

COLUMBIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

ALUMNI

MAGAZINE

FALL 2021

Third Time's a Charm

He Overcame Civil Unrest, Language Barriers and More on His Journey to Graduation

Hasan Sami Moudarres

B.S. Information Technology





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Dear Readers,

As Columbia Southern University's new alumni magazine editor-in-chief, I am honored to share your remarkable stories. In my previous role as an admissions counselor, I had the pleasure of hearing your stories firsthand, and I am inspired by each of you knowing that the end of your academic journey is only the beginning.

To say we live in unusual times is an understatement. Even so, I can't help but feel joyful to see how you have overcome what sometimes feels like the impossible. Hasan Sami Moudarres is a perfect example. Moudarres' captivating journey is one filled with hope and endurance as he set out to achieve his dream of earning a degree amid the Syrian Civil War. You don't want to miss out on this one and can read all about it on Page 12.

We love to hear what you have been up to and because of your hard work and dedication, it makes it even more special to celebrate your many accomplishments, like Allyson Kelly's journey to earn her MBA, despite facing tragedy in her home and community. Read more about her story on Page 10. Please continue to share any ideas you have to promote the alumni community and keep the Knight bond strong. Feel free to email CSU-Alumni@ColumbiaSouthern.edu to connect with me and we can work together to find the best way to highlight your success.

None of this would be possible without you. I look forward to seeing what new and exciting opportunities life sends your way. Continue to dream and your efforts will be rewarded.

With gratitude,

Haley Whigham
Editor-in-Chief

**“Believe you can and
you’re halfway there.”**

—Theodore Roosevelt

Ralph J. Blessing

Alumni Association President
M.S. Occupational Safety and Health, Class of 2007



Hello my fellow Knights,

Once again, I am honored to reach out to you during these trying times. Nevertheless, I am excited that we are introducing more alumni into this wild and unknown world. What awaits them, as well as the rest of us, is something I wish we could understand.

With the pandemic continuing to be at the forefront of our daily lives, let's continue to embody what we represent as Knights. During times like these, I wanted to reflect on what Columbia Southern University's Knight represents and why it is appropriate that we are called as such.

First and foremost, a Knight is courageous. Many of us Knights are veterans, public servants and leaders that sacrifice daily for the well-being of others. It is more than bravado or bluster. It is the heartfelt courage to undertake those tasks which many would find difficult, tedious or unglamorous. The ultimate outcome is to graciously accept the sacrifices involved.

The Knight believes in justice. We hold ourselves to the highest behavioral standards. The idea of violating even the smallest of rules weakens the fabric of society for all. We pursue our educational goals while maintaining a tremendous respect for academic integrity.

The Knight believes in mercy. We exercise mercy in our dealings with others, creating a sense of peace and community, instead of provoking hostility and antagonism. Our actions in the community should be representative of what we believe.

The Knight is generous. It is not only about material goods, but also time, wisdom, attention and energy. These exceptional virtues create a strong, rich and diverse community. Carrying the CSU banner, we should always focus on helping others.

The Knight possesses faith. In the chivalrous code, faith is indicative of trust and integrity. We are always faithful to our promises, no matter how big or small they may be. This is indicative in the time and effort we put into pursuing higher education while prioritizing work and our loved ones.

Finally, the Knight is always filled with hope. Hope is present with us daily and shows through our positive outlook and cheerful demeanor. This is our shining armor that protects us and inspires those around us.

This is Columbia Southern University. This is who we are and will continue to be. Although at times we may find the road difficult, we as Knights shall always prevail.

With the most humbled heart,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ralph J. Blessing".

Ralph J. Blessing



SPOTLIGHTS

Alumni



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International



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Military



Allyson Kelly Overcomes the Unexpected While Earning MBA

Cover Story



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EVENTS



The CSU Alumni Relations team is digging deep to find new ways to serve communities all over the U.S. Read more on page 17.

