

THE

Rock

Spring/Summer 2026
Slippery Rock University Magazine



From *Firestarter* to *Founder*

How one entrepreneur's big idea became Slippery Rock University's boldest investment in business education.

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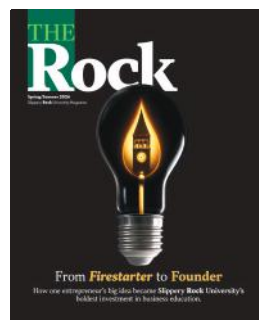
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Igniting Impact

This issue of The ROCK magazine explores what it means to be a "Firestarter" — not just in title, but in action. Inspired by Elliott Haverlack's philosophy of servant leadership, these pages bring to life the idea that true leaders ignite change by investing in others, leading with purpose, and committing to something greater than themselves. Haverlack's journey from SRU student to accomplished executive, author and philanthropist sets the tone: **leadership is not about personal gain, but about creating opportunities that spark lasting impact.**

From the advice in Elliott's business book titled "Firestarters," to Elliott and Rhonda Haverlack's historic investment in SRU (see page 8), SRU embodies this mindset across our faculty, students and alumni communities. It lives in classrooms where faculty challenge students to think and grow, in alumni who carry The Rock's values into their professions, and in current students preparing to lead. This issue highlights those stories — graduates who have become catalysts in their fields and a rising student poised to do the same — each exemplifying the spirit of a Firestarter.



ON THE COVER

Inspired by the cover of Elliott Haverlack's book "Firestarter" (see above), this cover uses elements from the "Firestarter" cover art with an SRU accent of Old Main tower in the flame illustration. The theme of this issue is centered on "firestarters" in the SRU community.

The ROCK is published two times annually by the Office of University Marketing and Communication for friends and alumni of the University. Send story ideas or feedback to news@sru.edu. Send Class Notes or updates to contact information to alumni@sru.edu or by using the online form at rockalumni.com.

Address changes can also be submitted to:
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1 Morrow Way • Slippery Rock, PA 16057

Message from the President



**When you
invest in people,
you create
momentum that
extends beyond
our campus.**

Greetings,

As I talk with students, alumni, employers, legislators and many others who are invested in what we do at Slippery Rock University, the story that I often tell is that The Rock is on the rise. This isn't just a catchy phrase. It sums up the SRU community's forward-thinking approach to student success that has produced measurable results, from our largest single-year enrollment increase in 20 years to our record-setting retention and graduate rates.

Especially during a time when the higher education landscape is often defined by uncertainty, SRU is demonstrating what is possible when we expand opportunities for our students and strengthen the communities we serve.

Sparking Change

We rise by sparking creativity, intellect, and the caring ambitions of our students. To use the title of one of Elliott Haverlack's books, we are "Firestarters" who fuel the potential in others. Fittingly, that's exactly what Elliott, '80, and Rhonda Haverlack did with their historic investment in SRU. Their transformative gift of \$5 million not only established our first named college, the Haverlack College of Business, it also empowers and supports student scholarships, faculty research, facility enhancements, and much more.

Their generous philanthropic act is an inspiration for us all and an example of how contributions — small or large, of time or money — can provide a spark for those to rise within the SRU community.

Lasting Momentum

Firestarters understand that progress is built, not assumed. They recognize that when you invest in people — when you remove barriers, create pathways, and open doors — you create momentum that extends far beyond our campus. It reaches into our classrooms, where students are challenged to think critically and ethically; into our labs and studios, where curiosity and collaboration drive discovery; and into the broader community, where graduates return as leaders, educators, and contributors who lift others as they climb.

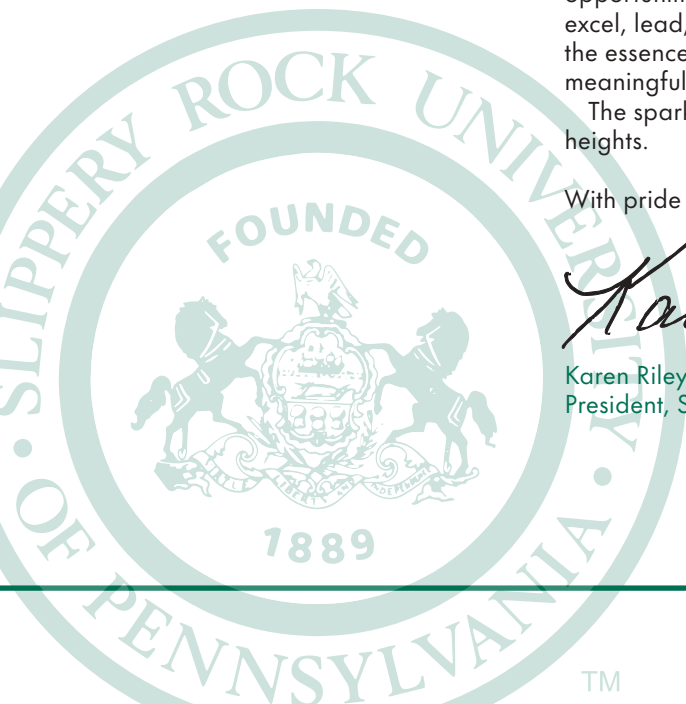
At SRU, this approach has proven to be a model for success, through personalized support, experiential learning, faculty mentorship, and opportunities for civic engagement that consistently produce graduates who excel, lead, and contribute to society in their careers and communities. This is the essence of SRU's mission: to prepare students not just for careers, but for meaningful lives of impact.

The spark is here. And together, it continues to blaze, lighting the path to new heights.

With pride and gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Riley".

Karen Riley
President, Slippery Rock University





Case for Investment

At a time when many colleges and universities across the nation are confronting enrollment declines and uncertainty, SRU continues to demonstrate that strategic investment in student success produces measurable results.

- Undergraduate enrollment is up 3.4%, the largest single-year increase in 20 years.
- The first-year class is the largest cohort at SRU since 2019.
- 86.4% of the first-year students from fall 2024 returned in 2025, which is the highest retention rate in the State System in the last decade and an SRU record.
- 58.3% of undergraduates are graduating in four years, which is the highest graduation rate in the State System in the last 20 years and an SRU record.

SRU President Karen Riley gave a testimony before the Pennsylvania House of Representatives' Appropriations Committee on March 11 at the State Capitol in Harrisburg, highlighting SRU's strong performance and growing momentum, while underscoring the value of continued investment in Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education.

Scan this QR code for a summary of her testimony.



Launching Aviation Careers

Future pilots can now earn their bachelor's degree at SRU thanks to a forward-thinking "co-enrollment" model that is allowing students to be simultaneously enrolled at SRU and the aviation pathway at Community College of Beaver County (CCBC).

Students will progress toward an associate degree from CCBC and a four-year bachelor's degree from SRU, securing a solid foundation for growth in the high-demand field of aviation.



Hunger-Free Campus

One of SRU's commitments to student success is combatting food insecurity through the nurturing support of programs like Rock Pantry+, which offers SRU students free food, toiletries and other resources. Rock Pantry+ received significant boost thanks to the PA Hunger-Free Campus Grant of \$60,000 from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Hunger is a nationwide issue for college students, with 41% experiencing food insecurity. The pantry at SRU serves more than 350 unique students each semester with a combined 13,000 pantry resource visits.





New Four-Year Nursing Program

SRU is expanding access to one of the most meaningful and in-demand careers by introducing a four-year, pre-licensure Bachelor of Science in Nursing program beginning in fall 2026.

Adding to the University's existing 1+2+1 nursing program and online RN-to-BSN program, this new program is designed for students who want to start and finish their nursing education at SRU.

Top Student in the State System

Abby Becker, who graduated from SRU in May at age 19 with a degree in mathematics, won the prestigious Syed R. Ali-Zaidi Award for Academic Excellence from Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education. As the top graduating senior across all 10 State System schools, Becker is the first winner from SRU since 2014. She finished her degree in just two years after taking community colleges courses in high school.

She's now working as an actuary analyst at Erie Insurance and plans to pursue a master's degree in actuary science through an online program at Boston University.



Community Engaged

The American Council on Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has endorsed SRU with the 2026 Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, recognition as one of the nation's most prominent colleges and universities for its commitment to community engagement. SRU, which first earned this elective designation in 2020, is one of 237 institutions to earn this classification.



AACSB Accredited



SRU's School of Business within the Haverlack College of Business has once again proven to demonstrate exceptional quality. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB) has extended SRU's accreditation, reaffirming that the University's School of Business meets the highest standards for its five-year review after AACSB first accredited SRU in 2020.

Only 6% of the world's schools offering business degree programs are accredited by AACSB International. Schools with AACSB accreditation offer higher-quality programs that directly benefit students, result in increased graduation rates and produce graduates who are sought after by leading employers.

STUDENT FIRESTARTERS

One of the namesakes for SRU's new Haverlack College of Business (see page 8) is Elliott Haverlack, author of "Firestarters." Here are two stories of SRU students who embody the firestarter mentality in how they inspire and empower others.

By Nina Sgro, '26M

Mentor who lights a spark in others

As an aspiring educator, Dimajio Locante is well aware of the importance of providing opportunities for young people to develop their skills and broaden their horizons.

Locante, a Slippery Rock University sophomore secondary education major from Pittsburgh, got to do hands-on work last summer with former Pittsburgh Steeler Charlie Batch's Camp Batch, which seeks to provide students with such opportunities. Locante's experience with the camp also gave him unique insight for his teaching career.

"At camp, we have children from all different walks of life, but many are low income," Locante explained. "Not all teachers have experience working with students from low-income backgrounds and how that affects a kid. They don't know how to deal with having students from a mix of backgrounds. Camp Batch gave me a new perspective in my education career."

The experience underscored the importance of education as advancement and informs Locante's own philosophy as a future educator and as a leader.

"I love helping people, and I love the idea of being able to mold young minds, not just to be able to adjust to society, but to be able to shape it," Locante said. "Kids are the future."

Locante applied his experience at Camp Batch to what he contributes to SRU community as he prepares for his teaching career.

In Locante's opinion, the lion's share of mentorship is relationship building, in the classroom and beyond

Students don't just succeed — they create pathways and lift others along the way.

as a youth mentor and leader among his peers as the president of Black Action Society at SRU.

"Collaboration is very important to me," Locante said. "I want my classroom to be a social and collaborative space, and collaboration is something that I had to learn as a leader."

Locante explained that when he took on the role of president of BAS, he tried to do all of the work himself before realizing that delegating and taking advantage of the strengths of his fellow executive board members led to better outcomes for his club.

"That's when we're the strongest," he said. "That's when we can truly advocate for our culture and speak on our experiences and build community on campus. Being an advocate in Black Action Society and in the classroom go hand in hand for me. It's about making connections to meet goals."

Locante's work is all about people. Connecting people, advocating for people and helping others to be the best that they can be.

"When I wake up, my first thought is boom, 'How can I make someone's day today?'" Locante said. "(This approach) builds community and it builds relationships.

That's what you need to do because we're humans and we need each other."

For him, it's all about spreading that spark, something that he knows he can do in the classroom and also hopes to do by starting his own non-profit one day, investing in young people the same way that his mentor Batch does.

