

AROUND THE OVAL

A PUBLICATION FOR MEMBERS OF THE COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

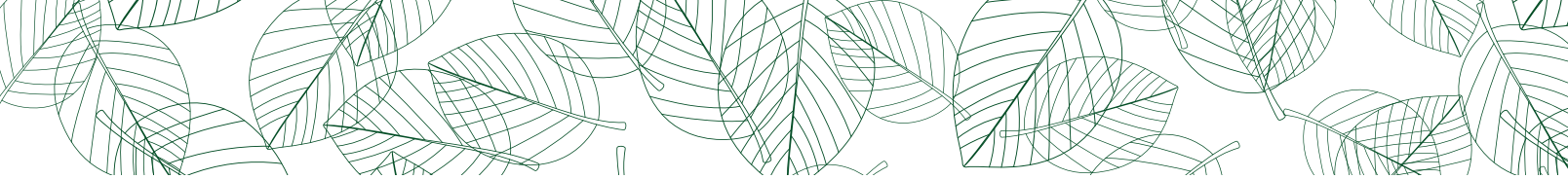


COOL UNDER FIRE

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COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY



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HELLO, RAMS!

When we welcomed the Class of 2020 to the alumni family without traditional in-person commencement ceremonies last year, I couldn't imagine that we'd be in the same situation this year. In early April, Class of 2021 graduates participated in the spring Oval walk, many dressed in full academic regalia as they walked across a stage to be recognized for their accomplishments.

And yet, circumstances have changed. The Oval's iconic trees had not yet woken from winter, but there were other signs of spring: tulips coming up in flower beds across campus, warmer weather, and most of all, a sense of hope and renewal that could be seen on the faces of each and every graduate, despite their masks. While the pandemic certainly isn't over, brighter days are ahead.

Like wildflowers growing on charred mountainsides after a forest fire, the alumni featured in this issue personify that sense of renewal. They also represent what I like to call "stalwart determination." I see it everywhere in our worldwide community of CSU alumni and friends. We don't shrink from challenges. We overcome them.

So, in a way, the stories told in these pages are all of our stories. Enjoy the magazine, enjoy the summer, and Go Rams!



Ram proud,

Kristi Bohlender

Kristi Bohlender, B.S., '93; M.B.A., '95; and Life Member

YOU make an impact

Your membership makes it possible for us to strengthen the lifelong connection of alumni and Colorado State University through meaningful and engaging opportunities. Thank you!

CSU ALUMNI ASSOCIATION MEMBERS LIKE YOU MAKE THIS PUBLICATION POSSIBLE

AROUND THE OVAL SPRING 2021

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Around the Oval is published twice a year by the CSU Alumni Association as a benefit of membership.

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ON THE COVER:

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COOL UNDER FIRE

CSU alumna Reghan Cloudman goes through flames
and floods to keep the public informed

By Becky Jensen ('93)

Photos by Joe Mendoza, CSU Photography





Scorched aftermath of the East Troublesome Fire in Grand County, Colorado.

On a gusty Thursday in late October, the two largest wildfires in Colorado history were on a wind-driven rampage, engulfing brittle forests at the rate of up to 6,000 acres per hour.

The Cameron Peak Fire barreled east past Colorado State University’s Mountain Campus toward Horsetooth Mountain and Masonville. Only 10 miles away, the aptly named East Troublesome Fire exploded up and over the Continental Divide before making its jaw-dropping run toward the town of Estes Park. Down on the Plains, skies were orange and apocalyptic.

Behind the scenes, Reghan Cloudman (M.S., journalism and technical communication, ’04) was working long hours to deliver the latest information to an anxious public. In her 18 years with the United States Forest Service, Cloudman had never seen anything like it: the worst wildfire season on record during a deadly pandemic. Trauma layered upon trauma.

As public affairs specialist for the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests and Pawnee National Grassland, Cloudman served as a public information officer on the Cameron Peak Fire, working with her

counterparts at other agencies to gather and share the latest updates as a unified front. She also took calls from worried homeowners, replied to comments on the Cameron Peak Fire Facebook page, and delivered messages to firefighters on the front lines. Through it all, she could see the toll these fires, and the pandemic, were taking on the community.

“It was a lot,” she says. “A lot of long days and long months for so many people.”

But there are few people better suited to her job than Cloudman, whose master’s thesis at Colorado State was “Crisis Communication Preparedness,” and whose first days as a summer intern for the Forest Service were spent fielding calls about the Big Elk Fire in 2002. Cloudman’s trial-by-fire internship led to a permanent position, and she’s been a voice of calm for the Forest Service ever since. Before the Cameron Peak Fire, she was a public information officer for the Picnic Rock Fire in 2004, High Park Fire in 2012, the record-breaking floods of 2013, plus many smaller fires, floods, and mudslides in between.