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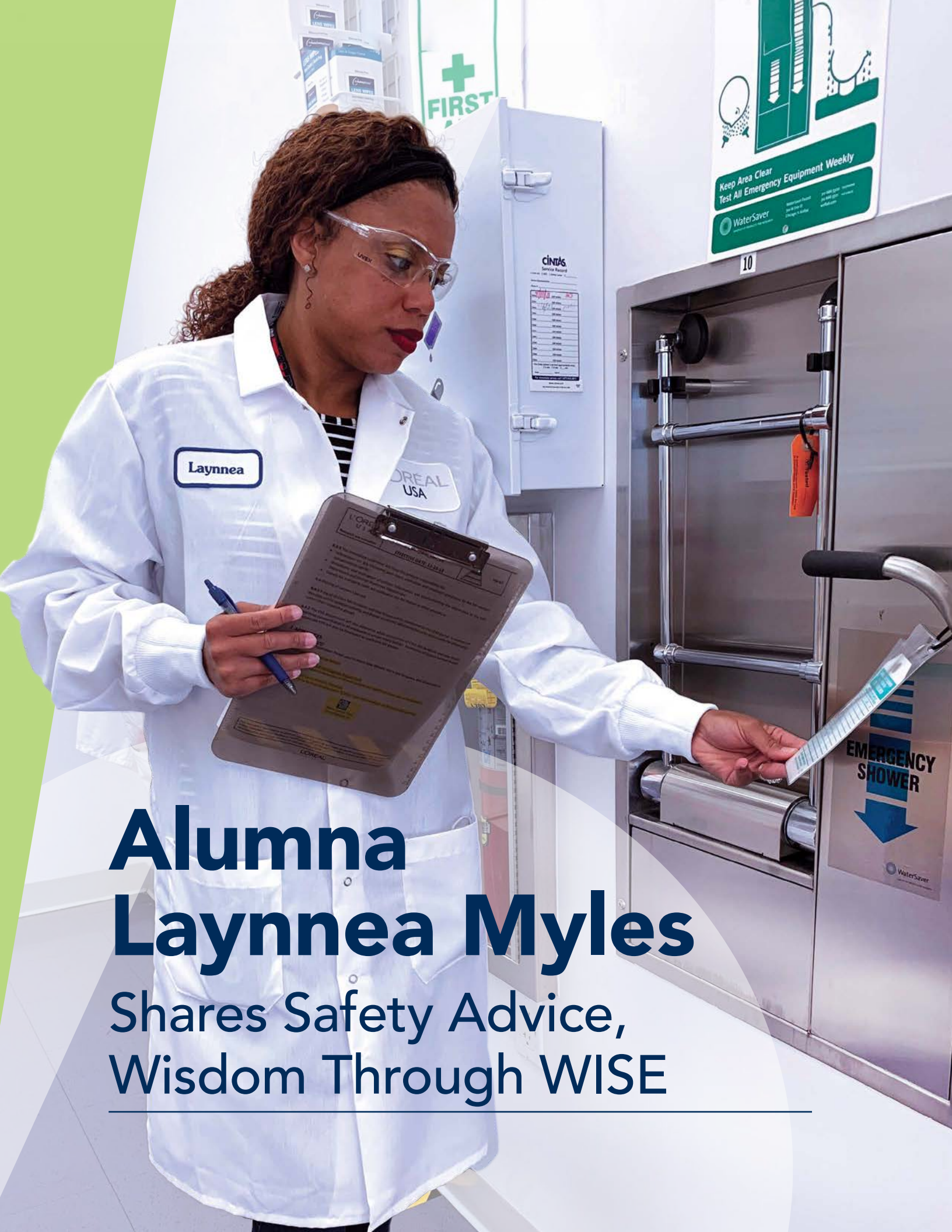
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Alumna Laynnea Myles

Shares Safety Advice,
Wisdom Through WISE

Myles and the Women in Safety Excellence Focus on Mentorship for Women in Safety

At her core, Laynnea Myles is someone who truly enjoys helping others. Her work in occupational safety and health as an environmental health and safety expert stands as a testament to this. For 17 years, she has motivated, energized and empowered people to consider the importance and value of EHS.

"I chose occupational safety and health as a career because it requires engagement with employees at all levels within the chain of command who have different backgrounds, expertise and job descriptions; all requiring a need to lead, coach and train in continuous improvement in EHS to help ensure that safety is a core value," said Myles.

Myles, who holds both Associate Safety Professional® and Certified Safety Professional® designations through the Board of Certified Safety Professionals, is the assistant vice president of EHS at L'Oréal in New York.

After starting as an intern with L'Oréal in 2004, she slowly climbed the ladder to her current VP position for one of the world's top cosmetic companies. Throughout the climb, Myles stuck to her mantra of making safety a core value: "safety first, safety always."

