

M NARET

THE UNIVERSITY OF TAMPA'S STUDENT NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1933

Building Worlds, Breaking Records

Audiences everywhere stacked into theaters as the Minecraft movie turned out to be a surprise box office smash



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The mission of The Minaret, The University of Tampa's student newspaper, is to promote accurate, thoroughly reported, high-quality, unbiased, and thought-provoking content. The Minaret aims to be recognized as The University of Tampa's leading and most trusted news source. Members of The Minaret will strive to publish student-produced content, including but not limited to articles, photographs, graphics and artwork.

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UConn Claims 2025 NCAA Women's Basketball Championship

By Emily McLaughlin | Sports Editor

The UConn Huskies clinched their 12th NCAA women's basketball championship (the most in Division I history) on Sunday, April 6, defeating the South Carolina Gamecocks 82-59 in front of 19,777 fans in the stands.

This game was a rematch of the 2022 championship, when South Carolina beat UConn 64-49, but this time, UConn had the upper hand. UConn took control early in the game, ending the first quarter with a 19-14 lead and then stretching the score to 36-26 at halftime. By the end of the third quarter, UConn was cruising with a 20-point lead.

Azzi Fudd, a guard for UConn, had a total of 24 points, five rebounds, and one assist. Fudd was named the Most Outstanding Player of the Final

Four. Paige Bueckers, in her final game as a college student, had 17 points, six rebounds, and three assists.

Bueckers, the face of UConn's team in her time with the Huskies, was the heart and soul of this year's squad and delivered yet another master-class performance. Bueckers is now third on the NCAA Tournament all-time scoring list as well as the most in UConn history with 477 points, sitting behind Chamique Holdsclaw (479) and Caitlin Clark (492) for the NCAA Tournament all-time list. Bueckers' consistent leadership drew high praise from head coach Geno Auriemma.

"The victory for UConn capped off a dominant tournament run, reasserting the program's place at the top of college women's basketball."



Photo courtesy of Mariam Bernardini-Herrera



Photo courtesy of Mariam Bernardini-Herrera

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Photo courtesy of Mariam Bernardini-Herrera

“My journey became hers in so many ways,” Auriemma said at a press conference post-game. “All the emotions that have been building inside of me came out and they came out in her. Cause in five years at Connecticut, I’ve never seen her cry. And she might deny it, but she cried cause she’s gonna miss me.”

Sarah Strong, forward, set the record for the most points scored by a freshman in the NCAA Tournament. Strong had 24 points and 15 rebounds to her name. Strong also maintained five assists with three blocks and two steals.

***"I've never seen her cry.
And she might deny it,
but she cried cause she's
gonna miss me."***

“I felt like I did better than I was expecting,” Strong said. “That would not have happened without my teammates though.”

UConn ended the season with a 16-game winning streak and finished the tournament with 521 total points, including 167 during the Final Four, recorded the sixth most all time. Bueckers was subbed out in the final minute of the game, sharing an emotional embrace with Auriemma.

“It’s an overwhelming sense of gratitude,” Bueckers said. “Gratitude for all that coach has meant to me and how much he shaped me to the human I am, to the basketball player I am throughout this entire five years and just putting it all into one hug what our journey has been together.”

Fudd, who was a valuable asset in the UConn tournament, said she credits her teammates and faith with how well she played.

“Being able to let go, give it to god definitely takes that pressure I put on myself away,” Fudd said. “I did what I knew I was capable of. My teammates trusted me, so shout out to them for putting me in that position and believing in me.”

The road UConn took to get to the Final Four and championship was one that will be in the books for the University of Connecticut. With players like Fudd and Strong, the legacy of UConn’s women’s basketball team will continue as Bueckers makes her way into the big leagues.



Photo courtesy of Mariam Bernardini-Herrera

The Downfall of Manchester United

By Juan Davalos | Staff Writer

Manchester United, once the epitome of footballing excellence, now finds itself in 14th place, grappling with its most challenging period in the modern Premier League era. The club's continued underperformance on the pitch has shown deeper issues rooted in years of mismanagement.

Since manager Alex Ferguson's retirement, there have been multiple fan protests demanding improvements to the club beyond team performance, like the recent gathering for the 20th anniversary of one of the first organized protests against the ownership, as first reported by the Guardian.

The fan protest targets the controversial ownership of the Glazer family, which also owns the Tampa Buccaneers. They acquired Manchester United in 2005, and the deal was heavily leveraged, saddling the club with substantial debt.

As of early 2024, the club's gross debt stood at nearly \$1 billion, as found in a recent tabulation by the Athletic, a burden that has hampered its ability to invest effectively in both infrastructure and talent.

With fan pressure on the Glazers increasing, they were forced into a vulnerable position. However,

Sir Jim Ratcliffe, through his company INEOS, acquired a 27.7% stake in Manchester United in February 2024, taking over the management of sporting and financials. This saved the Glazers from a full sale to Qatar.

However, this minority investment has already cost the club nearly \$44 million in fees. Ratcliffe has publicly criticized the previous management in a recent interview with Times Magazine.

Ratcliffe said,

"It's gone off the rails a long way... the costs had gotten out of control."

The 2024–25 season has been particularly challenging for Manchester United. The club parted ways with manager Erik ten Hag in October 2024 after a series of poor results left them in 14th place in the Premier League.

One of the first decisions by the Radcliffe INEOS group was the appointment of Portuguese manager Ruben Amorim as his successor in November 2024. Despite initial optimism, the



Photo courtesy of Mayer Tawfik via Unsplash.



Photo courtesy of Colin + Meg, via Unsplash.



Photo courtesy of Colin + Meg, via Unsplash.

Under Amorim, the team has continued to struggle, currently sitting 13th in the Premier League, just 10 points clear of relegation. After a defeat to Brighton, Amorim was very upset with the team's shortcomings.

Amorim said on ESPN, "This is the worst team, maybe, in the history of Manchester United."

In the same interview, he also expressed confidence in the process of bringing this team back. United, while out of every other competition and titering ever closer to relegation, is still playing in the Europa League. If they win this competition, it could mean a huge difference in next season's recruitment and compensation as they would earn the profitable Champions League qualification.

However, given United's recent form and this year's top-eight close shootout, it seems more and more unlikely that they will win anything and will fail to qualify for Europe.

Off the pitch, in a recent financial disclosure to investors, INEOS revealed that the club over the past

three years has reported cumulative losses exceeding £300 million. In response, Ratcliffe initiated a series of austerity measures aimed at stabilizing the club's finances.

These austerity measures included the termination of approximately 250 employees in 2024, costing the club £8.6 million in redundancy payments. Sir Jim Ratcliffe also recently personally announced to Gary Neville further plans to cut up to 200 additional jobs in early 2025 as part of efforts to reduce annual expenses by an estimated £10 million.

"They are destroying everything about the club's heritage,"

Additional cost-saving strategies have included the cancellation of staff Christmas parties, reductions in funding to the Manchester United Foundation, and the elimination of free meals for staff, according to the Standard.

These measures, while financially motivated, can be perceived by many as detrimental to the club's culture and morale, especially when the same report by the Standard revealed the wage bill for the club's players remained the second highest in the league after their takeover.

Manchester United legend Eric Cantona was particularly vocal in his criticism.

said Cantona, condemning Ratcliffe and his INEOS group.

What was once the world's most profitable club, usurping Real Madrid, now seems closer to bankruptcy than ever to achieving those heights again. Whether it's managerial disagreements, fan protests, new owners, or harsh budget cuts, Manchester United seems to be everything but United.

As the season gears to an end, given the institution's size and viewership pull, what the ownership decides to do next will have a ripple effect on the sport as a whole.

The Toronto Blue Jays and Vladimir Guerrero Jr. Agree to Record-Breaking Contract Extension

By Nicolas Mezzaucella | Copy Editor

The Toronto Blue Jays and first baseman Vladimir Guerrero Jr. agreed to a 14-year, \$500 million contract extension on April 7. After months of speculation and negotiation, the two sides reached a deal on the wealthiest extension in Major League Baseball (MLB) history, surpassing Mike Trout's 12-year, \$430 million extension signed in 2019.

Guerrero Jr. is one of baseball's premier players and became the franchise player for the Blue Jays when he was called up in 2019. Since then, Guerrero Jr. has won a Gold Glove and two Silver Slugger Awards, is a four-time all-star, and won the Home Run Derby in 2023. He is coming off a career year in 2024, where he hit .323/.396/.544 with 30 home runs and 103 RBIs.

"We have such a clear alignment on the desired outcome."

Rumors began to swirl in the offseason that the Blue Jays were focused on extending Guerrero Jr. before he hit the free agency market at the end of the 2025 season. Guerrero was said to be seeking a deal in the \$500 million range, but the Blue Jays were rumored to have offered anywhere from \$400 to \$450 million.

"The last number we gave them as a counteroffer didn't reach 600," said Guerrero Jr. to ESPN.

Still, the Blue Jays' front office seemed confident they would agree to an extension with Guerrero Jr.

"I think we're going to sign him. I think we're going to extend him," said team president Mark Shapiro.

With the two sides unable to agree on a deal before opening day, there was added speculation that both parties would table discussions until the end of the season.

