Express Their Gratitude

“Thank you for your generous help during a time when we need it most. I continue to be in awe of the support I have received from Aurora University, and this was one of many ways.”

“Your gift resolved a hopeless situation for myself and my family. I am eternally indebted and promise to do everything I can to pass it forward as often as possible!”

“I want to thank the donors for helping me with a portion of my monthly rent. It took some stress off of my shoulders and reminded me that people care about me and want me to succeed.”

## AU Community Raises Close to \$1 Million in Emergency Relief Funds to Help Students During COVID-19

As the pandemic waged economic havoc on many students and families this past year, the Aurora University community stepped up with a big heart and a powerful commitment to help.

In true Spartan spirit, when it became clear that there was a pressing need, the AU community responded in a tangible way with generous donations to a new emergency relief fund.

The WeAreOneAU fund, created this past spring, supports students facing economic hardship due to the pandemic by providing short-term assistance for basic necessities. The fund is approaching \$1 million, thanks to the generosity and kindness of scores of donors from all corners of the AU community.

“The student need created by the COVID-19 crisis prompted an unprecedented outpouring of giving from AU faculty, staff, and trustees,” said AU President Rebecca L. Sherrick. “The kindness and compassion of our AU community of donors had immediate impact.”

The distributions helped recipients do everything from pay the electric bill, buy groceries, and cover rent. And the much-needed relief allowed many students to focus on their studies during a time of great uncertainty and anxiety, and to continue to achieve their goals.

AU remains dedicated to the welfare of its students, especially amid the challenges of the coronavirus.

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“Over the last few weeks, I found myself worried sick as to how I would get through these unforeseen circumstances. After receiving financial assistance from generous donors, I was able to provide for my children. I am grateful, blessed, and forever thankful.”



## Support the Lakefront Restoration at George Williams College

Earlier this year Aurora University began a multiphase project designed to revitalize the lakeside front door at George Williams College. After all, it was this spectacular natural setting that first drew the founders to the shores of Geneva Lake.

The first phase of the project, completed in June, cleared some cottages from the Williams Bay lakefront. After several years of heavy rainfall and runoff, four of the five cottages were beyond repair. They were compromised structurally and beyond remediation. Now, in place of the cottages is an expanse of lush green lawn and the opportunity to reenvision the GWC lakefront.

AU is working to restore the natural landscape to the fullest extent possible and prevent further erosion of

the shoreline — all part of AU's commitment to remain an environmental steward of Geneva Lake.

Best of all, the project will celebrate the many educators who fashioned GWC's legacy over the years. A shiny brass sailboat weather vane will sit atop the tower planned for a prominent spot lakeside of the Weidensall porch. Affixed to the structure will be two bronze plaques. Honor a favorite professor, colleague, or family member with a donation of \$1,000 or more, and we will list his or her name on one plaque and yours on another.

You may make your gift by returning the envelope below. For more information, contact Meg Howes, vice president for development, at **630-844-5256** or [mhowes@aurora.edu](mailto:mhowes@aurora.edu).



## 'Boat 92'

For more than a decade, "Boat 92" has been a familiar sight at George Williams College, greeting all who pass its prominent home at the lakefront. The sculpture by California artist Max DeMoss depicts a small watercraft made of bronze twigs on a granite base.

DeMoss works primarily in bronze and stone, and boats are among his most frequently explored subjects. Fragmentation, and our human habit of resolving it and seeing wholeness, is a recurring theme in DeMoss' work.

The expansive lakefront at the GWC campus in Williams Bay, Wisconsin, has been a special, meaningful place for more than a century. It was at the lakefront that campus founders lit a dedicatory campfire in August 1884, celebrating the formation of the Western Secretarial Institute. Soon after, platform tents appeared along the shore, providing accommodations just a stone's throw from Geneva Lake. It was at the lakefront that decades of GWC students learned to sail at September Camp. And it was

(and still is) the lakefront that has welcomed campus visitors and guests arriving by boat.

In many ways, the GWC lakefront is the front door to campus. Even from across the lake, the familiar white arch, with the Weidensall Administration Building porch behind it, is instantly recognizable. So too is the Ferro Pavilion, home to *Music by the Lake*.

When plans for the pavilion were drawn up in 2007, two of its earliest champions were longtime Lake Geneva residents Larry and Sue Larkin. It came as no surprise, as the Larkins had been friends of *Music by the Lake* since the very beginning. They were instrumental in raising funds for *Music by the Lake's* new home.

In recognition of the Larkin's support, Aurora University President Rebecca L. Sherrick created the Larkin Sculpture Walk at the lakefront to coincide with the opening of the new pavilion in 2008, and personally selected "Boat 92" to serve as the first sculpture on the walk. It is an entirely fitting choice considering the Larkin's lifelong love of historic boats on Geneva Lake.





## CONNECT WITH US



Keep in touch! Aurora University is your university, and we want you to stay up-to-date about everything happening around the Aurora University and George Williams College campuses.