Part of the reason she enjoys EHS is because no day is the same.

"Each workday is enriching since my job is diverse," she said. "My environmental health and safety responsibilities can impact and engage in every aspect of the work culture, facility management, operations, compliance, and return on equity; all benefitting employees and the company."

Myles, a 2009 CSU graduate with a master's in occupational safety and health, also has a drive to mentor to women in the safety field.

"I try to teach them that you have to be true to who you are and always remain humble. Also, not to let a setback hold you back from achieving your goals and dreams. Lastly, not to measure your success based upon someone else's," explained Myles, who has been mentoring others since high school.

Myles takes mentoring seriously as she understands her responsibility to help others and offer guidance when she can. Those who have sought out Myles as a mentor have commented on her advice being heartfelt and sincere.

"I hone in on my creativity and servant leadership style to enable me to take an analytical, yet hands-on approach to giving leaders the tools they need to have an interdependent EHS culture," she said.

Along her journey, Myles has won many professional awards including: the National Safety Council's 2020 Rising Stars of Safety Award, the 2019 Women in Safety Excellence (WISE) mentoring program's excellence award, the 2018 WISE mentoring program's excellence award, and the American Society of Safety Professionals' (ASSP) Student Strategy Task Force President Award for 2013-2014.

She is also a member of several professional organizations such as ASSP, Blacks in Safety Excellence (BISE), WISE and the ASSP's Outstanding Student Section Award Committee.

When Myles is away from work, she enjoys dancing. She is currently the dance ministry leader at her church, Morning Star Community Christian Center, and serves as a volunteer for church activities. She also likes playing games that keep her mind sharp, relaxing at the spa and watching one of her favorite movies, Star Wars.

"Honestly, I'm extremely busy. Nevertheless, I'm never too busy to help someone," she said. "I feel that God has opened so many doors for me that I cannot let my ego allow me to think I got to where I am by myself."



Le Manh Hung

President and CEO of the Vietnam Oil and Gas Group



Pham Duc An

Chairman of the board of directors of Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development of Vietnam

Graduates Elected to Vietnam National Assembly

Two graduates of Columbia Southern University's Center for International Training Cooperation (CITC) in Vietnam, Le Manh Hung and Pham Duc An, were recently elected to the Vietnam National Assembly. Le Manh Hung, president and CEO of the Vietnam Oil and Gas Group (PVN), and Pham Duc An, chairman of the board of directors of Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development of Vietnam, are both MBA graduates of the CITC.

The National Assembly is a 500-delegate legislative body elected to a five-year term and meets twice a year. Because it is the highest government organization and the highest level representative body of the people of Vietnam, it has the power to draw up, adopt and amend the constitution, as well as make and amend laws.

Hung has worked many years in the oil and gas industry. In 2000, he began working as a technological engineer in the joint venture of the Viet Nga Refinery. In 2006, he was transferred to the government office as an officer of the Department of Oil and Gas. A year later, he returned to PVN as deputy director of the oil and gas processing department. In 2009, he

was elected deputy director general of Long Son Petrochemical Joint Venture Company, project manager at Ca Mau Gas Power and Fertilizer Complex. In 2011, he was elected general manager of Ca Mau Petroleum Fertilizer Company Limited.

An is a tenured financial professional, holding many senior banking positions over the years. He has been the deputy general director of Bank for Investment and Development of Vietnam, vice chairman of the board of directors, chairman of the Vietnam Banks Association and general director of Vietnam Russia Joint Venture Bank.

Congratulations on your achievements. We wish you well in your new positions.

Robert G. Mayes Memorial Scholarship

The Robert G. Mayes Memorial Scholarship was established in memory of Dr. Robert G. Mayes, Columbia Southern University founder. This scholarship is awarded annually to one CSU alumnus who wants to further their education by obtaining a master's degree.

The 2020 recipient of the Robert G. Mayes Memorial Scholarship is Juan Steele.

Steele, who has served 20 years in the U.S. Army, earned his undergraduate degree from CSU. He plans to use his degree to work for the Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure that veterans' financial needs are met.



“The veteran’s claims process is very important to service members and their families. The financial support and medical readiness for those who fought wars and represented our flag are the least we owe these men and women,” he said. “I feel I can make a lasting change in the way veterans are treated and viewed.”