That was until April 4, when MLB insider Mike Rodriguez posted on the social platform X that the two sides were nearing agreement on a contract. Three days later, the Blue Jays announced they had signed Guerrero Jr. to the record-breaking extension.

Locking up Guerrero Jr. before the offseason began is a great move for the Blue Jays, as Guerrero Jr. would have had many suitors once he reached free agency.

"I'm here. We didn't get an agreement," Guerrero Jr. said on SNY. "Now, they're going to have to compete with 29 other teams."

The New York Yankees, New York Mets, and Boston Red Sox were among the teams rumored to be interested in Guerrero Jr. if he reached free agency.

With Guerrero Jr. now locked up for the foreseeable future, the Blue Jays can turn their focus to extending their other homegrown star, Bo Bichette. Bichette, who was brought up alongside Guerrero Jr. in 2019, is a two-time all-star and has been one of the league's most efficient hitters, only tallying one season with a batting average under .290 in his career.

Bichette had a career-worst year in 2024, hitting .225/.277/.332 with four home runs and 31 RBIs in 81 games. His stock is down from where it was going into the 2024 season, but he should still command a \$100 million-plus contract whenever he decides to sign.

Extending Guerrero Jr. is the first step in the Blue Jays' plans for a future at the top of the American League. With another extension candidate in Bichette and top prospects such as Ricky Tiedemann, Arjun Nimmala, and Trey Yesavage waiting in the minor leagues, there is a seemingly bright future to be had in Toronto.



Photo courtesy of The Boston Globe.

Standing With Kip Hudgins: A Story of Brotherhood, Strength, and Support

By Ana Ortiz | Marketing Manager

At The University of Tampa, brotherhood means more than wearing the same letters; it means standing by one another when life feels unimaginable.

That's exactly what students, friends, and fraternity brothers are doing for Kip Hudgins, a beloved member of the UTampa community who is now facing the fight of his life after a devastating accident.

Hudgins, a member of UTampa's Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity, was struck by a car and suffered critical injuries, sending shockwaves through the campus. In the days since, the UTampa community has come together extraordinarily, lifting Hudgins and his family with love, prayers, and support.

A GoFundMe page created by friends and family, titled "Kip's Journey Back: Overcoming Critical Injuries," shares updates on his condition and the challenging road that lies ahead. The fundraiser has already raised over \$60,000, with donations pouring in from students, alumni, family friends, and people across the country who were touched by Hudgins' story.

"Kip has always been there for us," Flanigan said. "Now it's our turn to be there for him, every step of the way."

"Kip has always been the life of the party, someone who lights up every room he walks into," the GoFundMe reads. "Now it's our turn to show up for him."

For his fraternity brothers in Lambda Chi Alpha, the accident has been both heartbreaking and unifying.

"I've never seen our brotherhood stronger than it is right now," said Ronan Flanigan, president of UTampa's Lambda Chi Alpha chapter. "The accident has been incredibly difficult for all of us, especially the brothers closest to Kip. However,

the outpouring of love and support for him and the Hudgins family has been nothing short of remarkable."

According to Flanigan, Hudgins has always embodied what it means to be a true brother, leading with love, loyalty, and passion for the people around him. Now, it's the fraternity's turn to do the same for him.

"Our brotherhood has been tremendous in showing up for Kip," Flanigan said. "We're constantly checking in on one another. The situation is extremely difficult for all of us, and it's important to talk about what we're feeling."

At their most recent chapter meeting, the fraternity created space to come together and support each other. Hudgins' father and sister joined the brothers at the meeting, and Hudgins' father shared heartfelt words with the fraternity.

"It was very touching for us," Flanigan said. "We are glad to be able to support Kip's family through this."

The accident has reminded many in the UTampa community about the importance of leaning on each other in difficult times.

"Brotherhood isn't just about the good times; it's about showing up when life gets hard," Flanigan said. "And that's exactly what everyone is doing for Kip right now."

Beyond the fraternity, support for Hudgins has extended throughout the UTampa campus. Students have shared messages of encouragement on social media, contributed to the GoFundMe, and organized efforts to spread awareness and keep Hudgins in their thoughts.

"We are incredibly grateful for everyone who has reached out, donated, prayed, or just sent love our way," the GoFundMe page reads. "Kip is strong, and with the support of this amazing community, we know he will continue to fight."

As Hudgins remains in recovery, the road ahead will be long and filled with surgeries, rehabilitation,

and healing. But for the UTampa community, there is no doubt that he won't be facing it alone.

The accident has left a mark on the hearts of many students, but it has also left them inspired by the power of unity, love, and brotherhood.

People wishing to support Kip Hudgins and his family can donate through the GoFundMe page: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/kips-journey-back-overcoming-critical-injuries>



Photo courtesy of @utlambdachialpha on Instagram

Travel Advisory for International Students

As the Trump administration revokes student visas, The University of Tampa is holding travel advisory meetings for international students in the Office of International Programs (GC 103).

By Thomas Mangier | *Staff Writer*

In response to the federal government revoking more than 600 student visas in recent weeks, The University of Tampa is holding travel advisory meetings for international students. The meetings take place in the Office of International Programs in Grand Center Room 103.

According to The New York Times, the Trump administration has intensified efforts to revoke nonimmigrant student visas across the country, prompting increased concern among students nationwide.

"It's not a matter of if it is going to happen but when it's going to happen at UT," said Heredia.

While no UTampa students have been affected yet, Henry Heredia, assistant director of international programs, said the threat is imminent.

The meetings are geared towards international students planning to return home for summer break. Heredia was one of the main voices at the travel advisory meetings held in the Office of International Programs, where they advised international students potentially heading back for the summer.

Heredia warned that current visa revocations often stem from two main reasons: any past arrest within the last five years, regardless of whether charges were dropped. The other thing they use as an excuse is finding out an international student has spoken out or posted about the Gaza conflict. They can use that against you by using a foreign policy from 1952, according to NBC News. They use AI to find these things, so Instagram likes and reposts can be used against you.

One of the first pieces of advice that was brought up during the meeting was how the Department of State has been revoking nonimmigrant visas and how U.S. Embassies have been emailing students to self-deport and apply for a visa to come back.

If your visa is revoked, don't self-deport since your

visa is your key to get into the United States, not to stay here. As long as your Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) record remains active, you can continue studying/working in the country as long as you are fully enrolled at the school.

Another main thing that was talked about during the travel advisory was if a student were to leave and return to the United States, they had a chance of running into a Secondary Inspection at a border entry point.

While constitutional rights are weaker at the border, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) can search your bags and conduct an electronic search. You still have the right to remain silent, but the best thing that you can do is comply with these requests.

During the Secondary Inspection, you may be brought into a room with a CBP officer and questioned. As long as you are calm and answer the questions straightforwardly, you will be fine. Be prepared: CBP officers will ask ridiculous questions to try and fish something out of you. If you don't understand or are not sure you understand a question, you can request a translator, and they must give you one.

With these secondary stops becoming more

"Right now is not a good time for traveling abroad."

frequent, make sure you have at least a 3-hour layover in between flights.

The advice that was hammered home was that right now may not be the best time to return home and that you should consider how important it is to leave the country if you live abroad, considering the risk.

"Right now is not a good time for traveling abroad," said Heredia.

He also mentioned during the meeting to wait

until this storm has passed; hopefully, it won't last more than six months.

For those who have not attended a session,


"It's better to stay in the country and stay low profile and not do anything that may call the attention of the authorities."

upcoming travel advisory meetings will take place at 3 p.m. in Grand Center 103 on Wednesday, April 16; Tuesday, April 22; and Monday, April 28.

If you can't make any of these times but have questions or inquiries, reach out to the Office of International Programs via international@ut.edu.

TRAVEL RISKS FOR NON-CITIZENS
informational sessions

Thursday April 10
Wednesday April 16
Tuesday April 22
Monday April 28



Leave your questions here, or let us know you are coming

3 PM at Grand Center 103

THE UNIVERSITY OF TAMPA
Office of International Programs

Photo courtesy of Office of International Programs.

GloRilla Ignites the Tampa Crowd at Free Super Saturday Concert

By Emily McLaughlin | Sports Editor

The energy was unmatched as crowds gathered at Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park on April 5 for a free Super Saturday GloRilla concert as part of the NCAA women's Final Four tournament activities. Presented by AT&T, the event brought families, fans, and music lovers together to celebrate basketball, music, culture, and community.

The gates opened at 6 p.m. with DJ ReRe playing at 7 p.m. and GloRilla performing at 8 p.m. DJ ReRe got the crowd building with anticipation for GloRilla's performance.

"I've been waiting for this since I've seen it on Facebook a few weeks back," said concert attendee Renee Minnefield-Black. "I'm excited to see my girl GloRilla."

As the sun started to set, the park transformed into a vibrant festival space. Laughter consumed the area, people danced as they pleased, and areas where drinks and food were available for purchase.



Photo Courtesy of Emily McLaughlin

"With hard times, most family events you have to pay for, so I really appreciate [GloRilla] giving back to her community with a free concert."

The food truck vendors at the concert included Just Smokin' BBQ, The Mets Machine, Kebablicious, and Craving Donuts. A drinking station and free water cart were offered for those who needed relief from the Florida heat.