“A lot of what I studied in grad school is what I do every day,” she says, but admits the 2020 wildfire season

put everything to the test.

“When you add stress to a system, it can break,” Cloudman says. “Interagency relationships can really be tested when you have something like a Cameron Peak Fire, but we’re fortunate to have strong relationships with our partners,” she says, adding that the Forest Service and its partners – including Larimer County, municipalities, CSU, volunteer fire departments, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, nonprofits, coalitions, and more – always have each other’s backs.

“Fire doesn’t know land boundaries. It doesn’t know what’s public and what’s private, what’s state and what’s fed. It just burns,” Cloudman says, acknowledging that no single agency is expected to handle a wildfire alone. “We’re all in this together.”

By the time the Cameron Peak Fire was contained on Dec. 2, it had consumed nearly 209,000 acres over 112 days, making it Colorado’s largest and longest-lasting wildfire to date.

“What we’re seeing is that fire season keeps getting bigger and longer,” says Cloudman. “And there’s so much devastation.”



Smoke from the East Troublesome Fire, as seen from north Fort Collins, Colorado.



Above: Reghan Cloudman with her family, including their rescue dog, Hudson, at Fish Creek Picnic Area in Roosevelt National Forest.

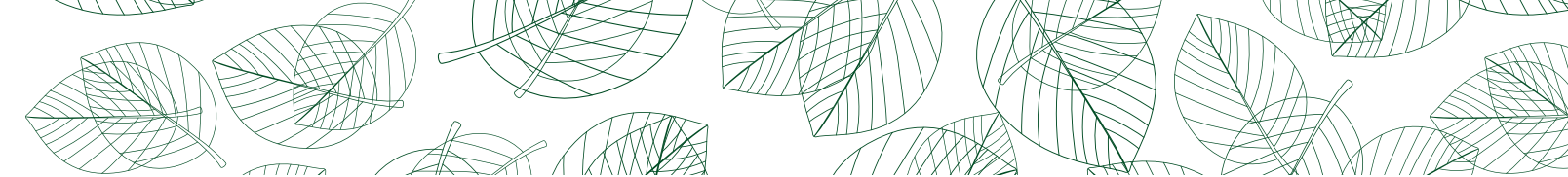


Right: Cloudman hits the slopes at Winter Park, Colorado.



“We all have a role to play in preserving our natural world and the places we love.”

— REGHAN CLOUDMAN



It’s the devastating loss that inspires Cloudman to share messages of hope.

“When we talk about silver linings, the Cameron Peak Fire showed the value of the work we’re doing with our partners and why it’s so important to look at forest management and forest health at the landscape level.” Proactive work, she explains, such as carefully planned prescribed fires and other fuel-reduction efforts, is making a real difference, even decades later.

Prescribed fires are known to boost soil nutrients that feed grass growth in the spring. For some wildlife, such as bighorn sheep, prescribed fires clear the landscape so they can see predators more easily. And when the raging Cameron Peak Fire reached Dadd Bennett, a prescribed-burn area from the early 2000s, the blaze became less intense, giving fire crews a fighting chance. In other prescribed-burn areas, observers reported that the lack of fuel made the fire lay down, stopping its advance.