Congratulations to Juan and to all of the 2020-2021 scholarship recipients! If you are interested in applying to a CSU scholarship, visit

ColumbiaSouthern.edu/Scholarships

STAY CONNECTED TO YOUR FELLOW KNIGHTS

As a graduate, you are automatically inducted into the CSU Alumni Association. Through your complementary membership, you will receive invites to alumni events, a subscription to the Alumni Magazine and more. To ensure you receive the full benefits of your membership, verify your contact information by visiting

Alumni.ColumbiaSouthern.edu/In-the-know.



Alumni Association

Once a Knight, Always a Knight.

Military

Spotlight

Allyson Kelly

Overcomes the
Unexpected While
Earning MBA



Life can change in the blink of an eye, and Allyson Kelly knows this firsthand. Having grown up in a military family and marrying her husband Timothy, a Navy chief, Kelly is no stranger to the unexpected.

“As a military spouse, I am very familiar with the uncertainty of everyday life,” she said.

“I don’t know what non-military life is like, what it’s like to live in the same town for most of your life. I do know what it is like to start over in a new town and not know anyone. It’s normal, as a military spouse, to meet other spouses and wonder how much longer they will be stationed here.”

In her continuous state of transition, her education at Columbia Southern University has remained the constant she needed to stay on course. Kelly says it is challenging enough to work full time, teach part time and still make time for her studies.

“It was daunting to think about working on my MBA, especially after so much time has passed since I received my bachelor’s. CSU made coming back to school an easy process.”

Kelly, a recipient of the Chantell Cooley Military Spouse Scholarship, began making great strides with her degree at CSU. Even still, she was not prepared for what was next.



Allyson stands with her family after receiving the Chantell Cooley Military Spouse Scholarship.

In September 2020, the Gulf Coast was met with a series of destructive hurricanes, including Hurricane Sally, leaving coastal cities with flooding and no electricity for weeks. As Kelly’s home of Pensacola was the target, she looked to CSU for support.

“I was left with no ability to maintain stable internet or a stable mindset. CSU responded with such kindness and understanding,” she said. “I even had to extend the end date of one of my classes and I figured I would have to pay a fee, and that was not the case.”

Following the hurricane, Kelly came face to face with her most difficult challenge yet. The sudden loss of her father put another halt to her studies. Dropping everything to take care of arrangements, Kelly reached out to CSU for guidance and was told by her advisor to take as much time as she needed, that CSU would always be right here.

“My dad tried to pass his military education benefits on to me, but had a challenging time working with the VA,” said Kelly. “He was so proud of me when I told him that I received the Chantell Cooley Military Spouse Scholarship, and I would have my MBA paid for! He even drove three hours to be with me at my scholarship presentation after having surgery the day prior. It is not going to be the same not having my dad at graduation, but I know he will be there in spirit, and I know I am making him proud!”

Despite the odds, Kelly is graduating in October 2021. She hopes to serve others and share her story to inspire military students or anyone who faces hardship while earning their degree.

Currently, she is the center operations supervisor for the USO aboard Naval Air Station Pensacola. The USO is an organization dedicated to keeping service members connected to family, home and country throughout their service to the nation.

“USOs are the home away from home for service members,” she said. “Helping service members and their families is something I love to do and with my MBA, I am excited to make a bigger impact on military and their families.”



 COLUMBIA
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Third Time's a Charm for Hasan Sami Moudarres

He Overcame Civil Unrest,
Language Barriers and More
on His Journey to Graduation

For 22 years, Hasan Sami Moudarres called Aleppo, Syria, his home. It's where his family lives, where he grew up and where he began pursuing his degree in technology at Ebla Private University. What he didn't know was that his time at the university would be short-lived.

"About two years into my studies the civil war began in Syria and my college was like a warzone right in the center," he said.

Hasan Sami found himself surrounded by destruction and gunfire amid the Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011.

"We would be inside a class and hear bombs exploding. There was once a student at the university who was even taken by an 'unknown entity.'"

Three years into earning his bachelor's degree, the university was demolished by a bomb, forcing Hasan Sami to pause his studies and move to a safer city: Vienna, Austria, or as he likes to call it, "My place to start over."

Hasan Sami moved in with his aunt with the intention to complete his degree. But first, he needed to learn the language.

“There is always a way. Don’t lose hope.”



“Arabic is my first language. It took me around eight to nine months to become fluent in German. I moved to Austria in June of 2013 and was able to start taking college courses in March of 2014.”