Concert attendee Lakiesha Chandler said she was grateful for the accessibility of the event. Laura Gerken, a volunteer at the GloRilla concert, was excited to be able to assist with the festivities. Gerken's job was to greet people who were coming through the gates, assist those who needed to find the bathrooms, and answer questions if needed.

"Once I heard that there is going to be a GloRilla concert, I was like, obviously, I need to go," Gerken said. "I love the girls, I love the rap, you know, I love to support the ladies, and they are out here killing it."

William Mann, a fire marshal who has been with the fire department for 23 years, said he enjoyed seeing everyone come together.

"It's good for the community; it brings a lot of people into downtown to celebrate the NCAA Final Four women's basketball tournament," Mann said. "It brings a lot of business to all the small businesses within Tampa."

The concert was one of the many events taking place as part of the NCAA women's Final Four tournament. The Final Four was on Friday, April 4, the first game was the Texas Longhorns and South Carolina Gamecocks while the second was UConn Huskies and UCLA Bruins. With UConn and South Carolina being the two winners of the Final Four, the women's championship game was on Sunday, April 6, with UConn being the 2025 women's championship winner.

Ahmad Keys, a self-proclaimed music nut and middle school teacher, said he had not been to a hip-hop concert in nearly 20 years.

"A lot of kids at my middle school listen to her, so I wanted to go to the concert and check it out," Keys said. "It's also a free concert, so why not, you know."

Even those who were completely unfamiliar with GloRilla or DJ ReRe found themselves amazed by the atmosphere.

Shane James, who originally came to the hands-off rally at the downtown center, saw the concert in the paper and decided to come with his husband.

"It brings a lot of business to all the small businesses within Tampa."

"[I] was not expecting the concert to be this big and free," James said. "We're just here soaking it all in."

As the music echoed through the park, the crowd swayed and cheered into the night. The concert was a perfect blend of hoops, unity, and community.

UTampa Theatre Presents: "Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean"

By Sofia McGinnis | Staff Writer

On April 10, 2025, The University of Tampa premiered its spring main stage play, *Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*.

Directed by Rosemary Orlando, the show follows the Disciples of James Dean as they meet on the anniversary of James Dean's death and look back at their lives from past to present, coming to terms with the truths in their lives.

"It was so fun to do a production that challenged my abilities more than other shows I have done in the past."

Elysia Rosado, a theatre major and criminal investigation minor at UTampa who plays Juanita, the bible preaching owner of the Five and Dime, talks about the process of the show.

"The process to get this show to life has been a long one [but], the end result is so satisfying, and it's a great feeling bringing Rosemary's vision to fruition," said Rosado.

"I absolutely loved the show," Rosado said. Walking into the Black Box Theater, it was not

hard to see the effort put into *Jimmy Dean*. The whole theater was transformed into the Dime and Five store. Audience members walked through the front doors to get to their seats.

Chloe Edwards, an allied health major at UTampa, talks about the transformation of the Black Box.

"I know the cast and crew have been working super hard on this show. It was really cool to see the Black Box flipped around," said Edwards.

Edwards goes on to talk about her favorite part of *Jimmy Dean*.

"I thought the show was absolutely incredible, [and] my favorite part was watching all of [the] flashback scenes, [seeing] how each character changed," said Edwards.

The audience follows multiple flashbacks throughout the show. Most follow Mona, played by Lily-Rose Sauger, an avid fan of James Dean and the mother of Jimmy Dean. The flashbacks show her developing a relationship with Joe, played by Robert Logan Mays, who, while a beloved member of the Disciples of James Dean, is ridiculed by the town for being different.

The two characters eventually fall in love, but unable to process the grief of losing James Dean, Mona claims that her baby is the son of the late

actor. Unable to cope with a broken heart and losing the person he thought understood him, Joe leaves.

Eventually, Joe returns, now as Joanne, played by Elizabeth LaRosa, and confronts the entire cast. The show tackles the idea of change and how some people embrace it while others shy away from it.

The show also tackles other heavy themes, including alcoholism, divorce, and even cancer, with characters like Sissy, played by Elliana Gorecki, talking about how her husband left her due to her losing her breast because of breast cancer.

Austin Keys, a music major at UTampa, talks about his impression of *Jimmy Dean*.

"I was absolutely surprised how deep and emotional the story is. The actors did a phenomenal job of portraying the characters and their stories throughout the process of the play," said Keys.

Keys said students can support the UTampa Theatre program.

"Being a non-major myself, you can certainly get involved by auditioning or possibly even joining tech crew," said Keys.

"The theatre department is absolutely incredible at UTampa, so we would love it for anyone to join us!"

There are other wonderful characters and storylines in *Jimmy Dean*. Stella May, played by Liv Mollica, is a sassy, high-class cowgirl who married rich and loves to flaunt it, or Edna Louise, played by Sophie Kuether, a pregnant mother of seven kids who, while not the smartest in the group, has the biggest heart.

Jimmy Dean was a wonderfully rich show. Congratulations to all the cast and crew for their hard work.



Photo courtesy of @theatreutamp on Instagram.

Val Kilmer's Impact on Cinema

Actor Val Kilmer died at 65, leaving behind a legacy and inspiring fans and actors with his talent and resilience.

By Arianna Fromm | *Copy Editor*

Val Kilmer, best known for his roles in the movies *Top Gun* (1986), *The Doors* (1991), *Tombstone* (1993), and *Batman Forever* (1995), died on April 1, 2025, at the age of 65. The beloved actor's cause of death, revealed on April 10, was pneumonia, with other health issues contributing. Kilmer's career spanned over four decades, in which he became an appreciated figure in Hollywood, admired for his talent and dedication to film.

Born on Dec. 31, 1959, in Los Angeles, California, Kilmer started his acting career in theater before going into film. The role that put him on the map was *Top Gun*, in which he played the iconic character Tom "Iceman" Kazansky. This role solidified his status in Hollywood and showcased his skills as a leading man. His portrayal of Jim Morrison in the biopic *The Doors* showed that he was able to become a complex character, for which he earned critical acclaim.

Kilmer's portrayal of Iceman in *Top Gun* made lasting impressions on audiences and pop culture. His character's dynamic with Maverick became a cultural moment, being referenced and parodied in other films over the years.

"Val helped us better understand American actors and what they can do in a genre-defining role."

"For me, it was really cool to know about the impact it had on pop culture before seeing it," said Andrew Gervis, a film fan. "Movies like *Meet the Parents* (2000) that reference the relationship between Iceman and Maverick, or *Hot Shots!* (1991) which is actually a parody of *Top Gun*."

Gervis said that Kilmer's portrayal of Iceman emphasized how he redefined the concept of rivalry and camaraderie in popular media, showcasing that men could be competitive and respectful without compromising their masculinity.

Even though he faced major health challenges in the more recent years, including his battle with throat cancer, Kilmer chose to continue working,

which inspired fans for his strength. His return for the role of Iceman in *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) was evidence of his lasting legacy and impact on the film industry.

"As an actor, Val is truly one of a kind, the way he can essentially be a charismatic leading man like Brad Pitt," Gervis said. "But then still have the range to play roles with gravitas and a presence that truly makes him one of the best."

Kilmer's acting style was characterized by emotional depth and the ability to engage with his roles and co-stars. His performances weren't just about delivering lines but fully becoming the character in that moment, which created a compelling portrayal that evoked audiences.

"What separated Val from other actors was his connection to emotion and how he portrayed it based on his cohort acting around him," said Thomas Aquilina, a film professor at The University of Tampa. "You can see how invested he is in the moment and feeding off other actors."

His influence goes beyond his performances, impacting the future of American cinema and paving the way for future actors. His ability to bring authenticity to his roles inspired many to follow in his footsteps.

"If it wasn't for Val's authenticity to be intrinsically himself and the character, we wouldn't have bought RDJ's comeback as Tony Stark in 2008," Aquilina said.

From a post on the social platform X, actress Jennifer Tilly said that Kilmer's unique personality and approach to acting were apparent from the beginning of his career. During a casting call, he made an unforgettable entrance by arriving in a 60s convertible that was blasting *Doors'* music and coming in barefoot, shirtless, and wearing tight leather pants.

"We all looked at each other like ... Who is this guy? We were more than a little shook by the sheer audacity of his entrance," Tilly said. "Well of course it was Val Kilmer and from that minute on, nobody else stood a chance."

Kilmer's resilience and ability to transcend typical acting boundaries made him a standout figure

in Hollywood. His career showed that actors can succeed without being limited by their background or typecasting.

"Val was a great American actor and not one who was never once hindered by his country of origin or upbringing," said Aquilina. "We see so many young American talents come and go or get stuck in one lane of acting. Val never did that."



Val Kilmer au festival de Cannes. Photo courtesy of Georges Biard, CC BY-SA 3.0, Via Wikimedia Commons.

Art vs. Artist: Can We Ever Separate the Two?

As museums and galleries continue to showcase the works of diverse artists, the growing scrutiny of their personal beliefs raises the question: Can we truly separate an artist's work from their ideology?

By Alyssa Cortes | A&E Editor

Can a visitor admire intricate works of molten glass without indirectly endorsing the ideologies or institutions the museum's founder supports? Can or should we separate the art from the artist?