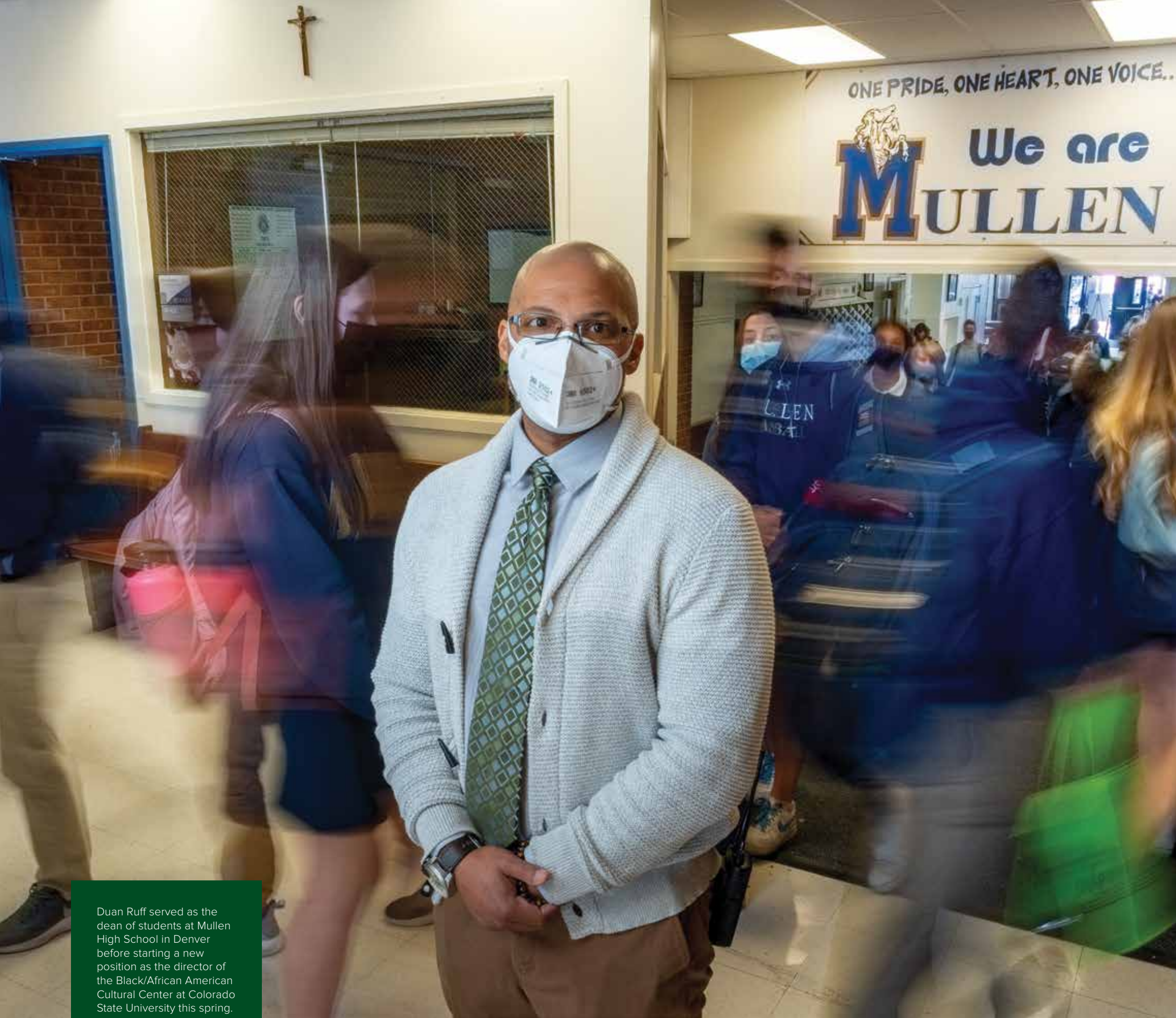
Although last year’s wildfires are behind us, the road to recovery has just begun. Crews are busy rehabbing bulldozer fire lines, preparing for spring runoff and

potential flooding, repairing damaged recreational areas, and so much more. Cloudman looks forward to celebrating milestones with the public as the recovery process unfolds.

And if this summer is anything like last year, Cloudman expects to see a record number of visitors on public lands and a greater need for fire safety awareness. In July 2020, Colorado Parks and Wildlife reported a 50 percent increase in visitors to the mountains, one-third of them identifying as first-timers. “Nine out of 10 wildfires are caused by humans,” Cloudman says. “We need to do our best to help educate people and make sure they have the information they need to make good choices out on our public lands. We all have a role to play in preserving our natural world and the places we love.”

A photo of wildflowers (below), taken a few years after 2012’s High Park Fire, resonates with Cloudman and feeds her growing optimism. “It makes me think about the renewal of the forest and how you can find beauty even in this immense burn scar,” she says. “I hope people can find that in Cameron Peak as well.” ☁





Duan Ruff served as the dean of students at Mullen High School in Denver before starting a new position as the director of the Black/African American Cultural Center at Colorado State University this spring.

EDUCATOR, INNOVATOR, AND AGENT FOR CHANGE

*By Ann Gill (M.A., '76)
Photos by Joe Mendoza, CSU Photography*

A passion for education runs deep in Duan Ruff (B.A., '03). Ruff, the new director of the Black/African American Cultural Center at Colorado State University, comes from a family of educators. The first Black superintendent of Denver Public Schools, Dr. Evie Dennis, was his great-aunt; his mother taught at a community college in Denver; and his uncle taught in Colorado Springs.

Education, he says, “is in my blood; I love it.”

When he was 7, Ruff’s family moved to Denver from St. Louis, where he was born. He attended Mullen High School before enrolling at CSU, where he competed in football and track.

Ruff excelled as an athlete at CSU, rushing more than 100 yards against both Fresno State and Air Force in the 2001 season. He also holds the CSU record for the 55-meter dash.



“Education is in my blood; I love it.”

— DUAN RUFF

While an undergraduate, he served as a tutor and mentor at what then was Black Student Services, noting the tremendous influence Blanche Hughes (M.Ed., '84; Ph.D., '95), now CSU's vice president for student affairs, and Jennifer Williams Molock (B.S., '84) had on his life. He spent Thursday nights before games in Bible study with Pastor Johnny Square (B.S., '87), who also played an important role in his life. Ruff says that “these phenomenal people remain friends.” He also participated in Athletes in Action, an athletics-based ministry group.