For seven years Vienna was Hasan Sami’s home. He enrolled in the software engineering program at the Technical University of Vienna, where he started his bachelor’s program all over again. Although none of his credits transferred from Syria, that hurdle was not enough to overpower something stronger within him—his determination.

“I told myself I am approaching 30 years old without a degree and I have to do something with my life.”

And then, he met the love of his life, Natasha.

“I met my wife in Vienna, and she was an American living there. She was my key motivation during the struggle with my studies.”

After meeting Natasha, the pair decided to relocate to the United States. For her, it meant moving home, but for Hasan Sami, it meant moving to another country. Although the decision was made, preparation for the move would be a lengthy process.

“Going through the immigration process took some time and I still had my heart set on earning my degree. I wanted to find a school that would accommodate my situation.”

Hasan Sami had two priorities when it came to choosing his third school: flexibility and time. After many years of trying challenges to earning his degree, he wanted the quickest route possible and that is where Columbia Southern University came in.

“CSU provided the best opportunity for me. I was even able to have all my previous credits from my schools in Syria and Austria transferred over. On top of that, CSU provided me with a way to maximize my speed to be able to complete my degree. I knew then this was the school for me.”

With his heart now set on Columbia Southern University, Hasan Sami knew he would have to understand English in an academic setting to fulfill his dream.

“I knew a few words in the language, but when I started at CSU, I had never written a sentence in English. I had to take the Test of English as Foreign Language exam and passed on my first try,” he said. “Ironically, my first two classes were English Composition 1 and American Government, two good classes to take if you are moving to America.”

Hasan Sami was able to pick up where he left off in his education pursuing a bachelor’s degree in information technology.

“I was always fascinated with what a computer can do, and I always wanted to explore technology more. My mother is an electrical

engineer, my father is an architect, and my sister is an IT professional which inspired me to follow in their footsteps in a creative field I admire,” he said.

Because he was not employed, he was able to complete his degree in no time and continued to balance the time spent on his education with his focus on the immigration process.

“I was very afraid to go into this process a third time, but in the end, it’s all about finishing what I started.”

“CSU’s LifePace Learning® option worked best for me because of the self-structure. I was able to put everything on hold with my classes for two weeks to get everything finalized and packed to make the move to the U.S.”

In July of 2020, despite a global pandemic, Hasan Sami made his way to America. He earned his degree only a month later with a 4.0 grade average. Now pursuing a master’s degree in homeland security with CSU, Hasan Sami is concentrating his studies on global terrorism.

“I hope to use the experience of terrorism I have been affected by as an advantage in a career in both technology and homeland security. I can relate to these situations and I know many people from many different backgrounds.”

After living in three continents, speaking three languages and attending three universities, Hasan Sami Moudarres was determined to



Hasan Sami with his wife, Natasha.

finish his college degree. Just like everything else in his life, earning his education from an online university in Alabama was not a part of that plan.

“I was very afraid to go into this process a third time, but in the end, it’s all about finishing what I started. There is always a way. Don’t lose hope. I never thought I would be

finishing my degree in America with an online university from Alabama, but now I am really proud of that.”

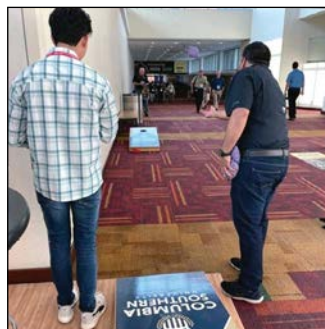


Events *In Review*

August 2021



Pensacola, FL | The CSU Alumni Association hosted a day at the ballpark to cheer on the Pensacola Blue Wahoos. As a long-standing Blue Wahoos partner, the alumni association and CSU's military outreach team together attended military appreciation night. Dr. Ernie Rosado, director of military outreach, threw the first pitch!



Indianapolis, IN | In August, CSU's alumni relations team attended the annual Fire Department Instructors Conference International held in Indianapolis, Indiana. Students and alumni who attended the conference participated in raffles, won CSU merch, played a few rounds of cornhole and enjoyed lunch together. This year's conference boasted multiple alumni panelists and instructors, as well as 125 student and alumni attendees.

April 2021

Pensacola, FL | This April, CSU sponsored the annual Pensacola Beach Firefighters Challenge. Each year, Pensacola Sports hosts the event as firefighters test their strength, agility and teamwork skills during this fun, family-friendly event.