The Imagine Museum of Contemporary Glass Art in St. Petersburg, Florida, showcases beautiful glass sculptures, innovative installations, and creative exhibits that draw in devoted artists and curious visitors alike. However, for some, the shimmer dulled after learning who stood behind the vision.

Trish Duggan, the museum's founder, is a top donor for the Church of Scientology and the Republican party, giving MAGA Inc. more than \$5 million in the 2024 election cycle. In Feb. 2025, Donald Trump appointed 14 new Kennedy Center trustees, one of whom was Duggan.

"I was honestly a bit surprised," said Dominick Elliott, a Tampa Bay resident who holds opposing political views and recently visited the museum. "Learning these things about the founder definitely opened my eyes on who you support, even in the sense of something simple like visiting a museum."

For Elliott, that realization changed more than just his impression of the building.

"Buying that ticket in some way is money going back to Trish Duggan and what she supports," said Elliott. "I, however, will not support that."

Elliott's conflict echoes a broader societal debate intensified by "cancel culture" and the growing scrutiny around where consumers' money goes when they buy products and consume media, art, or entertainment, leading to boycotts.

One recurring theme in these conversations is the role of institutions themselves. If a museum like Imagine houses art by various artists, does supporting the museum inherently support the founder?

"I do believe there is a way to separate the two," Elliott said.

Elijah Conley, a sophomore musical theater and journalism major at The University of Tampa, acknowledges that museums may act more as curators of time and history rather than endorsers of every artist's or founder's beliefs.

"Museums can be neutral," said Conley. "I think art itself isn't."

Conley believes art and politics are inherently connected.

"Art was created as a response to politics," said Conley. "People make stories. They want to make people happy. If you wanna make people happy, it's because something dark is happening."

As an artist himself, Conley argues that you can't truly separate the creator from the creation.

"Everything I do in my art and for every artist, subconsciously or consciously, you are actively making a decision that is what all your experience says," Conley said.

For Conley, even the most visually stunning piece becomes tainted if its creator holds damaging ideologies.

"The founder and the artists that make the work aren't the same people. In the moment, it's just myself and their work. Not me and the artists."

"If an artist purposely made a ... painting that has dark figures as scary beings, and that artist was a known racist, that will just forever taint the art to me no matter how beautiful it is," said Conley, clarifying this was a hypothetical example.

Artworks like Paul Gauguin's paintings of Tahitian women have sparked similar debates, as the aesthetic appeal is complicated by the artist's troubling personal history and the colonial gaze embedded in the work.

From a neuroscientific perspective, the answer seems to lean toward no, you can't separate them, at least not easily.

Hannah Kaube, a PhD candidate at the Institute for Neurocognitive Psychology in Berlin, said our brains process knowledge about an artist so rapidly that it reshapes how we perceive their work.

"Participants tended to like the artwork less and rated it more harshly in terms of quality when they were aware of negative information about the artist," Kaube said of her research with Dr. Rasha Abdel Rahman, a professor in the Department of Psychology at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Brain activity measured through neurocognitive measures (EEG) revealed that this influence occurs "rapidly and automatically," impacting both emotional and aesthetic judgment, said Kaube.

In other words, whether we like it or not, external context and knowledge about the artist often shape how we perceive their work.

Not everyone draws a hard line, though. Olivia Robertson, a sophomore majoring in emerging media and character animation at the University of Central Florida, said her reaction depends on the context.

Still, she distinguishes between collaborative efforts and individual creations, noting that some works can be done by a team of people and are not defined by one contributor's beliefs.

Robertson emphasizes the importance of media literacy.

“Everyone should reflect on why art makes them feel the way it does, and how it could be influencing other people’s beliefs,” Robertson said.

“There have been artists that I previously loved ... but finding out they had done something so terrible ... I now find that I can't resonate with that work in the same way,” said Robertson.

To Robertson, art can be entertaining, challenging, or both, but viewers have a responsibility to think critically.

“Controversial art does have the power to start conversations around social change. ... Just thinking critically about art and its intention is a skill everyone should practice,” said Robertson.

Whether viewers walk away inspired or disillusioned, the conversation doesn’t end at the museum doors. The next time you stand before a sculpture or a painting, you might ask yourself not just what you’re looking at but who you’re looking through.

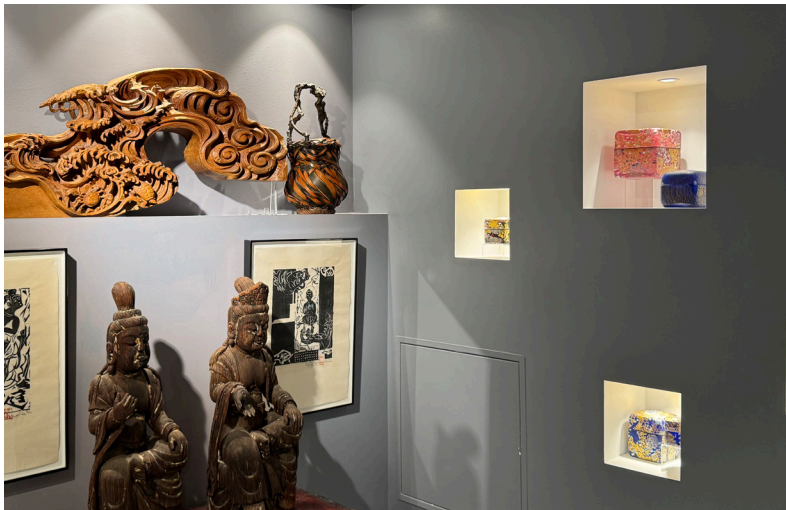
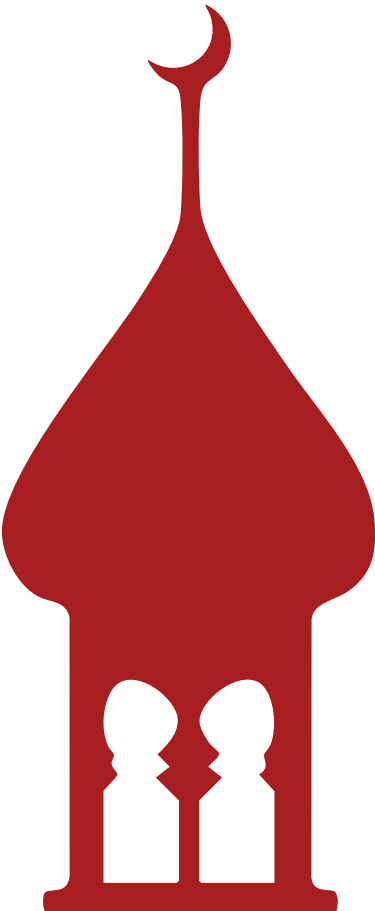


Photo courtesy of Alyssa Cortes.

ChatGPT 4.5: The Future of Communication and Education

ChatGPT 4.5 passed the Turing test, mimicking human emotions and natural conversation flow. These results raise many moral and psychological concerns regarding human and AI interactions. So, how does this affect education

By Genesis Muckle | Events Coordinator & Staff Writer

As of Feb. 27, 2025, OpenAI announced that they would be releasing a preview of the latest update to ChatGPT, known as GPT-4.5. This newest app model is supposed to improve natural language understanding and enhance contextual awareness to allow it to have more human interactions.

In a recent study by the University of California San Diego, MetaAI's Llama-3 and OpenAI's GPT-4.5 passed the Turing test. During the study, 284 participants believed that GPT-4.5 was human 73% of the time. It succeeded because rather than giving logical reasoning, it was able to mimic human emotions and natural conversation flow. These results raise many moral and psychological concerns regarding human and AI interactions. So, how does this affect education?

Academic Impact

ChatGPT 4.5 features like enhanced memory allow for more coherent interactions with the ability to remember the student's name and learning styles, and to provide instant feedback 24/7. It even possesses interactive features that help students with problem-solving, debate practice, and roleplay conversations, offering a more personal and humane private tutor experience.

Despite its advantages, there are concerns about it hindering students and allowing them easy access to answers without work. If students rely too heavily on AI, it can take away their ability to think independently and creatively. Additionally, even though AI is presented as all-knowing, it can be misleading and incorrect at times, leading to students still having to fact-check the information it gives them.

Emotional Impact

In "How ChatGPT Impacts Student Engagement from a Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Study," 1,735 students were analyzed. It was found that while students' emotional engagement was enhanced in terms of learning, the use of the app

raises the concern that people become overly reliant on AI for not only learning but also companionship.

Human interactions have decreased significantly, not only with major events such as COVID-19 but also with the rise of technology. Many people, particularly those within the adolescent to young adult years, don't feel the need to interact with people anymore. ChatGPT has now upgraded the app to where it can understand things such as the tone and offer a new level of emotional support and empathy that it has never had before.

Replacing real-life people and experiences with ChatGPT can give students a false sense of security and make it harder for them to open up and seek help from professionals. Students might feel like they are getting the support that they need. But using AI to sort their emotions can lead to isolation and loneliness due to the one-sided conversation.

Some would argue that this new emotional intelligence upgrade could help with human interactions and communication.

Madison Malaga, criminology and criminal justice major at The University of Tampa, said it

could benefit students who feel lonely, but they should not give up on real human connections.