After graduation, Ruff worked as a claims adjuster for Progressive Insurance in Dallas, before moving back to Colorado to work as a recruiter for the Community College of Denver. He moved on to become principal of Urban League Hope Online, a small charter school in Denver, while completing his M.B.A. and taking a “deep dive into education and teaching.”

His journey took him back to CSU where, from 2014

to 2017, he served as assistant director of the Black/African American Cultural Center, before heading to Mullen as the associate athletic director and statistics/computer science teacher from 2017-18. Then, as Mullen's dean of students and director of safety and security, Ruff helped students be the best version of themselves, while ensuring students and staff were safe while at school.

As director of safety and security, Ruff assessed access control and emergency procedures. He refers to the police who are on site each day as “assets rather than issues for

the school. They show students a different side of a police officer. They talk to students and help them out, creating an opportunity for learning.”

Ruff, who completed his principal license at the University of Denver, has a somewhat rare response to being an educator during the COVID-19 crisis: “I am ecstatic to be on the front line during the pandemic,” explaining that one positive result of this challenging time is that the concept of brick-and-mortar schools is changing. Students now “have information at hand; they Google topics while the teacher is talking,” so, teachers' roles are evolving as they become “guides.” Formerly, schooling was “creating students to be workers.” Now, teachers are preparing them to become creators and innovators, and Ruff is passionate about that direction.

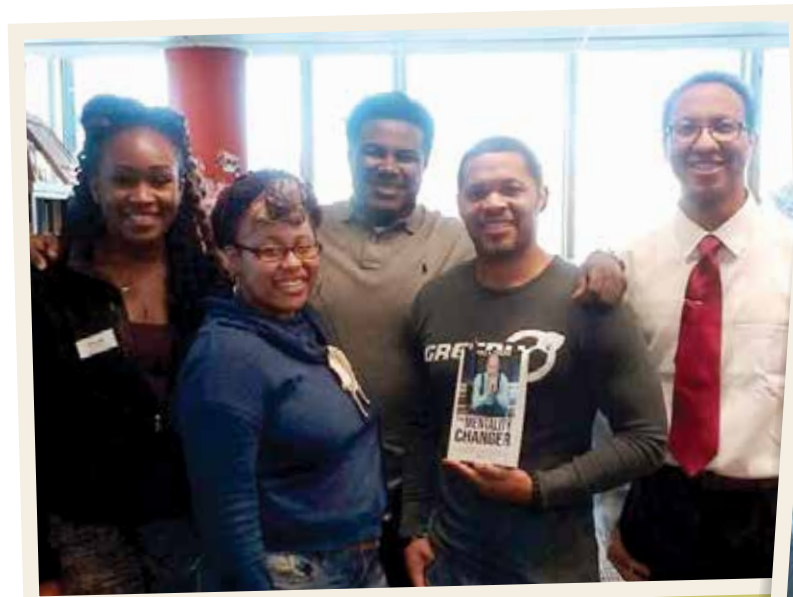
Ruff says teachers also need “to understand what information overload is doing to us,” arguing that tech companies need to take responsibility. “Their algorithms feed us only what we have consumed.” He claims this is deepening the divide in our country, saying “we need to take a balanced approach” to “see other sides and acknowledge multiple truths.” In terms of content students are accessing online, there is no alternate voice, no one to challenge the perspective they are reading. They

need teachers to challenge false narratives and provide that alternate voice, Ruff says.

Pandemic-induced isolation is another challenge for students, Ruff says. “At Mullen, my students hated isolation. They missed what they took for granted” prior to the pandemic. One interesting result of this phenomenon is that attendance is no problem these days; students want to be in class and to be with each other, says Ruff.

Asked earlier this spring where he sees himself in 15 years, Ruff said he wants to be an innovator and an educational leader, whether at the high school or college level. He got his wish when he was offered the position as director of the Black/African American Cultural Center at CSU, where he'll apply his forward-thinking leadership on behalf of students and the surrounding communities. Returning to his alma mater once again, he wants to do his part to “improve lives in the African American community and all marginalized communities, end racist systems of oppression, and enable everyone to live in a better world.”

Ruff and his wife, Reneca, have two daughters and two sons. They both are certified yoga instructors; he says yoga keeps him grounded. That focus will serve this outstanding educator extremely well in his new role. 🙏



Right: Duan Ruff, second from the right, with fellow Black/African American Cultural Center staff during a campus visit by author Kyle A. Greene. **Below:** Ruff with his wife, Reneca, and their children.





John Arnolfo (B.S., '74), owner of the Silver Grill Cafe.