"We're meant to share our light," Locante said. "We're meant to spread our joy."

A secondary education major, Locante applies his experiences as a counselor at Charlie Batch's Camp Batch to leadership and mentoring roles at SRU.





Green turned an internship at BNY into a full-time job after graduating, while co-founding a student organization for women in business in between.

Blazing a path for women in business

Krislyn Green was empowered by opportunities at Slippery Rock University, from classroom learning and campus involvement to practical experience through her internships with a Fortune 500 company.

A senior management major, Green never considered a career in the financial services industry before her 10-week internship with BNY in Pittsburgh last summer. That opened her up to possibilities for her career, but it also motivated her to blaze a trail for other women like her.

Green and fellow management major Andrea Bauer founded the Women in Business student organization at SRU.

"We established this organization to empower women in the business world," Green said. "We do a lot of professional events and networking as well as attending conferences. It's so important to us because it helps people to get excited about their career.

"We're really invested in exposing members to opportunities that allow them to grow professionally and to be prepared for their careers."

Investing in SRU fuels "firestarters" who drive lasting change beyond campus.

One of the things that Green's organization seeks to prepare members for is the necessity of collaboration in business. While the business finance world that Green is emerging into is often perceived as a cutthroat and perhaps isolating world, she maintains that collaboration is crucial to success in business.

"In this world, you do have deadlines and it's a very fast-paced environment, but you also have to be able to delegate tasks to one another and to work together to get everything accomplished," Green said. **"There's really no better feeling than to achieve something great together and to navigate challenges together."**

On top of Women in Business, Green is also the president of Society for Human Resource Management at SRU, and she has spent significant time working with her fellow executive members to provide opportunities for members through that organization as well. She also attends Butler County Chamber of Commerce meetings to network with other area professionals in order to learn from, connect with and serve other members of her community.

As an accomplished member of the area business community even at this early stage of her career, Green received some exciting news from BNY after her internship.

Upon graduating from SRU in May, Green joined BNY full-time as an analyst.

"I'm excited to be an SRU alum, to continue to support Women in Business at SRU, and to continue being involved in professional organizations in Pittsburgh and in Butler County," she said.

While Green will continue to climb higher in her professional life, she is committed to staying connected to the places and organizations where she developed into the young professional that she is today.

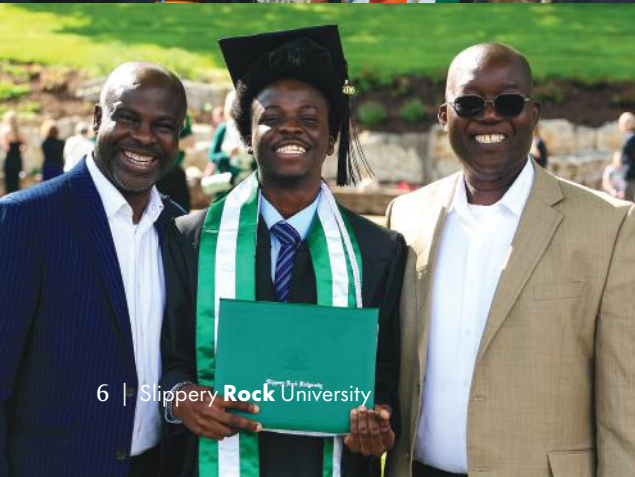
Nina Sgro is a graduate assistant of editorial strategy in SRU's University Marketing and Communication Office. She is secondary education-English master's student from New Castle.

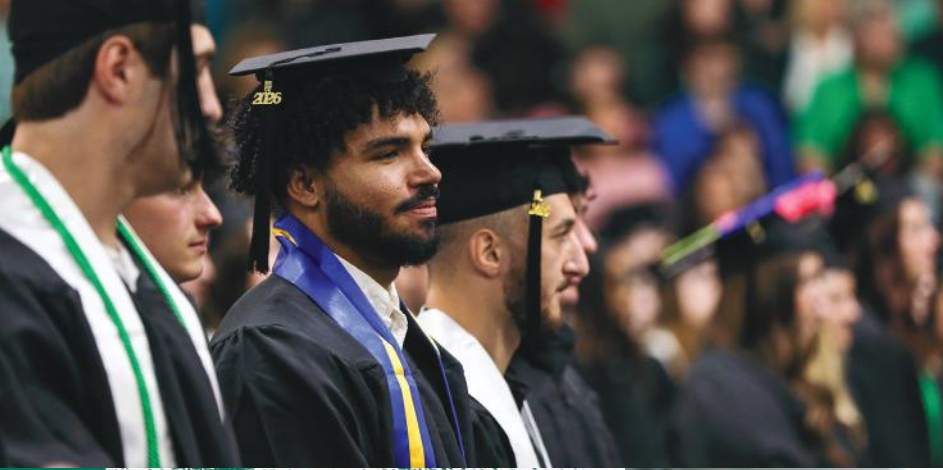


**OWNED IT.
ROCKED IT.
Ready for What's Next.**

Joining a community of more than 80,000 alumni, graduates from SRU's Class of 2026 celebrated their achievements as the University hosted four spring commencement ceremonies, May 8-9, at Morrow Field House.

More than 1,600 graduates had their degrees conferred at the ceremony, including 20 members of the U.S. Army ROTC program who read their oaths and were commissioned as officers with the rank of second lieutenant.







HAVERLACK
College of Business

SPARKING FIRE IN OTHERS

How Elliott and Rhonda Haverlack's transformative \$5 million gift changes lives

To be a leader, you need to create a spark in others. Whether you are running a company, teaching the next generation or investing in a meaningful cause, small actions can make a big difference. Elliott Haverlack wrote about impactful leaders in his business book "Firestarter: Igniting Change Through Leadership."

"It's a philosophy of servant leadership," said Haverlack, '80, a Slippery Rock University graduate whose career as a business executive spanned more than 40 years in the consumer-packaged goods industry. "If you want to lead, you better be prepared to serve. You can spark excitement and you can create an inferno that is inextinguishable."

This philosophy isn't limited to starting and selling businesses, which Haverlack and his wife, Rhonda, did. It's how people commit themselves to a worthy mission, which the Haverlacks did in a big way. Their recent \$5 million investment in SRU is the largest in University history. The transformative gift not only established the Haverlack College of Business, the first named college at SRU, it also aligns with the Firestarter philosophy because it will empower and support student scholarships, faculty research, facility enhancement and expanded student opportunities in SRU's college and programs.

"Education does so many things," Haverlack said. "It is the best way to stop the cycle of generational poverty because not only does it equip you with the skill set, but it also equips you with discipline and it enables belief in yourself."

Donor support fuels scholarships and experiences that empower students to succeed and lead.

Rhonda and Elliott Haverlack attended the first commencement ceremony at SRU for a named college in December 2025, celebrating with graduates, faculty and Prasad Vemala, dean of the Haverlack College of Business.



Ben Addison, '87



Ben Addison is a lifelong number cruncher. Sure, there are nuances and facets to his work in technology asset review, risk management and governance that he could get into, but his job is to help others succeed within standards. He started in the insurance industry before working 28 years for PricewaterhouseCoopers, one of the largest accounting firms in the world.

Now that he's retired, Addison reflected on his career and what his SRU education has meant to him.

"I had a successful career because of Slippery Rock," said Addison, who graduated in 1987 with a degree in computer science and a minor in business. "As many others who have donated back, I'm just grateful for the education that Slippery Rock provided me, and I just want to keep it going."

Like his career mission to help other succeed within the standards, Addison is "keeping it going" by empowering students to achieve. Support from scholarships funded by alumni like him, prevents students from having to crunch the numbers and make difficult decisions.

"I hear the stories of people dropping out during their sophomore or junior years because they didn't have the money and couldn't continue on," Addison said. "I was the first in my family to go to college, and I was fortunate enough that my parents paid for my education, along with the help of scholarships, and I came out with zero student debt, which was almost unheard of back then for a family from Sharon, Pennsylvania, whose dad worked for General Motors. So I was very grateful for all of the scholarships that I received, and if I hadn't received them, I probably would not have been able to go to Slippery Rock. Scholarships are the catalyst that keeps people going to the finish line."

Having just crossed the finish line of his career and into retirement, Addison continues to be a starter — that is, a Firestarter — through his philanthropic support.

Eric Conley, '90



The spark that ignited Eric Conley's 32-year career in health care leadership started at SRU. Today, he's an executive vice president who oversees Sentara Health's 12 hospitals in Virginia and North Carolina, system-wide pharmacy and inpatient rehab, home health and hospice. But his first leadership position was captain of The Rock baseball team.

"Leading a high-performing team of individuals who are all driving toward accomplishing a major goal," said Conley, a 1990 graduate with a degree in health services administration. "That opportunity really helped develop and initiate my leadership skill set. And then in the classroom, I had opportunities to do projects for hospital administration where I got to lead small teams on trying to accomplish a goal of a case study that our professors were leading us toward."

As Conley has gone on to achieve success in his career, he continues to invest in SRU because the University is providing optimal conditions for more students like him to flourish.

"The importance now is investing in it to make sure that legacy of success continues — administrative success, athletic success and academic success, as well as the success of being a student in today's environment, which gets harder from a cost perspective," Conley said. "Slippery Rock has just done an amazing job over decades, so it's about investing in and supporting a university that knows how to do it and do it right."



Elliott and Rhonda Haverlack joined SRU President Karen Riley for the unveiling of the Haverlack College of Business sign during a naming ceremony on campus April 23.

Investing in SRU sustains a legacy of opportunity, leadership and lifelong impact.

An SRU education, in particular, is something that Haverlack believes in. After earning a degree in environmental science, he went on to become a successful business executive in the companion animal consumer product industry.

"Slippery Rock remains true to its mission, just like it was 40 years ago when I was a student," Haverlack said. "Here, people teach you how to think, not what to think, as well as the self-confidence that bubbles up because you're part of a family and an institution where the professors care."

After growing up near Slippery Rock and graduating from his hometown University, Haverlack became a logistics manager for Ralston Purina before working as a vice president of logistics in the H.J. Heinz Company. He later became president and chief operating officer of Meadville-based Ainsworth Pet Nutrition. After retiring in 2012, he and Rhonda were cofounders and principals of Targeted Pet Treats headquartered in Warren, a business that they later sold.

Throughout his career, Haverlack developed high-performing teams, earning a reputation for driving growth through "people-first" strategies. During his retirement he committed to sharing his approach to leadership and business as a three-time published and two-time Amazon Best Selling author.

Opportunity for Impact

The Haverlacks' commitment to sharing knowledge and supporting philanthropically is rooted in education.

"Education has always been my passion," Haverlack said. "I've always wanted to teach, and I've always tried to teach my employees and my superiors or anybody that will let me teach them. And I said to myself, 'How can we help the most people with the kind of amount of money we have to work with?' That's when I thought about the University and what it meant to me as a student. The stewardship and leadership that currently is (at SRU) is about as close to perfect as you could get. That's why I chose to make an investment."

Future generations carry the torch because of donor investment.