The Guardian also explains how this app has become a platform where those who struggle with social anxiety could have a place to get reassurance and practice what it would be like to speak to people without the feeling of judgment.

"As a college student, it makes me feel good because you have someone to talk to if you're alone," she said. "[But] I think everyone should have a social life."

ChatGPT's advancements in education and communication have the ability to transform many college experiences and create a more customized educational experience. However, we also need to remember that there must be a balance between using AI and maintaining real human connections. AI is the future of the world, but it's up to us to decide how we want to use it.

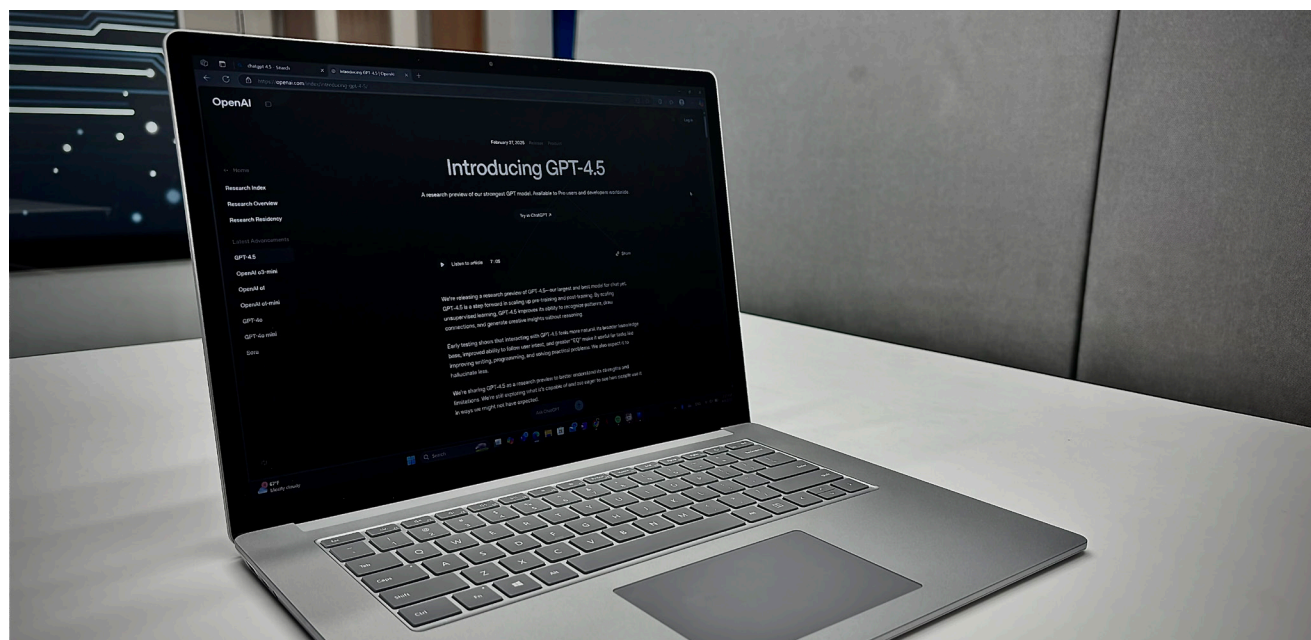


Photo courtesy of Genesis Muckle.

A Minecraft Movie Review

Staring Jack Black and Jason Momoa Star

By Kaitlyn Rodriguez | Staff Writer



Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures.

Last weekend, *A Minecraft Movie* was released in theaters on Friday, April 4, and it has left many viewers with mixed opinions on the film.

A Minecraft Movie is an adaptation of a very popular video game that many of us know, *Minecraft*, which is a game made up of blocks in a community, along with many different creatures. The point of the game is to express your creativity and build whatever comes to your imagination.

The film, directed by Jared Hess, aimed to give audiences that nostalgic feel as well as bring a ton of laughs. The film contains many stupid jokes that bring the comedy of the movie into play and contains plenty of internet jokes.

The movie has so far made more than \$1.3 billion after its opening weekend, which has made it the second-highest-grossing movie after the *Barbie* film.

The movie stars Jack Black, who plays Steve, the main character in the game, and Jason Momoa, who plays Garrett Garrison, a previous video game champion.

Steve is your average office worker who decides

he is tired of living the regular, boring nine-to-five life and decides to chase his dreams of working as a miner. While he takes his axe and begins the job, he stumbles upon a magic cube, which opens a portal into the Overworld, known as the Minecraft world, where your creativity doesn't have a limit.

You then have the rest of the crew of outsiders from the real world getting a hold of this magic cube, and they then enter the Overworld, getting caught in a battle to save the universe.

Many people have had mixed opinions on the film; some say they loved it and how it was amazing to see *Minecraft* almost come to life, while others said that they thought the movie was too stupid and did not enjoy it as much.

"It's not that often you get a movie that turns into a whole event," said Tampa Bay resident Nicholas Havener. "The excitement behind it made it better, and it is a really funny movie to go watch with your friends."

The visuals in the movie were very artificial, but it ended up working out. The Minecraft world was very colorful and fun and had a whole lot of blocks.

Even the creatures in the movie, like the wolves, creepers, and villagers, were spot on, making it visually appealing to watch.

Now, the internet jokes played a huge role in this film, which is exactly how it made it stupidly funny to some viewers. This includes one of the more popular memes, "Chicken Jockey," when both Black and Momoa were trapped in a boxing ring facing a baby zombie on top of a chicken, which is a rare enemy that you can find in the video game.

"It was an absolute cinematic experience from the memes to the interactions with all the fans and the movie itself actually having a pretty well-written plot too,"

This meme was one that most were excited for, as many people in the theaters would scream and start cheering and laughing after the scene was shown.

said Jose Montealegre, a junior cybersecurity major at the University of Tampa.

Most people enjoyed the jokes that were exchanged between both Black and Momoa, probably making both the funniest characters in the movie. Steve and Garrett were the stars of the film, making the other characters seem underwhelming.

Although there were some points where the movie seemed dumb, it was obvious that it was written that way on purpose. However, that's what most people seemed to enjoy about it, and they loved to embrace the bad humor.

"I loved the movie, and I thought it was really funny," said senior marketing major at UTampa, Ashley Field. "I appreciate how the theaters around the country have taken pride in it."

This is a movie you can go to with your kids or with your friends for a nostalgic feel. It is for sure worth the watch if you enjoy stupidly funny internet jokes.

An Untold Story Brought to Life: Melissa L. Sevigny on Science, Storytelling, and Her New Book “Brave the Wild River”

In honor of Earth Day, Melissa L. Sevigny will be hosting an event at The University of Tampa to discuss her newest book, *Brave the Wild River: The Untold Story of Two Women Who Mapped the Botany of the Grand Canyon*, and reflect on the importance of appreciating the nature that surrounds us.

By Franchesca Murrugarra | Feature Editor

When Melissa L. Sevigny stumbled across a nearly forgotten record at Northern Arizona University, she didn't expect to find the seeds of her third book. Nestled within the record's text was a mention of research papers donated by Lois Jotter, an American botanist, that had not yet been curated. It began the journey of piecing together an untold story that combined botany, women's history, and the indomitable spirit of the first two white women who successfully rafted through the Colorado River in 1938 and cataloged the plants of the Grand Canyon.

During a time when women were seen as incapable in scientific fields compared to men, Elzada Clover was someone who was not afraid to take up space. She was an outlier of her time, obtaining her master's and doctorate in botany at the University of Michigan. Her dedicated passion for botany overshadowed the sexism that fought to keep her down.

“Elzada was larger than life,” said Sevigny. “She was adventurous. She was obsessed with plants.”

Lois Jotter, Clover's younger colleague at the University of Michigan and fellow botanist, exuded a quieter strength. Yet, at 24 years old, she had a youthful enthusiasm about life, and most especially about nature.

“Lois, I found to be very warm-hearted, very funny, very kind,” said Sevigny.

The botanists' shared mission was as ambitious as it was unprecedented: to raft the entire length of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon while mapping out the plants of the region, which was a feat that no American woman (and very few men) had dared to attempt before.

It was a research expedition that drew national headlines before the journey had even begun, and there was an underlying belief that the Colorado

River was unsuitable for women in the 1930s. With its violent rapids and towering canyon walls, the river was feared by even experienced adventurers.

Many were doubtful that women were capable of conducting such scientific fieldwork in rough terrain and even more so when botany was originally written off as an effeminate discipline in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

“Botany's virtues were women's virtues: gentility, innocence, and modesty,” wrote Sevigny in her book. “Flowers, after all, reflected qualities most treasured in women: fragility, purity, and loveliness.”

However, the types of plants that intrigued Clover were not the precious flowers that one could pluck from the grass on a stroll but the ones that bristled and poked and were stubborn in the face of the droughts of the American West.

“I was surprised by the sexism that they faced,” said Sevigny. “I probably shouldn't have been. But

“I was surprised by the sexism that they faced”

once I really started learning about their experiences and just how consistent it was for people to tell them that women couldn't raft rivers and women shouldn't be doing science ... it ended up being a bigger part of the story than I initially intended it to be.”