February 2021

Houston, TX | Students and alumni from the Houston area came to the Houston Service Project to support the Kashmere Garden to prepare for the spring harvest. Students and alumni enjoyed fellowship and a picnic lunch as they served their community

*Upcoming* Events*November* 2021

Tampa, FL | Join us this year for the Tampa Firefighters 10th Annual Fire 5K Nov. 6, 2021. Tampa area alumni are invited to participate in the race or cheer on the racers.

One hundred percent of the race proceeds Fun/Run benefit Camp Hopetake, a weeklong summer camp hosted in Tampa for children who have survived a burn injury.

Visit the Columbia Southern University Alumni Association Facebook group for more information.

**Tampa
Firefighters
10th Annual
Fire 5K
Nov. 6, 2021**

100% of proceeds
Benefit Camp Hopetake



Boast Post

AUGUST 2021

Don Justus

Don Justus has been named interim head coach for the University of Hartford's softball team, the Hawks. Justus has spent the past two seasons with the Hawks, joining the coaching staff as an assistant prior to the 2020 campaign. Justus graduated from Columbia Southern University with a bachelor's degree in business sports management.

JUNE 2021

Brittnie Granville

Brittnie Granville is the current Miss Black Alabama USA. "I entered the pageant because I wanted to be a role model to other Black women. I wanted to be a positive representation of single mothers who may feel like they are overlooked or ignored in a society that views them as problematic," said Granville. She is a 2014 graduate of CSU.

Ray Iverson

As the new fire chief of the Redwood City (California) Fire Department, Ray Iverson has been tasked to lead a push to increase diversity in the fire department. He also serves as president for the International Fire Service Foundation, and is an adjunct faculty member for City College of San Francisco. He is a 2018 graduate of CSU.

FEBRUARY 2021

Joy Nichols

Joy Nichols was promoted to the rank of deputy chief of the Fairhaven Fire Department in Fairhaven, Massachusetts. Nichols is the first woman to hold the position. She also made history in 2015, when she was promoted to the rank of lieutenant, making her the first woman to hold that rank since the department's inception in 1812. Nichols earned her master's in emergency services management from CSU in 2021.

DECEMBER 2020

Riki Franco

CSU graduate Riki Franco, and her husband Oron, were recently featured on "Shark Tank" with their product, Prime 6. It is a uniquely shaped charcoal which is carved from hardwood waste sawdust, it is then compressed and slow-carbonized into dense charcoal. The pair received an investment from one of the sharks of the show.

NOVEMBER 2020

Lamonte Tyler

Gulf War veteran Lamonte Tyler of Gwynn Oak, Maryland, was recently featured in the Voice for Veterans spotlight by WMAR-TV. Tyler was spotlighted for his passion for helping the community, such as mentoring kids on a football field, training children and women in self-defense and buying food for the homeless. Tyler is a 2018 MBA graduate.



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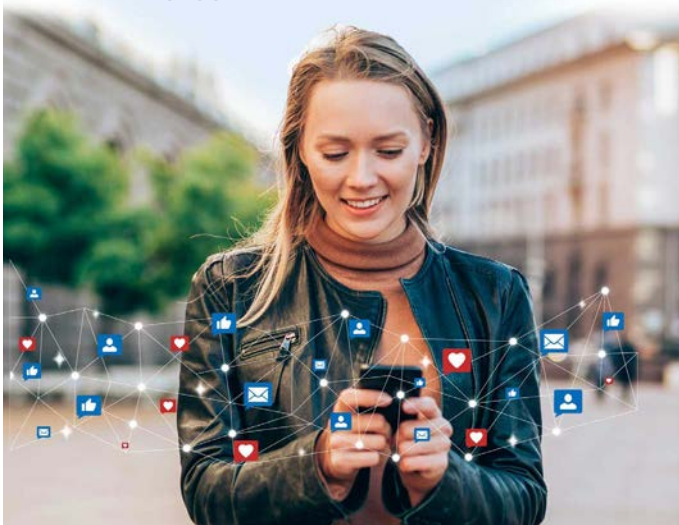
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DET Honor Society Welcomes New Inductees

The Delta Epsilon Tau international honor society was established to recognize the achievements of individuals who work diligently to acquire new knowledge and skills from an accredited distance learning institution. Columbia Southern University extends its congratulations to its latest inductees for their outstanding work and efforts.