Although they never intended to have a college named after them, the Haverlacks were convinced to set an example for others like them who have been blessed with successful lives — being the leaders who provide a spark.

"We never imagined we'd have this opportunity," said Rhonda Haverlack. "Slippery Rock will always be home for Elliott, and it's become a special place for both of us. Our hope is that every student who walks through these doors knows that the opportunities available to them are limitless."

Not only did Elliott Haverlack make a financial commitment to SRU's business programs, but he became a student by enrolling in the Master of Business Administration program last fall, saying he never worked at anything in his life harder than earning a graduate degree at age 67. Being compelled to stand by the product and attending the school that bears his name are consistent with his strong beliefs. When Haverlack worked at Heinz, he would eat ketchup every time he'd eat in a restaurant — despite not liking it.

The Rock, however, fits his tastes.

"Slippery Rock offers the best blend of authenticity, approachability and affordability," Haverlack said. "All are welcome, and you're going to get the real deal when you come here."

SRU Responds

"We are deeply grateful to the Haverlack family for their leadership and belief in Rock students," said Prasad Vemala, dean of the Haverlack College of Business. "Their generosity ensures that generations of students across all areas of study within the college will have access to meaningful, world-class opportunities."

Within the Haverlack College is a School of Business that is globally recognized. Only 6% of schools have earned the prestigious AACSB accreditation. Vemala considers the Haverlack's investment and naming as a catalytic moment that future-proofs the college and strengthens SRU's role as an economic and leadership engine for western Pennsylvania and beyond.

"We are profoundly honored by the Haverlack family's extraordinary generosity," said SRU President Karen Riley. "This gift is more than philanthropy, it is a legacy of vision, purpose and enduring impact that will empower future generations to learn, lead and succeed."



SCAN HERE to watch a video of SRU students from the Firestarter book club including Birtunen Hartman describing what they learned.

Birtukan Hartman, '28



While Addison and Conley represent SRU's track record of molding leaders who have gone on to achieve great success, current students like Birtukan Hartman are the future. And like Conley was, Hartman is a student athlete.

A rising junior marketing major who is a member of The Rock track and cross country teams, Hartman was part of a student group who read Haverlack's "Firestarter." She's a standout in the classroom and is engaged on campus as a member of a Christian student organization and secretary of the American Marketing Association chapter at SRU.

"One of our sayings on the cross country team is that anybody can be a leader," Hartman said. "Being on a team helps me put others before myself and encourage them."

Motivated by her campus involvement and mentorship opportunities at SRU, Hartman plans to pursue a career as a marketing project manager after she graduates. She has learned that leadership is less about filling a role and more about how she interacts with other people every day.

"SRU has positioned me for success and given me the confidence to become a leader," Hartman said. "Thanks to the Haverlacks and all the coaches, professors, donors and everyone who contributes to the student experience here at SRU, **I now have a fire that cannot be extinguished.**"

Securing Futures

An expert in cybersecurity, Nitin Sukhija is guiding students to succeed in one of the most critical professionals

By Nina Sgro, '26M



Nitin Sukhija (center) is a leading scholar of cybersecurity who is preparing students for this high demand industry.

Self-motivation, curiosity and resilience are vital qualities for students to succeed in cybersecurity, and these traits are exemplified every day by Nitin Sukhija, Ph.D., Slippery Rock University professor of computer science.

Sukhija is developing students skills so they can reduce risks, secure data and solve problems in an evolving world.

“As our reliance on internet applications and systems grows, alongside the emergence of complex technologies and cyber infrastructures that can be difficult to secure, the importance of cybersecurity becomes even more critical,” Sukhija said. “Furthermore, cybercriminals are continually adapting to these advancements by using automated, coordinated and sophisticated methods to carry out cyberattacks that range from minor data breaches to large-scale disruptions.”

Sukhija, who is the director of SRU’s Center for Cybersecurity and Advanced Computing, was recently named a Trusted CI Fellow, one of only 10 individuals selected for this prestigious cyberinfrastructure fellowship through the National Science Foundation’s Cybersecurity Center of Excellence. Sukhija has participated in research and management of several projects regarding high-performance computing and software security over the last 20 years. His areas of expertise include computing focused on performance modeling, robustness and resilience analysis, cybersecurity, cyber analytics and big data analytics.

He is sharing his knowledge at SRU by teaching the next generation of cybersecurity experts.

“I have found that blended learning has significantly improved student outcomes in my classroom,” Sukhija said. “This dynamic approach connects theoretical concepts with real-world applications in computing and cybersecurity, creating an engaging learning environment.”

Investing today in the leaders of tomorrow.

A key component of Sukhija’s strategy is ensuring that students participate in real-world projects that encourage collaboration with peers in projects related to software development processes that include AI in order to identify programming errors and to evaluate software testing tools.

Sukhija also actively fosters adaptability and continuous upskilling, which allow students to build analytical foundations and develop relationships and the leadership abilities that they need for long-term success in today’s evolving technological landscape.

The Cybersecurity and Advanced Computing Center, launched in 2018, provides students with opportunities to seek mentorship and participate in research and events in cybersecurity and related fields, affording undergraduate students with invaluable experiences that they cannot access at many larger institutions.

Under Sukhija’s guidance SRU students are positioned to be collaborative achievers responding to engaging questions, creating solutions and establishing themselves as prominent voices.

One of 10 scholars in the nation selected as a Trusted CI Fellow, Nitin Sukhija has contributed to several high-performance computing and cybersecurity research projects.



Forward-Thinking Use of AI

Professor Sam Thangiah, who has been preparing SRU students to use AI for the last 35 years, explains the latest advances of this technology



As director of the SRU's AI and Robotics Lab, Thangiah teaches students how to implement AI models and other emerging skills that companies across all industries desire.

Artificial intelligence is transforming the way the world works — and Slippery Rock University is ensuring its graduates are ready to lead that transformation. Few people understand AI and how students can leverage this emerging technology in their careers like Sam Thangiah, Ph.D., SRU professor of computing and security and director of the University's Artificial Intelligence and Robotics Lab.

A member of the SRU faculty for 35 years, Thangiah has helped prepare students to understand AI and use tools and implement systems for decades, dating back to when SRU first offered an elective course on AI in 1991.

Thangiah has become a recognized expert in developing artificial intelligence algorithms to solve complex transportation problems, specifically vehicle routing and scheduling problems that have saved school districts up to 20% on their transportation costs through greater efficiency.

Defining AI

Thangiah said that most people think of ChatGPT when the topic of AI in the workplace comes up. While large language models can learn and adapt like humans, they are just only one small aspect of many other AI models, and they are neither creative nor innovative like humans.

"AI is best and most often used for solving unstructured problems," Thangiah said. "Structured problems are

Supporting faculty who equip students with the skills to lead in rapidly evolving fields.

when you go through a sequence of steps to solve it, and every time you give it an input, you'll get the same output. AI is unstructured so that if you give an input, you could end up getting different outputs for the same input. Artificial intelligence algorithms should be capable of learning and adapting."

Developing and using AI tools are part of a college education today because of their undeniable place in the jobs of tomorrow.

"AI isn't just for coders or computing majors," Thangiah said. "It's impacting a large number of majors and professions."

Examples include the banking industry using AI for detecting and preventing fraud and doctors using AI to read X-rays and scans to identify and diagnose health problems that they might have missed previously. One of the recent milestones in medical science involves protein folding, which is the process by which a protein chain twists into its correct 3-D shape so it can work properly. This application is important because misfolding can cause diseases like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and cystic fibrosis.

Shifting Skills

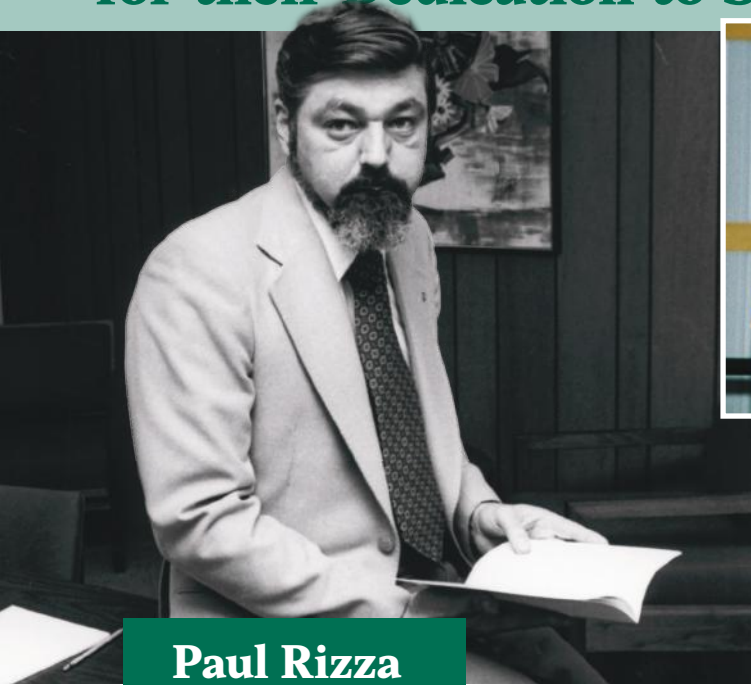
Few people will be solving complex problems like protein folding, but nearly everyone in the workforce will be affected by AI, if they haven't been already.

"AI is going to have a large impact on the workforce, because any job that is repetitive in nature is most probably going to get replaced by AI," Thangiah said. "Everything from manufacturing to customer service, even to point to where there will be robots flipping burgers."

That doesn't mean opportunities are disappearing. Instead, they're shifting toward higher-level work that requires creativity, critical thinking and the ability to build and manage intelligent systems. SRU's curriculum reflects that reality by embedding AI methods and models into computer science, cybersecurity, information technology, and data analytics courses.

"Employers want graduates who can communicate, collaborate and innovate; it's not just about knowing the theory," Thangiah said. "Here at SRU, our students are learning how to implement AI models, work in teams and present their solutions. These are skills that make them stand out to companies looking for more than just academic knowledge."

Celebrating the Lives of Late Faculty for their Dedication to SRU



Paul Rizza

Geography professor and philanthropist who was benefactor of Storm Harbor Equestrian Center

A lifelong advocate for Slippery Rock University and a benefactor of the University's Storm Harbor Equestrian Center, Paul Rizza, Ph.D., left an impact that goes beyond his time as a faculty member – it will be felt for decades to come.

Rizza served SRU from 1972-98 before retiring as professor and chair of the Geography and Environmental Studies Department, but his legacy also includes his commitments to students, global outreach, service in the community and as one of SRU's most resounding philanthropists. Rizza passed away March 13 at the age of 87.

Rizza and his wife, Carolyn Carruth Rizza, who passed away in 2022, were best known on campus for their work founding and supporting Storm Harbor Equestrian Center. Carolyn Carruth Rizza also served on the SRU faculty for 24 years before retiring in 1999 as a professor of sociology and social work. Together, the Rizzas donated more than \$1 million to Storm Harbor, including money to build the center and the endowment to pay its staff.

Storm Harbor provides equine-assisted activities and equine-assisted therapies for children and adults with disabilities, serving people from more than seven counties. It also provides SRU students opportunities to serve individuals with disabilities, giving them valuable field experiences.