However, despite all this, Clover and Jotter defied all expectations and successfully braved the Grand Canyon's treacherous rapids in an effort to catalogue the plant life of the region. Over the course of 43 days, the women — accompanied by Norman Nevills and three inexperienced boatmen — faced danger head-on and dealt with runaway boats, skeptics, and the harsh rivers flowing throughout the gorges.

After the groundbreaking expedition, the news quickly shifted its skeptical tone.

Before the trip, news outlets would heavily emphasize the deadly dangers of the Colorado River and how it was impossible for women to undertake. However, once the journey was completed, the narrative suddenly shifted. Suddenly, the media downplayed the dangers, suggesting that the river might not have been so dangerous after all if even women could manage to survive.

This severely undermined the accomplishments that Clover and Jotter made in mapping the botany of the region, though it inadvertently paved the way for more women to participate in similar adventures.

“I don't think [Clover and Jotter] were setting out to prove anything,” said Sevigny. “I don't think they were trying to prove that women could do this sort of thing. I think they were just genuinely curious about this part of the world, and they wanted to make their mark on the field of botany, and this [research expedition was] how they were gonna do it.”

Despite their scientific contributions — including published papers and a botanical collection — Clover never really received the recognition that she yearned to get after the trip. The press sensationalized the trip so much that her colleagues just dismissed it as a publicity stunt.

It wasn't until decades later, when Jotter revisited the Grand Canyon and saw their work still being utilized, that any real acknowledgment came along.

In light of this, Sevigny pointed out how sexism has not truly disappeared over time but simply showed up in a different form.

“I don't think we have the same degree of sexism

today for women in the sciences, but it's the same type of thing," said Sevigny. "Being told that they don't belong out in the fields, struggling to get grant funding, struggling to get promotions ... newspaper articles focusing on their physical appearance instead of on their words, on what they were saying."

If Sevigny wanted people to take away one thing from Elzada Clover and Lois Jotter's journey, it's to follow your passion and not let anything — or anyone — stand in the way.

"We all have those things, that spark of something, that just draws us in," said Sevigny. "And I think most of us have the experience of having obstacles in the way, things that stop us from pursuing those passions. And I think the story is about not letting those obstacles stop you ... I'm hoping that's kind of what people take away from that book: that inspiration."

In fact, it was Jotter's research and diaries that first impassioned Sevigny to want to learn more about the women's journey through the Grand Canyon.

"Lois' diary was there and the letters that she wrote during the trip," said Sevigny. "And she was just so warm and funny, and the story was so amazing, and I really got drawn into it. At first, I thought I was gonna write an article about them. So I started doing that. I was like, 'alright, I'll write a short article about these two cool women and move on with my life.'"

Nearly 10,000 words into her article, Sevigny took a step back and admired her work on the Word document before it hit her, "Oh, this isn't an article."

It was the beginning of her newest book.

Sevigny soon began chasing down pieces of the women's history across the country, inquiring at museums and archives, scouring through dusty, moldy records, all while handling setbacks at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, where some archives were shut down for over a year.

Luckily, since Sevigny had already created a copy of both Clover and Jotter's diaries, she was able to overcome the challenge of waiting by dedicating herself to their first-hand account of the research expedition. The story turned out all the better for it since it was centered on their personal story rather than the sensationalized news of the time.

Sevigny's quest for knowledge was as adventurous as the story she uncovered, especially when her search had her rafting down the Grand Canyon, placing herself in the shoes of Clover and Jotter nearly 90 years back.



Photo courtesy of Alexis Knapp.

Sevigny described how one of the most rewarding parts of writing the book was speaking with people who had known Clover and Jotter personally — from family members to former students. Since the book's release, even more people have reached out, trading memories that emphasized the women's lasting impact and deep passion for the natural world.

"This is my third book, but I don't think I've ever had this much fun writing something," said Sevigny with a genuine smile on her face. "Like, I became very obsessed with the story. I really connected with these characters, with these two women, and I never had a chance to meet them in real life, but I felt like I had gotten to know them really well."

To aspiring writers and historians who also want to excavate their own untold stories, Sevigny's advice is simple: keep digging and question everything.

"What you'll find is that history is kinda built up in layers, and not all of those layers are trustworthy layers," said Sevigny. "I found a lot of things written about Lois and Elzada that appeared to be from trustworthy sources, such as newspaper articles at the time. But when you peel back the layers, you realize they were very colored by the sexism of the 1930s, and by the sensationalism of the 1930s press."

The legacy of Elzada Clover and Lois Jotter serves as a reminder that real change begins with determination and refusing to give up on the greatest passions, regardless of society's changing norms. Some of the most profound discoveries, whether in science or storytelling, are made by those who dare to look deeper and keep going, even when the world tells them they can't.

Sevigny's book, *Brave the Wild River: The Untold Story of Two Women Who Mapped the Botany of the Grand Canyon*, is more than just a story of two women rafting down the Colorado River — it's a story of curiosity, courage, and the power of reclaiming the untold stories.

And Sevigny's final piece of advice:

"Trust yourself, trust your own voice," said Sevigny. "And if you get advice that doesn't jive with you, that's okay. Don't follow it. You know, you'll find your own way."

Melissa L. Sevigny will speak at The University of Tampa on Earth Day, April 22, at 5 p.m. at the Charlene Gordon Theater in the Ferman Center for the Arts.

Along with sharing the remarkable story of Elzada Clover and Lois Jotter, the first two women to raft the Colorado River in 1938 and undertake botanical research through the Grand Canyon, Sevigny will focus her discussion on a message that deeply resonates with the mission of Earth Day: the importance of slowing down and observing the natural world around us.

"Often we walk through the world without really noticing it," said Sevigny. "Wherever you are — Florida, Arizona, anywhere — there are these extraordinary things all around us: the plants, animals, the weather, all of this is stuff that we just kind of just tend not to notice."

Sevigny hopes her talk will inspire the UTampa community to open their eyes to how beautiful the world truly is. Her message, inspired by the legacy of Clover and Jotter, is rooted in the idea that meaningful environmental action begins with mindful awareness.

"Earth Day is about protecting the planet, but I think we first have to start with noticing the planet, like, noticing our own ecosystems, our own surroundings," said Sevigny. "And that's really what Elzada and Lois were all about: stopping and noticing and naming the plants around them."

Dreams Really Do Come True for UTampa Student Faith Dodge

Ever since she was a little girl, Faith Dodge had dreamed of performing at Walt Disney World, and last Christmas, that dream became a reality.

By Alyssa Cortes | A&E Editor



Photo courtesy of Al McDonald

"Happy Holidays!" said Faith Dodge, stepping onto the stage of Cinderella's castle. The lights were bright, the crowd was full of anticipation, and the season's magic was in the air.

It is the top of the show, and as Dodge took a moment to observe the faces of the audience before her, her eyes caught a familiar sight — the Crystal Palace, the very place that had been an integral part of her childhood.

"It's the most wonderful time of the year ... with the kids jingle belling ..."

Dodge had always been a Disney fan, a love that began in her childhood thanks to her late grandparents, who frequently took her to the Crystal Palace for breakfast. It was there where the seeds of her dreams were planted.

"I was always like, 'they're here with me,'" said Dodge. "I don't even know how to describe it — it was surreal."

That moment was the pinnacle of a dream come true for Dodge. The 23-year-old senior musical theater major at The University of Tampa had been hired in Sept. 2024 to perform in Mickey's Most Merriest Celebration during Mickey's Very Merry Christmas Party at Walt Disney World. From Nov. to Dec. 2024, she would live out a childhood fantasy, her voice filling Main Street as the magic of Disney surrounded her.

Dodge's passion for performing started early.

When she was a baby, the only way she would fall asleep was with her mother singing to her, and eventually, she would sing herself to sleep.

Dodge, a Jersey native, saw *Wicked* on Broadway at just 8 years old. After the first act, she turned to her mom and said she would be the lady in green when she grew up.

This caused her to pursue theater at 10 or 11, with her first role as Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*.

"Faith is one of the most genuinely kind and uplifting people I know," said Alyssa Hernandez, Dodge's roommate and friend, a senior musical theater major at UTampa.

"She approaches everything with a performer's heart — she's dedicated, hardworking, and always striving to grow in her craft."

Dodge's dream opportunity came with early mornings and long drives. Rehearsals in Orlando began at 9 a.m., and with traffic, Dodge often left home by 6:45 a.m.

Performance days were even more demanding.

She had to leave Tampa by 3 p.m. to make it on time to her 6 p.m. call time. She did her own makeup and hair once she arrived.

Dodge performed four shows a night, sometimes wrapping up as late as 12:30 a.m., returning home by 2 a.m. at the latest. She did all this while balancing a full class schedule at UTampa and other extracurricular obligations.

Her resilience was tested one night when her in-ear monitor failed mid-performance. She couldn't hear herself but continued with the full 20-minute show despite this setback. Her professionalism did not go unnoticed.



Photo courtesy of Rebecca Justus

Even through technical issues and fatigue, Dodge's joy never faded.

"It felt like all of her hard work had led to this moment, and I couldn't stop smiling the entire time [I watched her]," said Hernandez. "She belongs on that stage."

"It was a full-circle moment... watching her wanting to sing at the castle and then achieving it."

Paul Finocchiaro, a musical theater professor at UTampa, witnessed Dodge's growth firsthand.