FEEDING A LEGACY

By Bruce Hallmark (M.S., '04)

Whether you relish breakfast as the most important meal of the day or routinely skimp on it, the images and smells of eggs, pancakes, bacon, sausage, toast, and coffee excite our senses.

Fort Collins locals who get their breakfast fix at the iconic Silver Grill Cafe in Old Town can expect more competition for seating now that the restaurant has reopened for sit-down dining.

In December 2020, *Esquire* magazine named the Silver Grill one of the “100 Restaurants America Can’t Afford to Lose” to the COVID-19 pandemic because “if we lose them, we lose who we are.”

Food editor and author, Jeff Gordinier, who penned the entry for *Esquire*, wrote: “I have been around the world, people, and I am here to tell you that I firmly believe that the Silver Grill, founded in 1933, cooks up the best breakfast in America.”

“Unbelievable!” said John Arnolfo (B.S., '74), owner of the Silver Grill Cafe. “I couldn’t believe we were picked. I looked it up, and there are more than 660,000 restaurants in the United States, so to be chosen as the best breakfast restaurant is overwhelming,” he exclaimed. “It’s not only great for me, it’s also great for the city.”

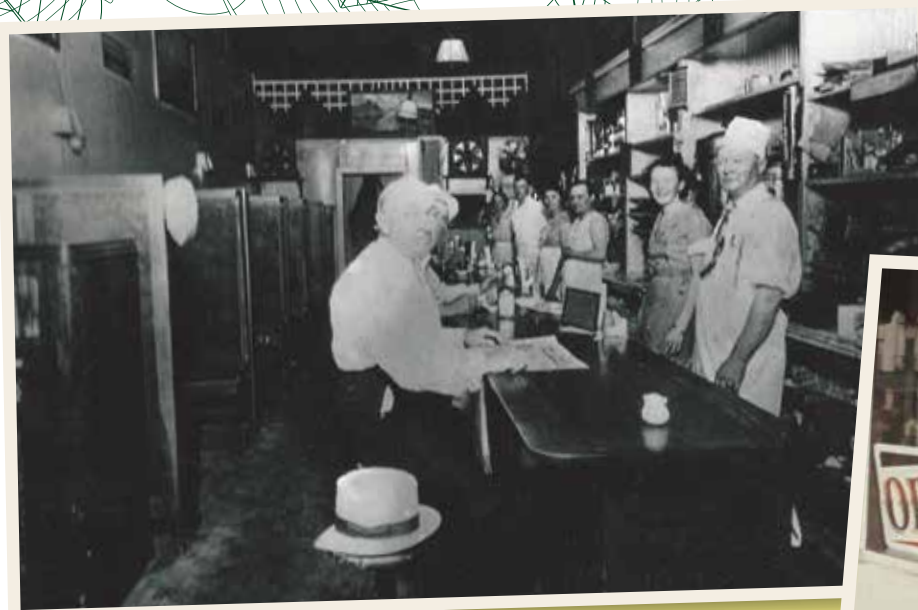
Arnolfo learned about making the list on Dec. 31 from a friend who sent him a link to the article in a text message

that read, “I’m sure you’ve seen this, but congratulations.” In fact, Arnolfo had not seen the article, but as he said, “to find that out on New Year’s Eve was pretty fun after a pretty lousy year.”

BREAKFAST IS SERVED

Arnolfo reached out to Gordinier, who helped compile the list and asked him how the Silver Grill made the cut. Gordinier, also the author of a book titled *Hungry: Eating, Road-Tripping, and Risking It All with the Greatest Chef in the World*, was a speaker at the 2019 Fort Collins Book Festival and ate at the Silver Grill one morning during his October visit. Arnolfo didn’t even know he had eaten at the restaurant, which is the oldest restaurant in Northern Colorado and one of the top five oldest in the state.

The historic beginnings of the Silver Grill Cafe can be traced back to 1912 when a family-run restaurant named UNEEDA-Lunch Cafe opened at the present location at 218 Walnut St. As the story goes, a window-sign painter came by and offered to paint the restaurant a new sign – and give it a better name – in exchange for lunch. The unknown painter christened it the Silver Grill Cafe. The restaurant closed a few years later. Then in October 1933, Leonidas “Flossie” Widger, one of the partners from the



Left: Silver Grill Cafe in 1933. **Below:** John Arnolfo in 1979, the year he and former business partner Mike Gress purchased the Silver Grill Cafe.



original restaurant, leased the building and the Silver Grill Cafe reopened.

Members of the Widger family continued to operate the restaurant for the next 46 years. In 1979, several years after graduating from CSU, Arnolfo and his college roommate and then-business partner, Mike Gress (B.A., '74), wanted to own a restaurant and walked into the Silver Grill one day. The place was run down, so they asked a server why things were in such disarray, and she told them the owner wanted to sell the business. Arnolfo and Gress bought it that afternoon.