Rizza also contributed to scholarships and other financial investments in students and programs that helped empower growth and development.



Paul Rizza, SRU professor emeritus, is pictured left in 1979 and middle at the 2005 dedication of the Storm Harbor Equestrian Center. Rizza, who died March 13, and his wife, Carolyn (together right) devoted their lives to Slippery Rock University as faculty members and dedicated supporter of the equestrian center.

The greatest gifts to SRU don't end with a lifetime — they continue changing lives and strengthening the University for generations.

"His legacy is so much more than about the money he gave, he actually did the work on the ground and met with scholarship recipients and got to know people," said Jack Livingston, an SRU associate professor of environmental geosciences. "He was an incredibly engaging professor who was just always there for you, and he was incredibly supportive of our students, our department and the University."

Although Livingston joined the faculty shortly after Rizza officially retired, Livingston credits Rizza for his mentorship and continued involvement to grow the department as an emeritus faculty member. Rizza's presence ensured the lasting impact from his time as department chair, in which he started a cartography lab and implemented forward-thinking technologies around geographic information systems.

His achievements weren't limited to SRU's campus, as he was deeply engaged in service and global outreach. In 1976, he was awarded a Senior Fulbright Lectureship to Finland, which he adopted as his second country, where he was guest lecturer at three universities and he was selected to represent Finland at the European Fulbright Conference in Berlin.

A member of Rotary International for more than 50 years, he served as president of the Slippery Rock Rotary Club and later as district governor. His commitment to peace and international understanding was evident through his work with the Rotary Foundation, including supporting its Peace Fellowship Program. He and Carolyn endowed peace fellowships and traveled extensively, visiting all seven continents and 87 countries.

Dick Wukich

Pottery professor who advocated for faculty, the arts and humanitarianism

While the annals of Slippery Rock University history are full of

committed, passionate people who have left their mark on the University, precious few can match the particular fire and venerable reputation of Dick Wukich. A former professor of art and trustee, Wukich passed away on Dec. 25, 2025, leaving behind a vast legacy that spans both his active presence on campus and through humanitarian efforts addressing hunger and safe drinking water.

A native of North Braddock, Wukich joined the SRU art faculty in 1968, retiring in 2011. In that time, Wukich impacted the lives of students and contributed to faculty life as a founding member of SRU's chapter of the Association of Pennsylvania State College & University Faculties.

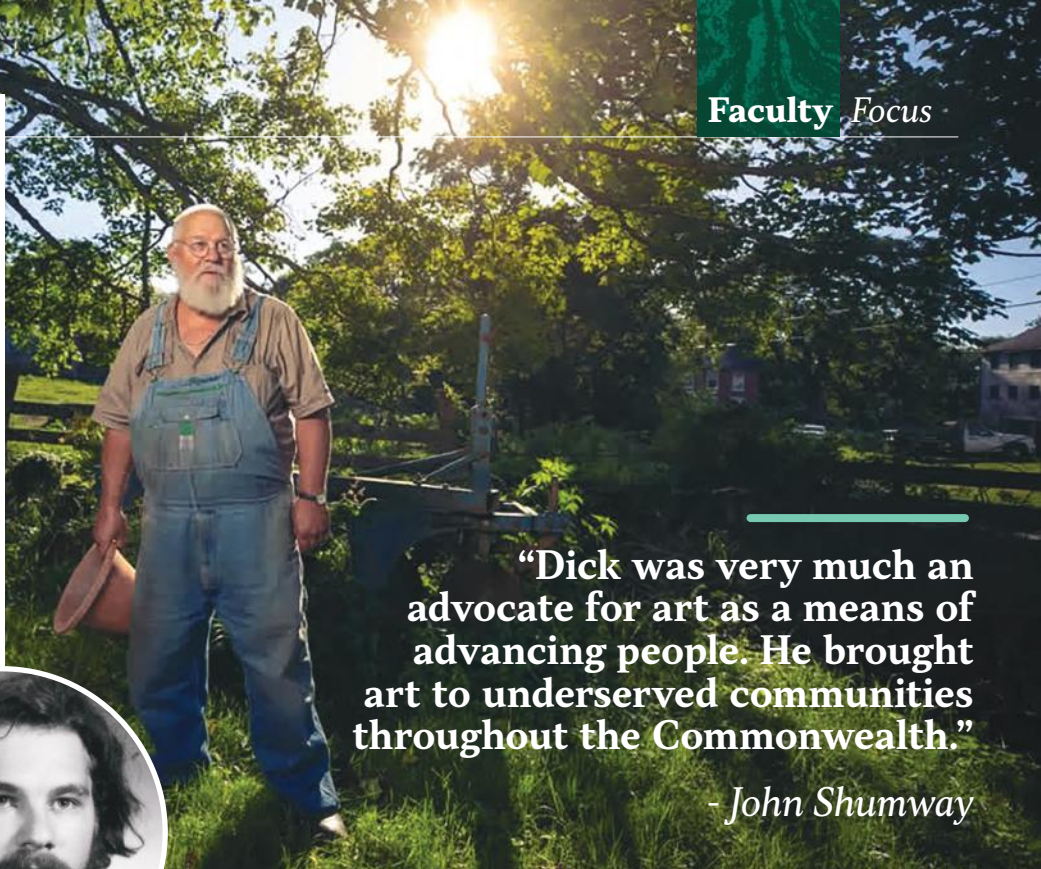
Campus Impact

Wukich's high degree of involvement in the University community and beyond left an indelible mark on his colleagues. SRU art faculty member Jon Shumway recalled Wukich's profound commitment to helping others.

"Dick was very much an advocate for art as a means of advancing people," Shumway said. "He brought art to underserved communities throughout the Commonwealth."

One of those outreach efforts was the Summer Art Academy, a program that brought students from around Pennsylvania to the SRU campus for two weeks of intensive study of artistic disciplines ranging from fine arts to music. Students from towns all throughout Pennsylvania come to campus for two weeks each summer for intensive, conservatory level study of their craft.

The Academy was born of Wukich's desire to provide high quality arts instruction to students from smaller, less



"Dick was very much an advocate for art as a means of advancing people. He brought art to underserved communities throughout the Commonwealth."

- John Shumway

Known for wearing overalls, Wukich was a pottery professor whose clay pots were more than a teaching instrument -- they saved lives. Left, Wukich in the early 1970s.

affluent schools with struggling art programs, giving students from those places an equal opportunity to pursue their passions and broaden their minds.

Legacy of Outreach

The desire to use art to address big issues flowed over into Wukich's life off campus, as well. He led the Potters Water Action Group, an organization that provided ceramic water filters to people in nations living without access to clean drinking water. In his time implementing the filters around the world, Wukich also made connections and memories with the people he came to serve.

"He was promoting the water filter and helping people to establish facilities in Sudan, and he made a little video clip of him where he's chanting 'Here we go, Steelers, here we go!' and a bunch of kids start calling back, mimicking him!" Shumway recalled, laughing. "It was just this little joyous experience where he was sharing where he came from and the kids were just enjoying the experience with him."

That love of where he came from was something that spoke to Shumway throughout their time together.

"He showed the importance of staying true to who you are and standing up for what you believe in," Shumway added. "He had very strongly held convictions, and he held them to his dying day."

It is clear that Wukich left an impression on those who knew him with his strong personality alone, but this larger-than-life figure's legacy is ultimately defined by those he helped as a teacher and activist.



Wukich led the Potters for Peace group at SRU that created ceramic water filters to help produce cleaner drinking water in places like Nicaragua and Haiti after the 2010 earthquake.

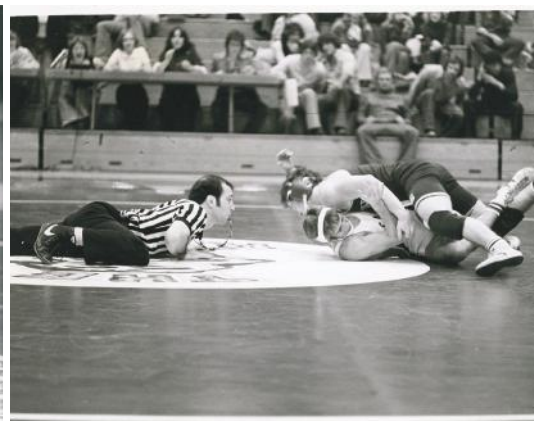
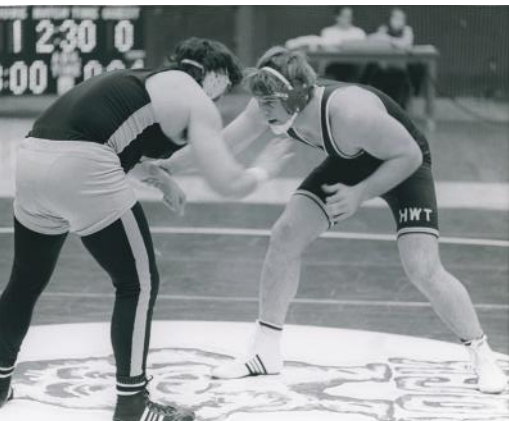
Back on the Mat

Wrestling returns to SRU in 2027 thanks to financial support from alumni

Wrestling is a sport that changes lives, and western Pennsylvania is a place where the best wrestlers are born and raised. Now, thanks to support of loyal alumni, Slippery Rock University is once again a place where college wrestlers can thrive and develop the skills they need to succeed in life.

When SRU announced in November 2025 that the University is bringing back wrestling as a varsity sport for the 2027-28 season, former Rock wrestlers like Robert Dudley could not have been more excited because he knows how important the sport is to not only his fellow alumni but the people of western Pennsylvania and wrestling enthusiasts and, above all, for the opportunities that young men will once again have to succeed on the mat and in life.

"The sport itself changed my life," said Dudley, '77, a retired sales manager who began his career as a physical education teacher. "It changed my outlook and allowed me to pivot from just being able to teach to understanding how to learn. There's a deep appreciation from one wrestler to another, because you know the toughness, hard work and everything that goes along with wrestling and what it takes to succeed."



Many Rock wrestlers competed in the NCAA Division I championships under the guidance of Fred Powell (top), who coached (from left) Anthony Calderaio, Jerry Johnson, Don Henry and Keith DeGraaf. This "Fearsome Foursome" each won Eastern Regional titles in 1982 and qualified for nationals.

Pennsylvania is a hotbed of wrestling with nearly 500 high school wrestling programs, but more noteworthy is how colleges from across the country come the state to recruit the best wrestlers. Pennsylvania high schools produced nearly 300 NCAA Division I All-Americans from 1961-2011. No other state can claim more than 200.

SRU contributed to this rich history with a successful program from 1958-2006, including a 24-year run under legendary coach Fred Powell in which the team won 66 percent of its matches and placed 10th at Division I nationals in 1974. Starting with a 19-0 season in 1969-70, Powell led the team to a seven-year stretch with a dazzling 98-9 record with nine All-Americans at both the Division I and College Division levels.

"Coach Powell was the antithesis of what casual observers would think of a wrestling coach; he was a gentle soul," Dudley said. "He was tough and strong, but he could say the right things without shouting or screaming."