"I could see that her versatility as an actress was masterful, her vocal ability is nothing short of amazing, and finally, her dance training and ability helped her to shine in every audition," said Finocchiaro. "As soon as she played the lead role in Dames at Sea, I knew there was no going back to the chorus for her."

There were two especially emotional performances for Dodge.

For one performance, 13 of her college friends surprised her with matching shirts that said, "I heart FD." When Dodge walked out on stage, they screamed so loud that she could hear them through her in-ear monitor. Everybody on stage knew her friends were there.

So whenever they had a moment with her, they would squeeze her arm and say, "Oh, they love you," said Dodge.

Another night, her mom was in the front row, proudly filming and wearing a shirt with her daughter's face on it.

"Watching her at Disney made me cry. I was proud of her," said Jennifer Dodge, Faith's mom.

"[To] anyone who listened, I said, that's my daughter," said Jennifer Dodge. "It amazes me [that] she is my daughter."

Now, as graduation approaches, Dodge is reflecting on what this experience meant.

"Every day I was just ... so glad to be there," said Dodge. "A dream come true is really how I would describe it."

Racial Discrepancies in Pasco County Schools

Black and Hispanic students in Pasco County face higher rates of disciplinary action than their white peers, resulting in long-term consequences for their academic success and future opportunities.

By Alyssa Cortes | A&E Section Editor



Photo courtesy of Jeffrey S. Solochech from the Tampa Bay Times.

Pasco County's student population is over half white, about a quarter Hispanic, and 8.1% Black, according to U.S. News. Despite this, Black and Hispanic students receive a disproportionately high share of suspensions.

The Florida Department of Education shows Hispanic and Black students account for 43.6% of in-school suspensions (ISS) and 42.4% of out-of-school suspensions (OSS), even though they make up far less of the total student body.

This trend is also observed statewide. Robert F.

Smith said that the consequences of these racial discrepancies are significant and stem from systemic racism in schools that has been present throughout history.

The U.S. Census said in 1940, only 7% of the population nationwide had a high school education, and 24% of those were Black.

As of 2020, the percentage of Blacks or African Americans who possessed a high school diploma was just short of the national average at 88%.

Systemic racism is in every aspect of the education

system, including funding, lack of diverse subjects, lack of opportunities, and disciplinary action.

School discipline doesn't just punish students; it also has long-term effects on their academic trajectories, as they are more likely to fall behind academically, have lower graduation rates, and be more likely to drop out.

According to ProPublica, Black students are academically 1.3 grades behind, while Hispanic students are 0.7 grades behind white students.

Jess Aiken, a 2023 graduate from Pasco County, said she noticed a disparity in the number of Black and brown students attending higher-level courses, specifically Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses.

"I feel like the demographic within those classes did not reflect the actual demographics within the school," said Aiken.

White students are 1.5 times more likely to be enrolled in an AP class than Black students and 1.3 times more likely than Hispanic students, said ProPublica.

A large number of her female peers, particularly those of color, face repeated dress code violations and unequal punishment, said Aiken.

"I feel like it was obvious that it wasn't to the same

"I was punished and told to clean the bus for a whole week and almost got a referral, while no punishment was given to my white friend."

amount as the often less fuller white counterparts,” said Aiken. “It was almost never addressed, even though I know it was something that was brought up to teachers and school administrators.”

A 2021 study stated that 26% of Black students received at least one suspension for minor infractions, including dress code violations, compared with just 2% of white students.

This suggests a systemic issue in how discipline is applied, where certain groups of students are more frequently targeted for minor infractions.

Lilly Howell, a 2023 Pasco County graduate, shared her own experience of racial disparity.

“In eighth grade, my friend and I got in trouble on the bus,” said Howell.

In 2013–2014, Black students faced OSS at four times the rate of white students and three times the rate of Latin students, according to Ballard Brief. This harmful inconsistency shows how some students experience implicit bias while others do not.

Zero-tolerance policies in schools play into this bias as well, said the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). What was originally designed to address severe issues, particularly for violence or weapon usage, is now used frequently for subjective behavior like disrupting a classroom. This often results in harsh punishments like suspension or even expulsion, particularly for Black students, regardless of context.

Not all disciplinary measures are criminal offenses, and the school system’s approach should seek to minimize the long-term negative impact on students, said Stephen Thompson, director of community relations for the Sixth Judicial Circuit Pinellas County Justice Center.

Juvenile diversion programs, such as teen court, support students who have already faced disciplinary action in schools. If completed, these programs allow the student to have their record withheld.

“[The goal is to] affect the child as little as possible through the juvenile diversion program, so that any transgression doesn’t affect the kid,” said Thompson.

By offering a second chance, these diversion programs aim to ensure that students can move past their mistakes without facing long-term consequences, such as a permanent criminal record.

However, while 50% of cases involving white youth are diverted to these programs, only 39% of Black youth and 48% of Latinx youth receive the same opportunity.

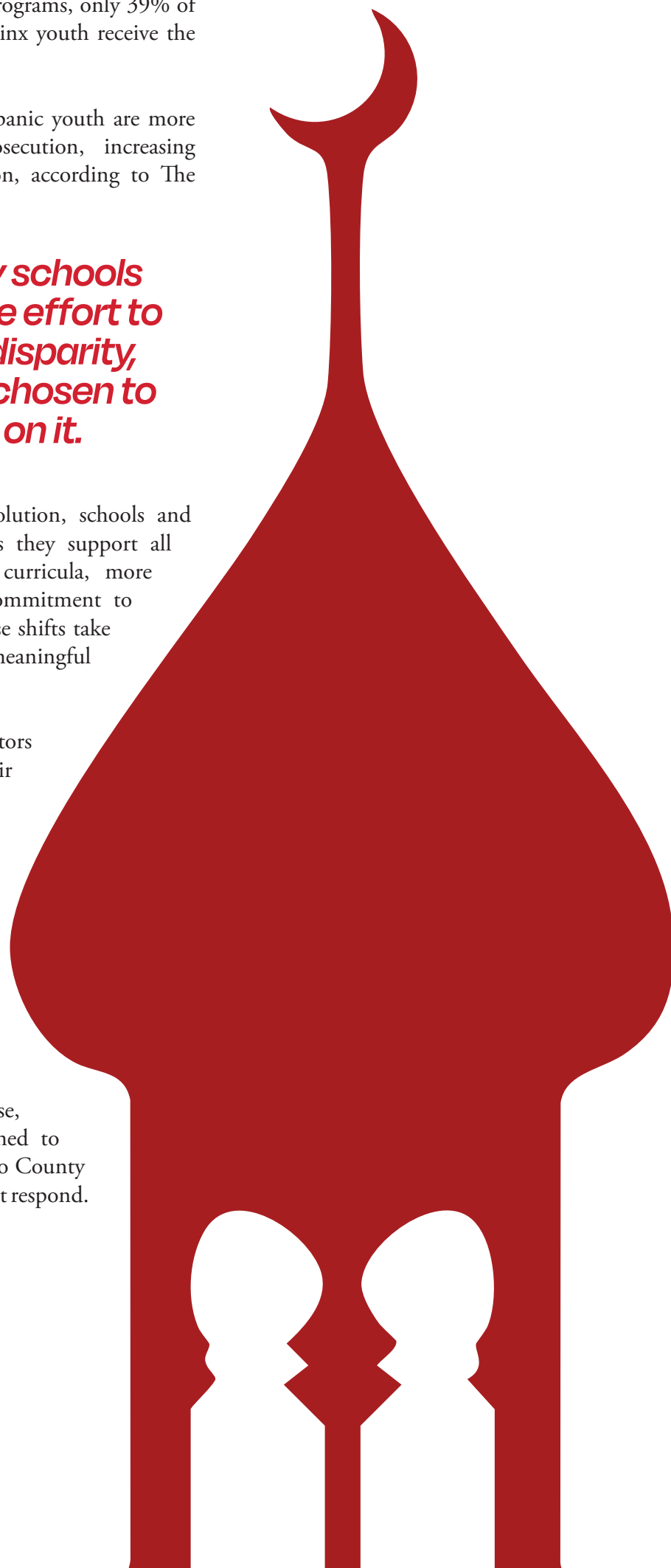
As a result, Black and Hispanic youth are more likely to face formal prosecution, increasing their chances of incarceration, according to The Sentencing Project.

Pasco County schools have made little effort to combat this disparity, nor have they chosen to comment on it.

While there’s no single solution, schools and families can reflect on ways they support all students through inclusive curricula, more diverse leadership, and a commitment to equity in the classroom. These shifts take time, but they can create meaningful change.

Families and educators need to advocate for their underrepresented students more, both for personal and academic reasons, such as promoting diversity in leadership and providing financial assistance.

Twenty-four officials, educators, and students in Pasco County, as well as officials from nonprofits and the Florida courthouse, were contacted. Eight declined to comment, including the Pasco County superintendent, and 13 did not respond.



Samantha Luque Flips the Script on Filmmaking

With her documentary work and indie production company, this Tampa filmmaker is prioritizing the stories often ignored by Hollywood, emphasizing representation and authenticity.