Six years later, Arnolfo expanded the size of the restaurant by purchasing the building next door, which was the first of four adjoining buildings he eventually purchased. The ambiance that diners enjoy today was produced by removing drywall to reveal the brickwork and refinishing the original wood floors. "As we were renovating, we designed the Old Town look we have today." After owning the restaurant for more than 42 years, Arnolfo says, "what you see at the Silver Grill today was a combination of luck and tenacity."

FROM SAN FRANCISCO TO FORT COLLINS

Some of that entrepreneurial spirit came from Arnolfo's family and upbringing. He was born and raised in San Francisco, California, where his parents owned a grocery store. Arnolfo's father immigrated from Italy where his family grew grapes. "He had a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps attitude," Arnolfo said.

In his senior year of high school, Arnolfo started considering universities to attend in Colorado, Arizona, Idaho, and Wyoming because he wanted a more rural way of life and outdoor activities. One day, he was looking at a map of the country and just put his finger down on Fort Collins and said "CSU." It was the only school he applied to. He hadn't been to Colorado or Fort Collins until arriving on campus in the summer of 1969. "I came here and never went home."

Arnolfo believes his business degree gave him a strong foundation to open and operate a restaurant. "I'm so thankful to CSU for what they've done for me. I've gotten more involved with the University through Athletics and the College of Business, and the community connections I've made through the years helped grow my business."

In 2016, he established the John F. Arnolfo Scholarship in the College of Business. "It is my way of starting to give back."

SURVIVING THE PANDEMIC

In early 2020, Arnolfo and his staff had growing concerns about COVID-19 that soon became a stark reality.

"We never anticipated it would get to this level," Arnolfo said. "We went from hearing about it in late February, to getting pretty concerned about it in early March, to receiving notice on March 16 that we were closing down the next day. The business owners I knew were all in shock." That news was followed by a lot of

internal emergency meetings about how to manage the situation.

Thanks to solid financial planning and loans through the Paycheck Protection Program coordinated by the U.S. Small Business Administration, the Silver Grill weathered the first wave of closures. But they didn't know what to expect next.

"We started considering things that we never thought we'd do, like takeout, delivery, and online ordering," Arnolfo said. "It truly was an evolution; all those things were brand new to us. After we opted into doing them, we had to buy software to allow online ordering and had to develop relationships with delivery companies. It was almost like opening a new business."

Those new ventures were successful. "To my surprise, we're doing much more take-out and delivery breakfast than I ever thought we would," remarked Arnolfo. For those who love their famous cinnamon rolls, it's no surprise they have been a popular take-out item. And, thanks to *Esquire's* review, a lot more people are ordering their homemade hash browns too.

LIVING UP TO THE HYPE

Being named the No. 1 breakfast restaurant in America is a high honor, but Arnolfo knows they're not out of the woods just yet. "Those of us in the restaurant business – certainly in a dine-in restaurant like mine – we're all looking for this pandemic to be over and have started welcoming our customers back."

The Grill had almost 50 employees when 2020 began. But a year later, when they reopened for in-person dining on March 1, that number had dropped to 35.

During the downtime, the restaurant has upgraded computer systems and processes. "We're going to be leaner and more efficient, and when the community fully reopens, I think we're going to hit the ground running and be as busy as ever."

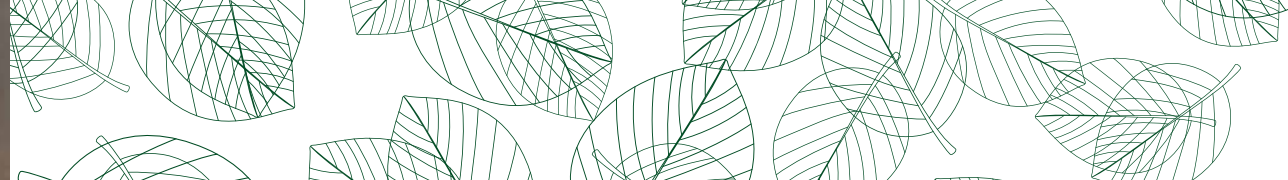
"We've been voted the best; now, we have to be the best," said Arnolfo. "It's got everyone's attention at the restaurant. I think our food is better now than it's ever been." ☺

Old Town Room, location of the original 1933 Silver Grill restaurant.



The Silver Grill Cafe's famous cinnamon rolls.