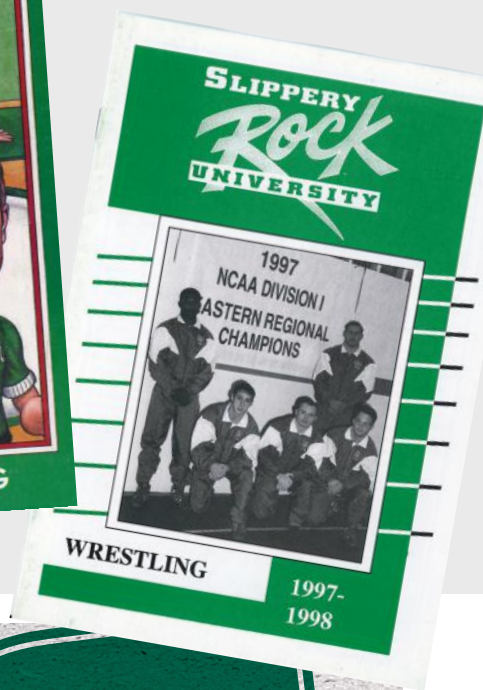
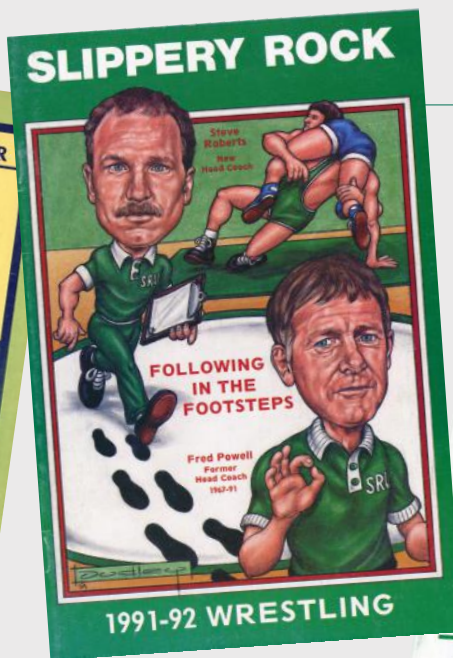
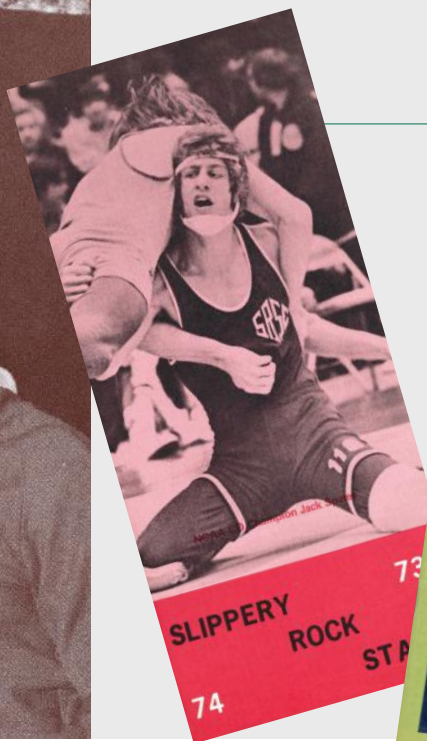
Among the many prominent wrestlers in program history is Stan Dziedzic, '72, a national champion in 1971 who compiled a 118-2 career record and went on to win a bronze medal at the 1975 Olympic Games and a gold medal in the 1980 World Championships.

The Rock will compete in NCAA Division II when wrestling returns, the team's level when the program went on hiatus two decades ago. NCAA rules have changed since the last time SRU fielded a wrestling team and a return to the Division I level is no longer possible.

Still, the excitement and potential for success around the sport has been building. Several supporters banded together to form SRU Wrestling Alumni and Friends Committee, now chaired by John Butch, '72, and the University recently launched a wrestling campaign with an initial goal of \$2 million.

"The passion of the past is coming back and whoever comes to Slippery Rock to wrestle will have a wealth of people supporting their work and effort," Dudley said. "We've got the opportunity to bring back a very successful and respected program, and one that impacted a generation of wrestlers."

SRU competed at the highest level of collegiate wrestling in the 1970s and '80s.



Wrestling media guide covers through the years included a cartoon (right) of Steve Roberts succeeding Fred Powell as head coach in 1991.

"Your support today does not determine if Slippery Rock wrestling returns — it determines how strong it returns."

Dudley has created a dollar-for-dollar match challenge (up to \$250,000) to effectively double the impact of each additional dollar raised to help bring the program's return to the next level.

"Through the support of the alumni and the University, we now can support the sport the way we felt that we should have been able to have before," said Dudley, referencing how donations will provide better equipment and facilities. "We can certainly make sure that whoever comes to Slippery Rock is going to have the best equipment and the best support."

"SRU is excited to revive its storied wrestling tradition, and counts on the support of alumni, fans, and friends to get us to the mat," said Roberta Page, SRU director of athletics. "The campaign will help fund essential needs such as equipment, coaching, travel and scholarships, ensuring SRU wrestlers can compete among the

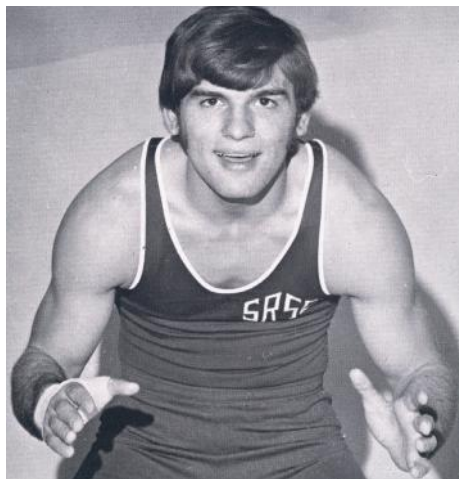
To donate online, visit <https://bit.ly/rock-wrestling> or scan the QR code.



nation's best once again."

"Every gift directly strengthens the program's long-term success by creating a program that attracts and develops top-tier student-athletes," said John Stroup '80, a former Rock wrestler.

"Your support today does not determine if Slippery Rock wrestling returns — it determines how strong it returns."



Stan Dzedzic won the Division I national championship in 1971 wrestling at 150 pounds before earning a bronze medal in the 1975 Olympics.



Women's Flag Football

In addition to wrestling, SRU also recently announced that women's flag football will be a new varsity sport in 2027, backed by a fundraising campaign that launched in January 2026. Women's flag football and wrestling at SRU will increase the total number of NCAA sponsored sports at the University to 19 in 2027-28, including 11 women's teams and eight men's teams.

Flag football has been one of the fastest-growing sports in the country at the youth, high school and collegiate levels, with at least 65 NCAA schools sponsoring the sport in 2025-26 and more than 150 Pennsylvania high schools field teams since the state athletics board approved the sport in 2024.

Family from eastern Pennsylvania on the University that said 'yes'

By Nina Sgro, '26M

When Nancy Zimmerman's daughter Kaylee was searching for colleges, she had a very clear and specific view of what she wanted to study. Despite living in Langhorne, north of Philadelphia near the New Jersey border, the Zimmermans found an ideal match on the other side of Pennsylvania.

A longtime musician, Kaylee wanted to study music therapy and pursue a doctorate in occupational therapy. The Zimmermans desired a school like SRU that would give Kaylee the support and opportunities she would need to reach her goals.

"I spoke to other schools about what she wanted to do, and they all said that it wouldn't be possible because of the way the programs were structured and because music therapy is so specialized," Nancy explained. "I finally contacted SRU, and they said that she absolutely could."

At many schools, occupational therapy programs operate as "3+3" programs in which students spend three years studying occupational therapy as undergraduate

students before going on to spend three years in doctoral programs. While these programs do accelerate students' progress, they aren't always the best path for students with interests as specific and specialized as Kaylee's.

"The approach was to do a traditional four years of undergrad in music therapy and then the three-year doctorate in occupational therapy. The school had physical therapists do this, but Kaylee was the first music therapist," Nancy said.

The Zimmermans are a State System of Higher Education family: Kaylee's brother recently graduated from PennWest California, and both Nancy and her husband attended state universities.

"We looked at a few private schools, too, but the state schools offer so much financially and in terms of overall experience," Nancy said.

While the Zimmermans knew the merits of state schools, their first visit to the town of Slippery Rock for a tour of the University helped seal the deal.

SRU advances students' ambitions by turning goals into life changing realities.

"We call it a 'Hallmark' town,"

Nancy said, praising the small town for its friendly citizens, unique shops and restaurants and well-kept main street.

"We visited campus in the summer, and they put a presentation on, and the head of her music therapy program [Vern Miller] came and talked specifically with her. He didn't have to, but he did."

After that first visit, Kaylee, a French horn player, was put in touch with French horn players on campus and even had a French horn lesson conducted via Zoom with a faculty member. Then, when Kaylee went in for her audition for the music therapy program, she got the opportunity to sit in on classes and to meet other music therapy students who showed her around campus and had lunch with her.

"Everyone went out of their way for her," Nancy said. "After we got home, she was like, 'That's it. It's Slippery Rock. I don't need to look anywhere else.'"

Kaylee's advisers in music therapy and occupational therapy also worked together to ensure that she was poised to approach issues from both disciplinary perspectives to make her a consummate expert in both fields.

While the Zimmermans live on the other side of the state, they knew that SRU was the place for Kaylee when they experienced the University's commitment to going the extra mile to help students meet their personal career goals. The Zimmermans had the confidence to say 'yes' to SRU because SRU first said 'yes' to Kaylee's goals.

Nina Sgro is a graduate assistant of editorial strategy in SRU's University Marketing and Communication Office. She is secondary education-English master's student from New Castle.



From left, the Zimmerman family — Ryan, Nancy, Kaylee and Mike — at Kaylee's graduation ceremony in December 2025. Nancy reflected on how Kaylee found a perfect fit at SRU despite the Zimmermans' living across the state.

Messer Field Dedicated

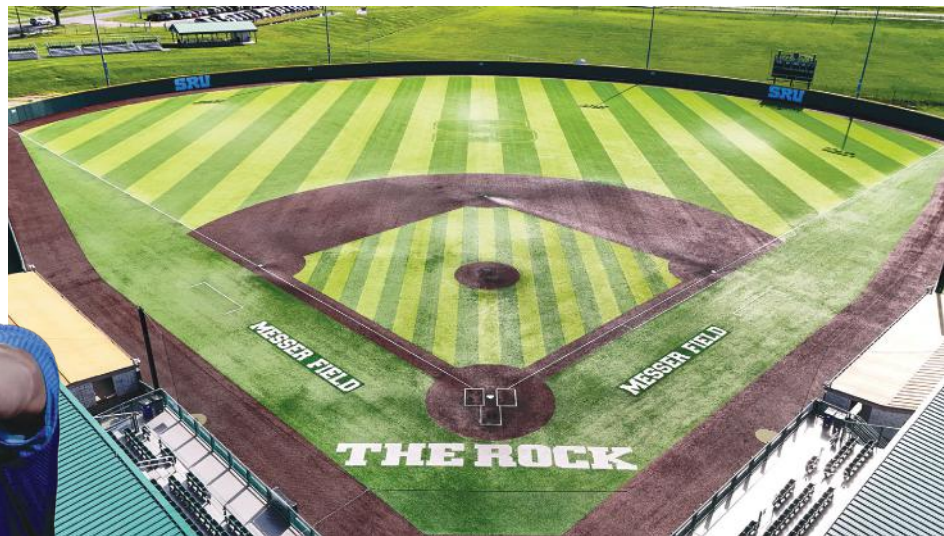
Last fall, the SRU council of trustees approved a naming resolution to honor SRU baseball head coach Jeff Messer, and earlier this spring former players and other alumni and friends gathered to celebrate the honor.