By Kailey Aiken | Staff Writer

Drag queens tower over the buzzing crowd in platform heels, sporting bright colors, bold patterns, and sparkling jewels. With their bright lipstick, razor-sharp eyeliner, and dramatic arching brows, they strut through the club, gracing the stage with performances ranging from upbeat, energetic dances to sappy Whitney Houston ballads.

This was the scene two years ago at the Drag-2Talle fundraiser at City Side Lounge, an LGBTQ+ bar in South Tampa. The event raised money to help drag performers travel to Tallahassee, where they protested legislation threatening their livelihoods.

One of the hundreds of supporters navigating the jam-packed bar was filmmaker, Samantha Luque, armed with her camera. The idea for her docuseries, *Beyond Borders*, had just been born.

Moved by the drag queens' impassioned speeches about the struggles their community was facing, Luque felt compelled to tell their story. She was struck by their devotion and energy.

"I kept thinking to myself, someone has to hear this," said Luque. "Someone needs to understand. These are true stories that are happening. These are people, everyday people, whose lives are getting erased in front of them."

Luque, a Tampa-based filmmaker, uses filmmaking and storytelling to amplify underrepresented voices both on-screen and behind the camera. Her work is rooted in her commitment to diversity, inclusion, and authenticity.

Luque's journey as a filmmaker began long before *Beyond Borders*. As a little girl, she fell in love with film. She was drawn to TV shows like *I Love Lucy* and inspired by legends in the industry like actress Rita Moreno and comedy star Tina Fey.

"I wanted to create content that could make people laugh, cry, be angry, or simply raise awareness," said Luque.

Despite her family's lack of support for a career in the entertainment industry, Luque pursued it, driven by her love for the job.

She landed her first job as a filmmaker to shoot a documentary about Bill Ulrich, an older man who decided to change the trajectory of his life after witnessing a double rainbow. The film portrayed his transformation from a money-driven man to someone dedicated to giving back. He began

"I wanted to create content that could make people laugh, cry, be angry, or simply raise awareness."

pursuing charity work and founded a nonprofit aiming to make the world a better place.

The documentary, *Rainbowland*, was shown at over 60 film festivals. It began to shape the sort of narratives Luque would continue to deliver: human and emotion-based.

Luque forged ahead in the filmmaking industry but found the entertainment world cold and unwelcoming. The absence of women and minorities in production roles was impossible to ignore, and she grew tired of jumping through endless hoops just to catch the attention of major companies.

Instead of trying to fit the mold of big production companies, Luque built her own: SLlama Productions. As her own boss, Luque chose the

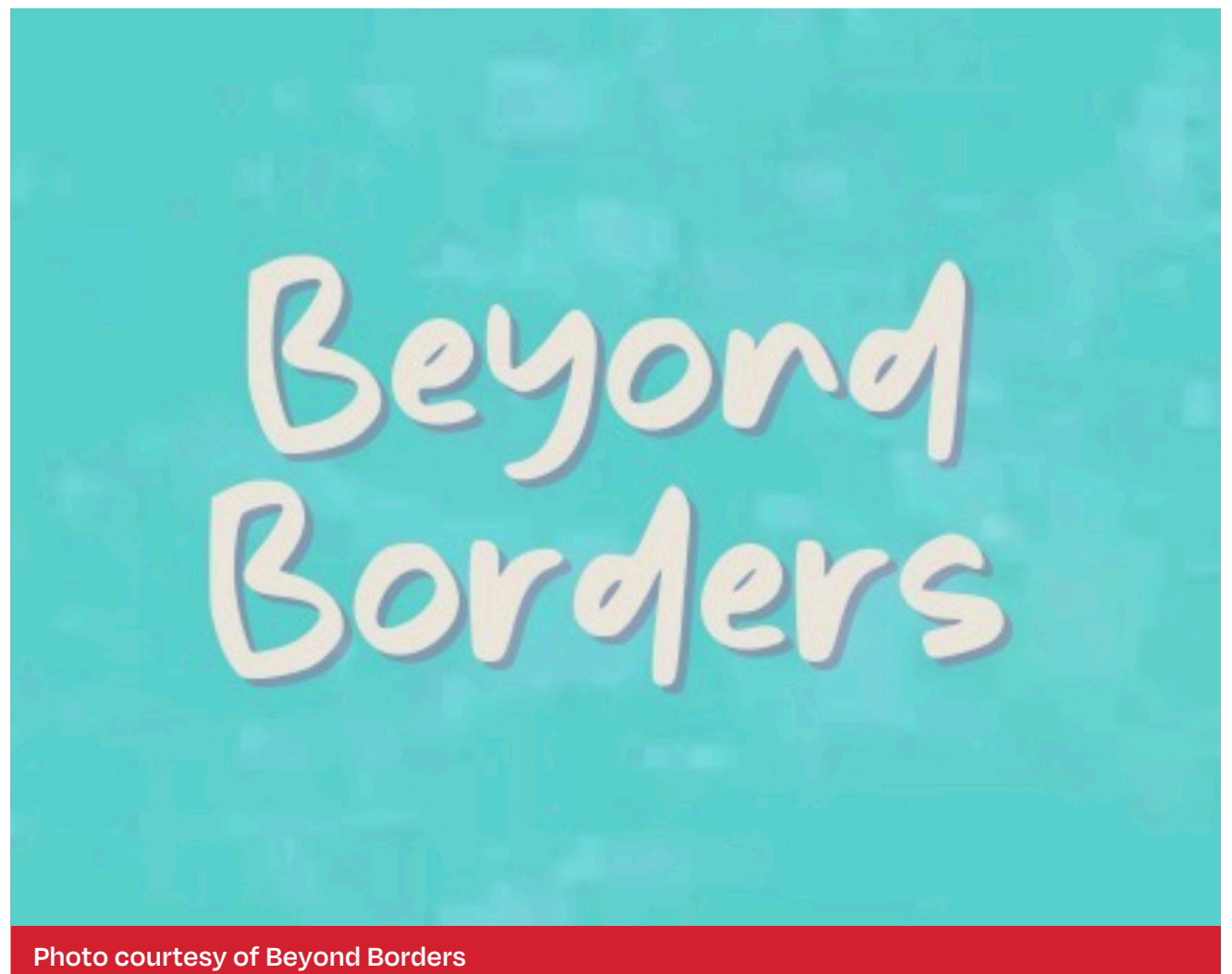


Photo courtesy of Beyond Borders

stories she wanted to tell and the people she wanted to work with. She wouldn't have to sacrifice her values and could give a platform to people with similar backgrounds as herself.

With creative control finally in her hands, Luque undertook one of SLlama Productions' largest projects, *Beyond Borders*. Through this series, she set out to tell the stories of transgender and drag queen communities in Florida, highlighting the real-world impact of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.

"If I could affect one person like that, that's my whole thing, just one person — that's everything to me."

"All these different legislations that are getting passed are affecting real people," said Luque. "When you can put a face to the problem, then it becomes more humane."

The five-episode docuseries spotlights different LGBTQ+ individuals, each sharing their unique story through emotional interviews and powerful footage.

"The interviews were heavy," said Luque. "So it was really important for me to connect with [the people in the docuseries] on a deep, personal level."

Each interview lasted hours before editing, demanding a great deal of vulnerability and trust in Luque to deliver their stories authentically. She was determined for the series to shed light on the hardships this community faced and raise awareness about the issues at hand.

And it did help. After releasing *Beyond Borders*, Luque received DMs, phone calls, and in-person "thank you's" from those moved by the docuseries.

"One man emailed me all the way from Colombia, and he literally poured his heart out," said Luque.

He explained that after watching the series, he felt he could better understand his trans son and felt a stronger connection with him. He realized that he wasn't alone, that there was this whole community that he could relate to.

"If I could affect one person like that, that's my whole thing, just one person — that's everything to me," said Luque.



Photo courtesy of SLlama Productions.

Since releasing *Beyond Borders* in the spring of 2024, she has continued to focus on creating meaningful, human-centered stories that are close to her heart.

Currently, she is working on a documentary that portrays Alzheimer's disease in a more lighthearted way. Having experienced her own grandmother's battle with the disease, she hopes to capture a grandparent-grandchild relationship that isn't defined by solely sadness and loss.

"Of course [Alzheimer's] impacted our relationship ... but it's not all bad," Luque said of her relationship with her grandmother.

She recounted visiting her grandmother once while wearing ripped jeans. Her grandmother, concerned about the holes, chased her around with a sewing kit trying to fix them up for her, making her laugh.

"Let's bring awareness to the disease," she said. "Let's find a way to prevent it. Why not do that through film?"

As SLlama Productions continues to grow,

Luque wants to continue pushing boundaries and forming connections with audiences through her films. Her mission hasn't wavered since she first picked up her camera: to support minority groups and create content that she's passionate about. While the industry is slowly diversifying, Luque believes it's still not enough. In her seven years of filmmaking, she has only had the chance to work with two women in production.

"It still needs more of a push," Luque said. "Not just people on the screen, but also behind the scenes."

Luque wants to continue to bring in more people of diverse backgrounds into every part of the filmmaking process.

For Luque, it all comes back to translating important stories onto the screen.

"Filmmaking is huge because I'm a storyteller at the end of the day," said Luque. "So if I'm able to understand who you are and how we can relay it to an audience ... I want to help you tell your story."



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