This page: © Silver Grill Cafe; opposite page: © Colin Shepherd



IN THE LINE OF FIRE

By Ben Fogelberg (B.A., '94; M.A., '98)

Beatriz del Rio's first day on the job as a wildland forest firefighter was a brutal test of her mental and physical stamina. "I was thrown into mop-up," she remembers. "We were essentially trailing the fire, making sure anything still burning wasn't going to start another arm of the fire." InciWeb, an interagency wildfire information management system, describes mop-up as "extinguishing residual fires to make sure they don't continue to spread outside of a containment area." To del Rio, it meant repeatedly combing over the same stretch of ground on her hands and knees, sticking her ungloved hand into piles of hot ash, logs, and stumps to see if they were still secretly burning and needed to be cooled down. "We couldn't cool it down, no matter how many times we went over it," she says. By the end of the day, she was covered in ash and had gone through nine liters of water.

For wildland firefighters, their first incident assignment is the final challenge in a demanding training program. After completing an online course of study, trainees enroll in a weeklong boot camp consisting of physical tests

and on-the-ground instruction on command structure, communication protocols, digging and clearing fire lines, setting up fire hoses, and lighting and extinguishing controlled fires. Finally, trainees endure the "pack test," a three-mile hike that must be completed in 45 minutes while wearing a 45-pound backpack.

Not all trainees decide to continue along the path to becoming a professional wildland firefighter after their first assignment. "Everyone understands that it's going to be hard," del Rio says. "But if you find that it's not for you, they'll get you out."

Del Rio didn't just survive her first grueling days. She thrived. "I was always excited. After the second day, I was called to a different incident and got to camp on a beautiful high-altitude property with horses running through camp. Getting up early to put out the fire, I could see the landscape all around. It was a cool sensation."

She developed her love for mountain landscapes and nature outside Santiago, Chile, where she grew up. When she was 8, she moved to Colorado, which furthered an

Left: Firefighting crews used drip torches to set machine piles ablaze to remove invasive western juniper near Oregon's Painted Hills for drought mitigation and grazing purposes in 2020. **Above:** North Complex Fire, California, Oct. 12, 2020. **Right:** Beatriz del Rio runs a saw for the first time, North Complex Fire, California, Oct. 2, 2020.

interest in plants, animals, and being alone in nature that was cemented during a high school backpacking trip. When her older brother, Gabe, toured Colorado State University, she tagged along and met Ethan Billingsley, a Warner College instructor who encouraged her interest in natural resources.

Del Rio says she was fortunate to land a job in the forestry department's office during her freshman year and to work for the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute as a field tech and crew leader for the next three summers. Housed in the Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship, CFRI is a grant-funded organization that serves as a bridge among researchers, land managers, and other stakeholders working to enhance forest ecosystem resilience to wildfires. Del Rio helped collect data that



Photos courtesy Beatriz del Rio



Beatriz del Rio maintains “peak dirtiness” during her month fighting the North Complex Fire, California, Oct. 2, 2020.

“I am always excited to see women in leadership roles, doing hard physical tasks.”

— BEATRIZ DEL RIO

strong, graceful woman in a leadership position. In her free time, she told stories about her adventures, including being shot at in the Pike National Forest.” Another was Kat Morici, a researcher who left the CFRI’s summer field crew to fight a forest fire and was happy to let del Rio pick her brain about the experience later. Del Rio’s first supervisor at CFRI, Emma Williams, also had firefighting experience.

After graduating in 2019, del Rio moved to Bend, Oregon, hoping to find a job in natural resources. She found the applicant pool saturated with other recent graduates seeking rewarding experiences in the outdoor industry, but admits that “with such great field experiences, I was being picky.” After a winter of “laying low” doing menial

jobs in town and feeling inspired by her network of strong women, she decided to give firefighting a shot.

There are two types of wildland fire crews: agency and contract. As wildfire seasons have lengthened and become more costly and destructive, state and federal agencies rely more and more on contract firefighting companies to augment their efforts. Del Rio found a job with PatRick Corp., the first private sector company to fulfill a fire contract with the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

Last year, she was called to fight eight fires, including the North Complex and Castle fires in California. During a two-week assignment in Sequoia National Park, PatRick crews worked to limit burn severity in groves

informed predictions about how fires would behave in the landscape. “It was a hard job that I was not qualified for,” she recalls. But her confidence grew with every field experience. “One of my favorite components of the work was getting to camp for a week in whatever weather – heat, wind, snow, or rain. I told myself, okay, I can handle a little more. It was a slow progression.”

Del Rio credits several mentors and role models for speeding up that progression, including three women who exemplified professionalism, strength, and success in male-dominated fields. “I was always excited to see women in leadership roles, doing hard physical tasks,” del Rio says. One of them is CFRI research associate Marin Chambers (B.S., ’11; M.S., ’15), “an ex-EMT and a kind,



Sequoia Complex Fire, California, Sept. 13, 2020, after fire crews and residents were evacuated the prior night.

of monarch giant sequoias and saved the world’s fifth-largest tree.