The council approved to name the playing field at Jack Critchfield Park as "Messer Field" in recognition of pledged philanthropic support of the SRU baseball team by alumni and friends to honor Messer. The field and stadium is now collectively named "Messer Field at Jack Critchfield Park."

Alumni from the baseball team have embarked on a \$100,000 fundraising campaign in support of the Messer Field naming project that will support the program and its student athletes.

One of the most decorated coaches in Division II history, Messer has compiled a 1,172-774-5 overall record during his accomplished career at The Rock.

A 2023 American Baseball Coaches Association Hall of Fame inductee, Messer currently ranks eighth in Division II history for wins in a career as well as being the third winningest active coach in DII.



SRU assistant track and field coach Jordan Geist placed second in the shot put at the World Athletics Indoor Championships.

World-Class Coach

One of the top shot put throwers in the world is on the track and field coaching staff at SRU. Jordan Geist, a former NCAA Division I national champion at the University of Arizona, joined The Rock's staff as an assistant coach last fall.

Since then, Geist has continued to compete on the global stage for Team USA at the World Athletics Indoor Championships in Poland. His shot put throw of 21.64 meters earned him a silver medal at the competition.

A native of Saxonburg, Geist works alongside his parents, volunteer coaches Jim and Judy Geist, in coaching the SRU throwers. Both Judy and Jim are in the SRU Hall of Fame after storied careers as members of The Rock track and field program. This winter, Geist helped the SRU men's throwers break two indoor school records.



Springing Champions

The Rock is home to three conference champions this spring. The women's track & field team won its second straight and 19th overall outdoor title at the Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference Championships. The women's tennis team knocked off defending champion IUP to claim its fourth all-time conference championship, and its first title since 2003. The women's lacrosse team finished the regular season with a perfect 20-0 record by winning its first PSAC title in program history (see page 28 for more).

Built on The Rock: Eric Cunningham, '97

Procurement intelligence is the type of service that Eric Cunningham's company provides, but to him it is a proving ground for resilient competitors and collaborative achievers.

"There's a lot of synergies between sport and business," said Cunningham, '97, a Slippery Rock University graduate who earned his degree in sport management before entering the field of technology sales. "We don't call it going to work every day. This is our sport. I treat this like I'm the general manager or the head coach and we all know what we have to do to prepare every day, to get better every day, to win every day. That's the kind of culture that we have here."

Cunningham is the CEO and founder of Green Cabbage, which serves more than 2,600 organizations all over the world using agentic AI to accelerate and facilitate better deal outcomes, strengthen supplier negotiations and help clients make smarter procurement decisions. Headquartered in Cranberry Township near Pittsburgh, Green Cabbage has offices in India, Singapore, London and will soon expand to Mexico City.

Dozens of the 200 employees at Green Cabbage are former college athletes, including Cunningham who played football at The Rock. But that's not the only recipe to Green Cabbage's success with ingredients sourced from SRU.

Cunningham credits the knowledge, network and social skills that he gained at The Rock to prepare him to lead an emerging international company.

"Some of my first phone calls every day are from people that I went to Slippery Rock with, and my last phone calls are people I went to Slippery Rock with," Cunningham said. "I walked away with a lot of lifelong friendships, but a network, too. That helped me grow my business."

Cunningham gives back to SRU as part of what he calls a "circle of life," one where today's alumni recognize they were once supported by others and feel a responsibility to pay that forward.

His story highlights how the University's growth (its facilities, programs and opportunities) exists because generations of supporters chose to invest in students they would never meet. Now, he sees giving back not just as generosity, but as a shared obligation to ensure future students have the same opportunities he did.

"Slippery Rock gave me a lot, so I feel responsible to give it back," Cunningham said. "Somebody was there to donate to help build these buildings, or (provide resources to start a) new track within the curriculum. I just think that if people are in that position, they should give back. Even a little bit helps a lot and it's not always about money. There are other ways to give back."

Making those daily phone calls and strengthening the SRU network while helping others win at the game of life is also part of giving back.

"At our company, we've people who went to Stanford, Wharton School of Business, Harvard and all these Ivy League schools," Cunningham said. "I'm proud to say that I went to Slippery Rock University."



As the CEO and founder of the Green Cabbage, an international procurement intelligence company, Eric Cunningham was positioned for success thanks to the knowledge and network he gained at SRU.

Paw Patrol

SRU alums connect and give back with K9 search and rescue unit

By Nina Sgro, '26M

Denise Ross and Marie Johnson have continued the proud history of Slippery Rock University alumni collaborating to make a difference in their own communities, but this pair is making an impact with the help of their canine companions. Ross, '13M, and Johnson, '19, '22M, are volunteers with Venango County's Rocky Grove K9 Unit.

This small but mighty pack helps track down missing people with the help of their dogs, Willow and Echo.

The team is part of the Rocky Grove Volunteer Fire Department's new canine search and rescue unit, a group of volunteers, certified professionals, and dogs put together to fill the gap in the department and greater community's operations for locating missing persons.

The dogs are trained in such skills as trailing, air scent and human remains detection for anywhere from a year to two years and often serve from six to eight years. The group also meets regularly to keep everyone's skills sharp to ensure that they're ready to help whenever they are called upon.

By day, Ross, who received a master's in special education at SRU, is a reading specialist in a public cyber school. Johnson attained a degree in psychology from SRU before going on to graduate from SRU's physician assistant program and is now working as a physician assistant through Meadville Medical Center. Both Ross and Johnson feel that the careers that SRU prepared them for have helped them in their work with the K9 unit.

"The reason I got involved with the K9 unit relates to my special education degree as well as my personal life," Ross said. "I have an education background, but we also have a foster child on the autism spectrum who is also blind and has a seizure disorder, and my husband and I always worried — if he wandered off — how we could find him quickly. With that concern, we were led to the K9 unit."

Johnson said that her backgrounds in psychology and health have given critical

skills that have helped her understand missing people and how to care for them.

"I studied a lot of the behavior of missing people as an undergrad, so I understand the psychology of people in this situation, and we also deal with a lot of psychological issues when people are missing," Johnson said. "My PA degree also helped me to be able to perform medical care in the wilderness, if necessary."

Ross and Johnson were thrilled to find that they were both SRU alums once they met through the K9 unit.

"Any time I hear that someone is an SRU alum, it's so nice to say, 'Hey! I'm an alum too!'" Ross said.

Their shared affinity for SRU created an immediate connection between the two of them, adding a new level of meaning to their already crucial work.

Ross and Johnson also shared some important tips regarding the pursuit of missing people.

"If you have a family member or friend who is missing, call 9-1-1 quickly," Johnson said. "Not everyone in public safety has expertise in searches, so it's important to call quickly and request those services. We work closely with law enforcement and fire departments and game wardens, so get in touch quickly and request us."

"We want to bring closure," Ross said. "Whether we find a loved one alive or deceased, we want to provide closure. But our goal is to find people's loved ones alive, and an early response helps us to do that. We want to bring the lost home."

Nina Sgro is a graduate assistant of editorial strategy in SRU's University Marketing and Communication Office. She is secondary education-English master's student from New Castle.



Denise Ross and her dog Willow receive regular training so they can find missing people in the community.



Slippery Rock University alumna Marie Johnson '19, '22M, and her dog Echo are volunteers with the Rocky Grove Volunteer Fire Department's K9 Unit.





Full Circle

Sharif Bey, '98, exhibits sculptures at The Warhol Museum for his 'Homecoming'

By Maxwell Hildebrand, '27

SRU alumnus and Pittsburgh native Sharif Bey is a nationally recognized sculptor and educator based in Syracuse, New York (photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center).

Nearly three decades after graduating from Slippery Rock University, Sharif Bey, '98, returns to his hometown's cultural forefront with a landmark exhibition at The Andy Warhol Museum—a full-circle moment that reflects both the scale of his artistic ascent and the enduring influence of his SRU roots.

From June 26 to Oct. 12, Bey will be exhibiting his sculptures at The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. This exhibition, titled "Homecoming," pulls from Bey's experiences across a variety of creative communities, partnerships and residencies, as well as his history as a Pittsburgh native.

"When I was a student at SRU, the Andy Warhol Museum was just getting started," said Bey, who earned his degree in fine arts: ceramics. "And, since I've graduated, I've gone off and done quite a few things, but I'm coming full circle here."

Bey is a professor of studio art at Syracuse University where he's been a faculty member since 2009. He had the opportunity to come home to Pittsburgh

to display his artwork back in 2021 for the Carnegie Museum of Art, but this time feels much different.

Supporting Big Dreams

"That was a wonderful homecoming about six years ago, but I was still coming into my own in terms of the level of support and notoriety that I had," Bey said. "But that really positioned me to dream bigger and invest in my work, not only in ambition, but also momentarily. It's sometimes discouraging when you're creating and producing work to go out in the world, and it doesn't have the kind of impact that you wished for. But, once you get to the point where your work is inspired by major collections and people, it positions you to work on a larger scale."

For Bey, "larger" is both physical and metaphorical, as his sculptures have generated massive amounts of buzz for their monumental size and scale. He creates complex sculptures inspired by modernism, functional pottery and Oceanic African Art.

"When I'm saying larger scale," Bey said, "I mean that literally. The works

in this upcoming exhibition are mostly monumental. I'm talking five to six and a half feet tall."

At this point in Bey's career, the definition of "homecoming" has taken on a different meaning. It is not just about returning home to Pittsburgh, but also about embracing the point of life that you are in and taking pride in where you come from.

"The focus of this show is on homecoming, and what it means to come back to an art community as a seasoned professional," Bey said. "There aren't a lot of mid-career Pittsburgh artists who were born and raised there, like I was. I feel like there's a unique perspective here. I'm turning 52, but I don't see myself slowing down for another 25 to 30 years at least. I'm excited about this chapter of my life, not only as a working artist, but in being able to take inspiration from my hometown. My city."

Shaping Futures

When reflecting on the sources of his creative inspiration, Bey mentioned SRU.