Ernani Valencia Braganza

Latifu Onaije Brooks

Jeffrey Mark Brown

Teresa Ann Dillingham

Daryl James Hogan Jr.

Ricky Anthony King

Lucinda Fitzhugh Ward

CSU alumni who have earned a bachelor's, master's or doctorate degree with a minimum of 3.8 GPA are eligible to be invited to join the DET honor society. CSU administrators submit names of potential inductees routinely to the DET president based on the current criteria for DET recognition.

To learn more, visit ColumbiaSouthern.edu/Alumni/Organizations/DET.

Introducing “Inside the Industry: Professor Spotlights”

Columbia Southern University's Department of Career Services is pleased to introduce a new faculty spotlight series: “Inside the Industry: Professor Spotlights.” This virtual series was developed to introduce students and alumni to CSU's expert faculty members.

Learn more about our professors' career paths and their teaching philosophies. Get an insider's look at the classes they teach and hear their advice for eager industry professionals. You can also connect with the professors to ask them questions about their chosen industries.

“At the end of the day...your calling has to be something bigger than you.”

Dr. Terrance Hinton



View Dr. Hinton's interview or the entire series on the CSU Career Services YouTube channel and CareerQuest.



Omega Nu Lambda Scholarship Recipients Announced

Columbia Southern University's Department of Career Services is proud to award the Omega Nu Lambda Scholarship to its latest recipients. Omega Nu Lambda, a national collegiate honor society, was founded to foster community, provide encouragement and acknowledge the academic success of online students.

In order to obtain the scholarship, students must maintain a 3.2 GPA, be in good academic standing and actively participate with CSU Career Services. The 2020-2021 scholarship winners are: Montgomery

Ambrose
 Aaron Bachelder
 DeAnjelo Bradley
 Soraya Brewer
 Soha Brohi
 Jennifer Campbell
 Michael Connolly
 Jenny Flores
 Carly Green
 Jared Green
 Brian Jones

Amethyst Johnson
 Misty Lake
 Gerald Lavergne
 Tamara McCloud
 Elizabeth Newman
 Stephanie Perell
 Tyler Savage
 Tanya Smith
 Alan Storer
 Marsha Willis-Flowers
 Sydney Melton

The Omega Nu Lambda assists in the cost of one future CSU course and recognizes the accomplishments of Omega Nu Lambda student members.

"Fulfilling my dream will help me with advocating on behalf of others and assisting with improving quality of life for those displaced," said Tamara McCloud who is pursuing a master's in health care management. "I am thankful to be a student and thankful for the opportunity to be considered for such a great reward."

To learn more about the Omega Nu Lambda Scholarship, visit ColumbiaSouthern.edu/Scholarships.

Columbia Southern University Financial Aid Team Assists High School Seniors with FAFSA



Photo (Left to Right): Marie Williams, director; Leanne Smyth, financial aid supervisor; Britney Tankersley, financial aid specialist; Meghan Moore, financial aid specialist.

Columbia Southern University's Office of Financial Aid has launched an initiative to help local high schools and seniors fill out financial aid documents, including the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

CSU's efforts urge students, families and school staff to learn about access to federal, state and institutional student aid. For many college hopefuls, the FAFSA is a vital form that can help make dreams a reality through education; however, completing this government form can be challenging.

CSU's first outreach event occurred in 2019. Morrell Baxter, a Baldwin County

public schools career coach, called CSU's Office of Financial Aid Director Marie Williams for help answering questions at the Daphne (Alabama) High School FAFSA Night.

"I jumped at the opportunity to give back," said Williams. "I remember being 17 and trying to complete a paper FAFSA that was pages and pages long. It was so overwhelming! I was the first in my household to go to college. There was so much that we didn't know or understand. I wished someone would have taken the time to help me."

CSU staff has also worked with counselors and career coaches at Foley High School

and Elberta High Schools in Alabama. Williams stressed that CSU's efforts are volunteered and meant to only help with FAFSA, not recruit or require students to apply to CSU for their college education.

There are a few proactive steps students and parents can take prior to filling out the FAFSA form. Williams recommends establishing the federal student aid identification (FSA ID), gathering tax documents and planning at least an hour to work on the form. Students should also seek general financial aid and college planning information before applying for federal student aid.

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