"The impetus of my earliest work



Left, Bey's sculptures "Wanetta Whisper," made of earthenware, mixed media and carbon steel; and "Domestic: Queen," made of clay, glass and metal, displayed at New Orleans Museum of Art. Middle, Bey works in his Syracuse studio. Right, "Crown Series: Iris," made of earthenware, vitreous china, mixed media, and carbon steel. Photos courtesy of Bey and albertz benda.

was the vessel, and I started to make them at a very young age," Bey said. "I worked in a community center called the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild; it's a nationally known community arts organization. They had a world-class visiting artist program, which was so impactful that the arts community, hobbyists, local colleges and professors would converge to partake in it. This program received sponsorship in part by SRU, thanks to the efforts of Richard Wukich."

Wukich was a faculty member at SRU from 1968-2011 who passed away in December (see page 15 for memorial).

"Richard was instrumental in working with the founder of the Manchester Craftsmen," Bey said. "He ensured that these workshops were funded. So here I was, 14 or 15 years old, and I was engaging in hands-on workshops with college students, most of whom were from SRU."

The early exposure to college-level art encouraged Bey to pursue a career centered around creativity and community.

Travel Abroad Experiences Change Lives

"Through that program, I had an ongoing dialogue with SRU faculty and students," Bey said. "And, although I was unsure about what was going to happen after high school for me, I already had my own orientation. Slippery Rock also had a cutting-edge international exchange program, so I knew I would have the opportunity to go abroad."

During his time at SRU, Bey would go on to travel abroad for a symposium, and from 1994-95, he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, Slovak Republic, before earning his degree at SRU. Bey later earned a master's degree in fine arts from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and a Ph.D. in art education from Pennsylvania State University.

"The thing that made my time at SRU so special, is that when you'd work with other students, you get their network," Bey said. "Their network then became a part of the arts and educational community. The faculty would host workshops or

they would bring other artists in. They'd bring their teachers and colleagues from various universities."

Bey felt as if there was always a major sense of community among the students and faculty while attending the University, something that could only be captured at a place like Slippery Rock.

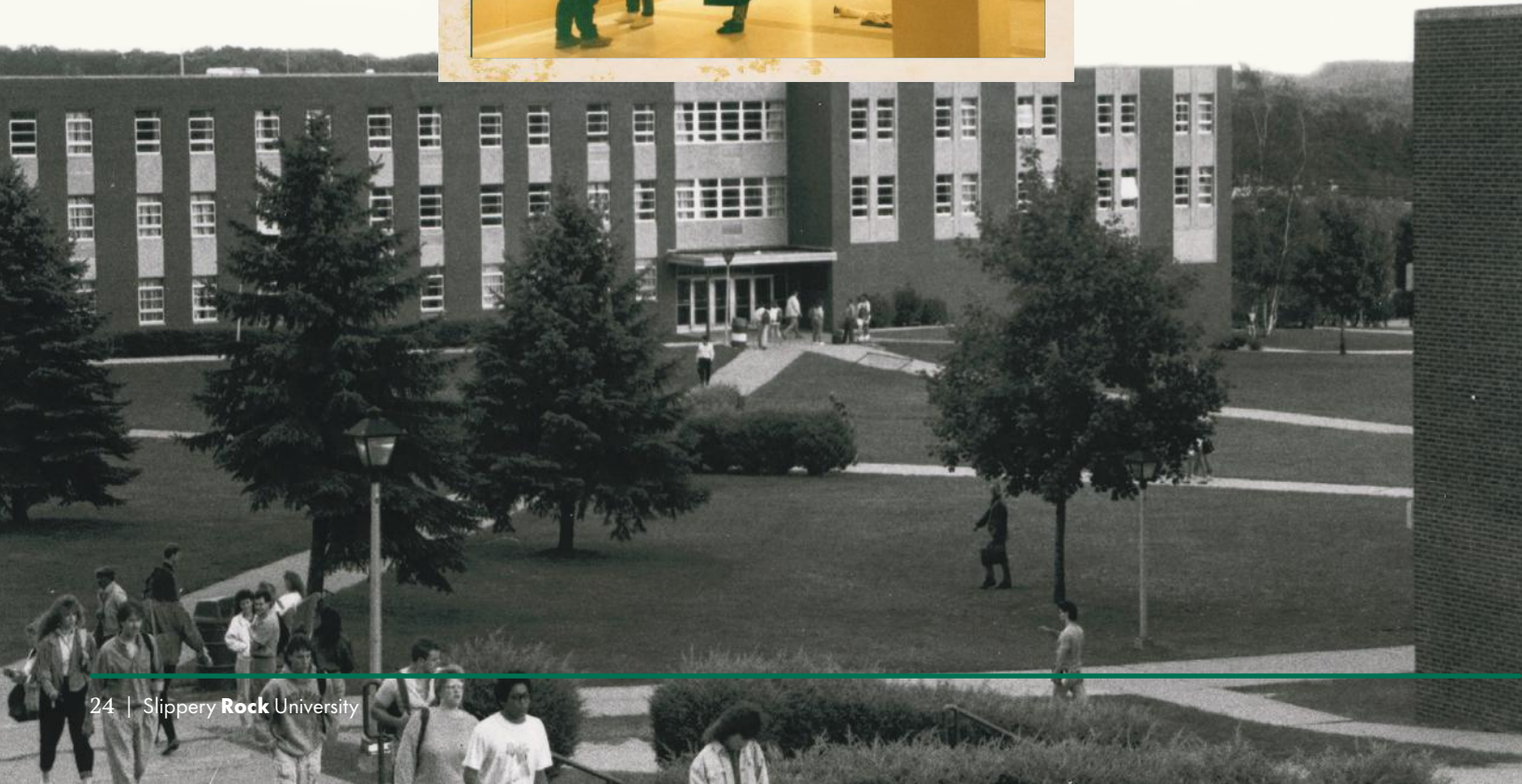
"One of the humble things about the programming that came out of SRU was that we were taught how to engage with a bigger world from a smaller stage," Bey said.

Bey's "Homecoming" exhibition at the Andy Warhol Museum not only highlights his growth as a nationally recognized sculptor, but also reflects the impact of his roots in Pittsburgh. His journey, from early community art programs to international study and large-scale exhibitions, represents how strong artistic foundations and meaningful mentorship can shape a career.

Maxwell Hildebrand is a student writer in SRU's University Marketing and Communication Office. He is an English writing major from Greenville.

From the Archives: Eisenberg Classroom Building

Now home to the Haverlack College of Business (see page 8), the Eisenberg Classroom Building has cradled the lower campus quad since it was built in 1969 (top). Throughout the years (1987 bottom, 1976 middle left) it has housed everything from computer labs to art galleries (middle right).



1960s

Janet (Waddell) Hurley, '63, and Dennis Hurley, '62, celebrated their 62nd anniversary in Edinburgh, Scotland, at the Military Tattoo with the sound of 400 bag pipes. Janet is Scottish.

Chuck White, '68, was inducted into the South Carolina Deaf Athletic of Fame. White was recognized for his 29 years as director of athletics and director of residential life. White was also recognized by the South Carolina High School League for service as coach and administrator.

1970s



Martha and Phill Morgan

Phill Morgan, '73, serves as the national board president of YMCA alumni, which is comprised of more than 1,500 YMCA retirees and spouses representing 17 chapters throughout the United States. YMCA alumni approved a national service project and built a tiny home village (four, 465-square-foot homes) on the Cheyenne River Reservation in Dupree, South Dakota, at the YMCA of the Seven Council Fires. Following their graduation, Phill and his wife, **Martha (Thorn) Morgan, '73,** entered the Peace Corps in Venezuela and thereafter enjoyed careers with the YMCA and in public school education as a media specialist, respectively. Phill and Marti recently celebrated their 52nd wedding anniversary.

Send Class Notes or updates to contact information to alumni@sru.edu or by using the online form at rockalumni.com.



Jesse Sheaffer, '21, and Molly (Sheaffer) Kinney, '77, have a new nephew, Teddy Sheaffer.

1980s

Bob Petrini, '83, was inducted into the Mercer County Athletic Hall of Fame in January 2026. Petrini was inducted into the SRU Athletic Hall of Fame in 1996.

Mike Timpani, '86, authored a book, "Movie Watchers Notebook," a guide for families and movie lovers. Timpani is a media lover and librarian.

1990s

Scott Zema, '90, '92M, was named director of the Office for Students with Disabilities at PennWest University-California, after a 35-year career in intercollegiate athletics as a certified and licensed athletic trainer. Zema started his career at Olivet College as head athletic trainer and served in similar roles at Alfreed University, Stevenson University and California University of Pennsylvania. Zema worked at SRU from 1999-2013 as an assistant professor in the athletic training program as well as serving as the head football athletic trainer.

Judge Nicola Henry-Taylor, '93, was presented the Drum Major for Justice Award January 2026 during the 27th Annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Prayer Breakfast and Program at Mt. Ararat Baptist Church in Pittsburgh. Judge Henry-Taylor is a member of the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas and was recognized for her career that reflects a deep and enduring commitment to advancing justice, equity and meaningful access to the legal system. Judge Henry-Taylor is also a board member of the SRU Foundation.

Mary Beth Jenkins, '93, was named to the Pittsburgh Business Times Power 100, an annual list highlighting the region's most influential business leaders.

Tonia (Asel) Kaufman, '95, was inducted into the Cavalcade of Bands Hall of Fame. Established in 1980, the hall of fame recognizes directors, instructors and organizers with significant, long-term contributions to the Cavalcade of Bands Association, a nonprofit organization of member schools who come together to compete on the interscholastic level.

Douglas Carlquist, '96, was appointed chair of the Pennsylvania State Private Academic School Board by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The board provides statewide oversight of licensed private academic schools and is responsible for approving and renewing school licenses, establishing professional standards, and ensuring quality of educational programs.

2000s



Jason Edsall, '02, was selected as the new dean of the College of Health Sciences at Chatham University. Arriving at Chatham in 2017, Edsall has served as associate professor of athletic training, chair of the Department of Health and Human Performance and program director of the Master of Science in athletic training program.

Tim Moore, '02, will be inducted into the Beaver County Sports Hall of Fame in June 2026. The Beaver County Sports Hall of Fame preserves and celebrates those who have brought recognition to Beaver County through sports. Moore has excelled as a women's basketball coach at Penn State Beaver.



Mark Carothers, '03, (center) was named Wayne Perry High School Principal of the Year by the Maryland Association of Student Councils. This honor recognizes Carothers' outstanding commitment to elevating student voice and leadership. Carothers received the award at the MASC's annual awards banquet, celebrating his work to create meaningful opportunities for students to engage in decision-making and leadership at Poolesville High School.

Rosie Trump, '03, was promoted to full professor of dance at the University of Nevada, Reno. Trump also had an article, titled "The Third Coast Dance Film Festival and COVID-19 Adaptive Programming in 2021," published in the International Journal of Screendance.

Joshua Young, '04, was appointed president of the Caln Township Board of Commissioners. Young, who was first elected as a commissioner in 2005, began his sixth term on the board in 2026 and his first as president. Young is also a member of the SRU Council of Trustees.



Andrew Beers, '06, won the Pittsburgh Technology Council's 2026 Tech Trailblazer Award as part of the council's CIO of the Year and Tech Titan Awards. Beers is a founding partner of Drean Invent Inspire, an engineering lead

team of inventors focused on software as a service technologies and agriculture technology innovation.



From left, **Tanner Ambrisco, '17**, **Lenny Zucco, '05**; **Zach Zucco, '12**; and **Jordan Crescenzi, '14**; are leaders of Keystone Clearwater Solutions, which was named the KPA 2025 EHS Innovator of the Year at the Stars of EHS awards. KPA is a provider of environmental, health, and safety software solutions, as well as work compliance services for a wide variety of businesses. The award honors organizations that demonstrate exceptional leadership, innovation and commitment to safety excellence across industries. Ambrisco is director of HSE field operations, Lenny Zucco is training and employee development manager, Zach Zucco is vice president of operations, and Crescenzi is vice president of HSE.

Dan Hooven, '06, was named vice president of marketing at Schneider Downs, one of Pittsburgh's largest accounting firms. Hooven has nearly 20 years of enterprise marketing experience across the professional services, financial services and software industries. Since joining the firm in 2019, he has served as director of marketing strategy and senior marketing manager.

Susan Kelley, '07, authored "The Before," a creative nonfiction essay, published in "The Perch," Yale University School of Medicine's creative journal, detailing the experience of parenting an adult child with substance use disorder. Beginning in February of 2020, the essay follows a year of a tumultuous sobriety journey and moving from the before to the after in segments of stress, anxiety, hope and fear.

2010s



Mercy (Kroh) Dahlstrom, '17, (middle) and **Nicholas Dahlstrom, '17**, (right) were vacationing in Italy in March when they encountered a fellow SRU alumna, **Scott Spinucci, '91**, (left) wearing an SRU shirt at the Pantheon in Rome and the group posed for a photo. PHOTO

Victor Kustra, '14, was elevated to member (equity owner) of The Lynch Law Group. Kustra is a key member of the firm's business and corporate law, real estate law and business succession planning practice groups. Kustra focuses significantly on mergers and acquisitions and serving as outside general counsel to owners and C-suite executives. Kustra was named among Best Lawyers in America: Ones to Watch in 2024 and 2025, and to PA Super Lawyers Rising Stars List for five consecutive years (2021–25).

Abbey (Ballas) Arrington, '19, earned her Master of Education degree from Western Governors University and Education Specialist degree from Liberty University. Both degrees were in curriculum and instruction. Arrington is a third-grade teacher at West Creek Elementary, Clarksville-Montgomery County School System in Tennessee. Arrington was also named chair of the student support team, third-grade lead reading teacher. Despite being pregnant with her second child and her husband getting deployed, Arrington accomplished all of this within the past year.

Clare Clark, '19, was named on the Pittsburgh Business Times' 30 Under 30 list for 2026. Clark is the coalition manager at the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council.

2020s



Amber Winchester, '21, '26M, was selected as the 2025 Teacher of the Year for Pressley Ridge and Texas Family Care Network. Winchester was chosen among educators across seven states for her dedication, commitment and service to the students and families she serves. In honor of this award, the organization hosted a celebration in February 2026 in downtown Pittsburgh.

Tyler Anderson, '23, was named on the Pittsburgh Business Times' 30 Under 30 list for 2026 for his outstanding work with the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust as an Arts Educator Program Coordinator.

Alyssa Mascolo, '24, an account executive at Havas Red, received Public Relations Society of America, Pittsburgh Chapter, Member of the Year Award.



Mikayla Habursky, '25, continued her education at Kent State University in the political science master's program. Habursky was awarded a full tuition waiver and is a graduate assistant working for the department. Habursky's educational and professional goal is to obtain her doctoral degree to teach at the collegiate level.



Remembering Sally Lennox

Sally Jackson Lennox, '59, who served as SRU's director of alumni affairs before retiring in 1999, passed away April 5 at the age of 88. During her 16 years at SRU, starting as assistant director of development in 1983, Lennox coordinated alumni activities, as well as the production of "The Insider" portion of The ROCK Magazine. Lennox worked closely with the SRU Alumni Association board of directors to fulfill their dream of having an Alumni House on campus that opened in 1998. The Sally Jackson Lennox Patio at the Alumni House is named through her financial contributions to the project's success.

Justin Ventura, '25M, was promoted to senior manager of operations at Saxton & Stump, a law firm with more than 150 attorneys. Ventura works out of the firm's Pittsburgh office, which he helped establish in 2025, and collaborates with the firm's HR, facilities, IT and concierge teams to ensure the firm runs smoothly both daily and with a long-range vision in sight.

Carrington Williams, '25, was named on the Pittsburgh Business Times' 30 Under 30 list for 2026. Williams is a Development Associate at Auberle.

Weddings



Lea Bialek, '16, and Matt Sovocool were married Oct. 3, 2025, in Pittsburgh where the couple also resides.



Billy Killmeyer, '16, and Cassidy Lowden were married Oct. 4, 2025, in Cleveland, Ohio, where the couple also resides.



Mary Thomas '21, '22M, and Aaron Smith, '22, were married June 21, 2025, at the Scottish Rite Cathedral in New Castle.



Carly Cooper, '21, and Logan Conboy were married Aug. 16, 2025, in the mountains of western North Carolina, surrounded by family, friends and several fellow SRU alumni. Standing with them on their special day were Courtney Jakiel, '21 (second from left); Kaitlyn Dietz, '19 (third from left); Samantha Pugliese, '21 (fourth from left); Shelby Searight, '18 (fifth from left); Cassandra Cooper, '18 (sixth from left); and Nick Harayda, '18 (first from right). Carly's stepfather, Joel Brown, '89, had the honor of walking her down the aisle.

Births



Corey DeSantis, '13, '24M, and his wife, Robin, welcomed their first child, Eliana Iris, Aug. 24, 2025. The DeSantis family resides in the south hills of Pittsburgh.



Becky Morgan, '09, and her husband, David, welcomed their first child, Archer "Archie" Gabriel, Oct. 21, 2025.

SRU Alumni Association

Executive Committee:

President, Rajeev Karmacharya '95

President Elect, Mike Zody '88

Treasurer, Don Huddart '87

Secretary, Justina Cerra '13

Immediate Past President, Melissa Visco '04

Board Members:

Angela Beeman '06

Lee Bowers '98

Hollie Carlson '14

Joe Coudriet '23

Joe Dropp '03

Jack Dugan Jr. '87

Bruce Ferguson '94

Claudia Hartmann '18

Lisa McCullough

Holmes '88, '01

Jamaur Law '13

Jeff Milliner '04

Karen Taylor Perry '79, '80

Greg Sfera '78

Chris Thrasher '23

Matt Vannoy '09

Holly Vogt '97

Dave Wolfe '13

Sam Zyrill '78

In Memory

Dorothy J. Colton (Catherwood) '52

Zane L. Nossokoff '52

Elmer C. Morrow '52

Mary Lou Aufmann (Graham) '53

William J. Karpinski '53

James F. Watson '54

Eleanor Stewart '55

Christian F. Lampe '57

Margaret C. Barnes (Patterson) '57

Rose Dillner (Spataro) '57

Joan M. Smith '57

Eleanor J. Ventresca (Depaoli) '58

Thomas P. McCarthy '59

Sally J. Lennox (Jackson) '59, Retired Staff

Rose Walton '59

Vonnie-Kaye Brough (Galvin) '60

Joseph E. Yost '60

Edward McCullough '61

Ethel A. Warren (Myers) '61

Eleanor L. Smith (Anderson) '62

John A. Miller '62

Jane H. Moore (Hughes) '64

James Mirto '64

Tom W. George '64

Donald F. Hannon, Ph.D. '65

Nancy Howard (Kovacic) '65

George A. Marsh '65

Margaret A. Dattilo (Russo) '65

Marilyn A. Natili (Odrey) '65

Frederick Haberlen '66

Pauline Janocha '67

Harry V. Herlinger '67

Michael R. Vankirk '68

Mary B. Benedict '68

Jean M. Thompson (Daughenbaugh) '68

Sally M. Ohi (Labor) '69

Benjamin F. Bruno Jr. '69

Frederick S. Lesnett '69

William J. Murrin '69

Richard B. Ganster '70

Rhonda R. Ridinger '70

Elvasio Vaccaro '70

Edward C. Blanck '71

Paul L. Mills Jr. '71

Cheryl J. Peterka (Hamilton) '71

Mary T. Mintos (Liska) '71

Robert C. Rectenwald '71

Christine Springer (Betty) '71

Maureen L. Galardini (White) '71

Sharon L. Smith '71

James B. Zambelli '72

Mary Del Brady (Delsignore) '72

Paul E. Hohman '72

Richard Berger '72

Michael A. Sheppeck '73

Charlene F. Dillaman '73

Annette Carolus (Roseto) '73

Charles T. Lesnick '73

Mary A. Laughlin '74

Gary A. Jedinak '74

Marilyn C. Bullock (Siuta) '74

Lynn S. Hamilton (McCauley) '74

Allan F. Shifflett '74

Randy E. Wolford '74

Geoffrey L. Barnes '75

Stanley P. Wojton '75

David A. Barron '75

Jeffrey A. Buirge '79

Charles M. Oberlin '79

Coleen S. Myers '79

Ruth F. Hoffman '79

Cynthia M. Shipman (Cangey) '80

Esther J. Santilo '80

Laraine Fardo (Nawrocki) '81

Laura M. Herman (Spear) '81

Shirley K. Hildebrand (Keeple) '81

Mary R. Holt '81

Patricia A. Tellosh '82

Linda J. Sydeski '82

Betty A. Wagner (Brown) '83

Robert K. Smith '86

Roger G. Cooling '86

Rose M. Mong (Oertel) '86

Margaret S. Foster '87

Kathryn A. Fray (Senko) '88

Shirley Weber '88

Constance S. Troy '88

Joanne E. Klammer '90

Leslie W. Martin '90

Kathleen A. Harris '91

Glenn T. Miller '92

Tibor Cseszneki '93

Patricia C. Sovern (McCall) '95

Stephanie L. Senft (Havens) '97

Thomas M. Stafford '97

Melissa A. Bargo (Miller) '00

Amy J. Nagy (Eshenbaugh) '00

Gayle D. Barrett '02

Bobbi J. Bailey (Welton) '02

William I. Tegethoff '04

Kevin R. Wolf '05

Michael T. Muha, Esquire '06

Bradley J. Dovey '13

Maurice D. Lewis-Briggs '14

Cheryl E. Mounts '23

Rhoda E. Taylor, Professor Emeritus

Richard M. Wukich, Retired Faculty

Gene J. Wilhelm, Professor Emeritus

Edward E. Leone, Retired Staff

Paul F. Rizza, Professor Emeritus

Florine Ferrere-Plavny, Retired Staff

First Hoist

Pure celebration after the SRU women's lacrosse lifted its first-ever Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference championship trophy with a thrilling, 11-10 victory over Kutztown University at Mihalik-Thompson Stadium on May 3. Junior goalie Lily Ventresca (top center) was named the tournament's Most Valuable Player. The Rock set the new standard by taking their national-best, 20-0 record into the NCAA tournament.





— **SAVE THE DATE** —
HOMECOMING 2026
OCT. 24, 2026



See you back at
THE ROCK!
sru.edu/homecoming