Del Rio worked on a 20-person hand crew, which she describes as “one of the more basic resources available to fight a fire.” Each crew member wears a hard hat and carries a line pack full of water and food, protective gear, and more than 20 pounds of tools. “The initial attack involves being on an active flaming fire front to create a fuel break to slow the fire down and contain it,” she says. “We’re digging down to bare soil, limbing tree branches to limit fire spreading to the canopy, and protecting structures.” She estimates that about 1 in 10 wildland firefighters on hand crews are women.

Between assignments, del Rio tries to rest while waiting for the next call. She gets a minimum of 24 hours off, but afterward the uncertainty about when that call might

come forces her to be productive with errands and the mundane obligations of life. When it does come, she feels her adrenaline spike and then packs up her gear, notifies family and friends, and heads to the base. When last year’s fire season ended, she took a month off. “I’ve never felt that exhausted,” she attests.

And now, a new season is well underway. As of this writing, the National Interagency Fire Center forecasts above-normal significant fire potential in many parts of the country this spring and summer, including the Southwest and parts of California and Colorado. While there’s no way to predict how long or destructive this year’s season will be, it’s safe to say that del Rio and thousands of other contract and agency wildland firefighters are well prepared and ready to put themselves in the line of fire. ☞

Photos courtesy Beatriz del Rio

RAMS IN THE LIMELIGHT

Alumni on the Big Screen

By Bruce Hallmark (M.S., '04)



Emmy Award-nominated actress and comedian Annette “Leslie” Jones, who attended Colorado State University in the mid-1980s, garnered the

attention of alumni with a recent television commercial. During the NCAA’s basketball tournament in March, Jones appeared in two 30-second commercials for Uber Eats, the food-delivery service launched by the ridesharing service, Uber.

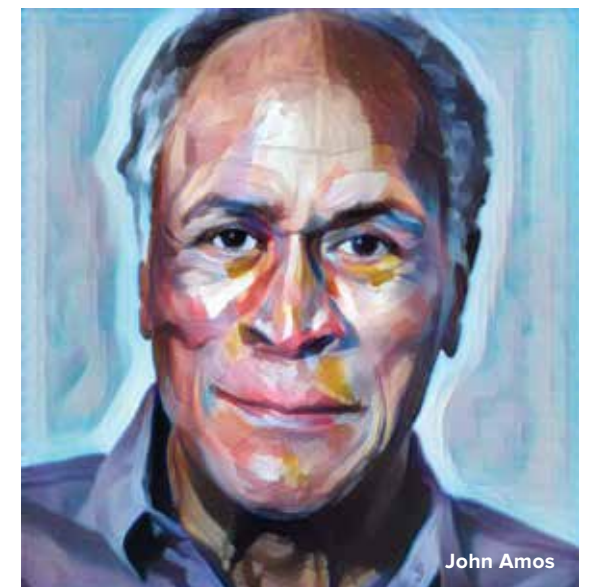
Jones plays multiple characters in the ads, and in the March Madness Super Fan spot, she is wearing a white Colorado State hoodie and a green number 77 basketball jersey, both of which are a nod to her basketball days at CSU.

For those unfamiliar with Jones, she was a longtime standup comedian prior to being hired by *Saturday Night Live* in 2014 as a writer and quickly gained popularity after a memorable on-air appearance during the show’s “Weekend Update” segment as herself. Her popularity led to big-screen roles in films such as Paul Feig’s 2016 reboot of *Ghostbusters* starring Melissa McCarthy, Kristen Wiig, and Kate McKinnon; Chris Rock’s *Top Five*; Judd Apatow’s *Trainwreck*, starring Amy Schumer; and *Masterminds*. Among all that, Jones found time to return to campus in March 2016 for a comedy performance at the Lory Student Center.

Recently, Jones appeared in *Coming 2 America*, a sequel to the 1988 film *Coming to America*, starring Eddie Murphy. The film was originally planned for theatrical release in August 2020, but due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Paramount Pictures sold the distribution rights to Amazon Studios and the film debuted on Prime Video on March 4, 2021. According to Amazon, the film had the best opening weekend of any streaming film in the past year.



Leslie Jones



John Amos



Kareem Rosser



▲ Leslie Jones in one of the Uber Eats “Double the Madness” commercials shown during the NCAA men’s basketball tournament.



▲ Leslie Jones as Mary Junson in *Coming 2 America*.



▲ John Amos as Cleo McDowell opposite Eddie Murphy as Prince Akeem in *Coming 2 America*.

Coincidentally, Jones isn’t the only former Ram in the film. Emmy Award nominee John Amos, who attended CSU in the early 1960s, reprises his role as the father of Murphy’s love interest in *Coming 2 America*.

Amos played football while at CSU and pursued a career in the NFL. After the Kansas City Chiefs cut him during tryouts for the second time, Amos wrote a poem titled “The Turk,” describing the humbling experience of being let go. He asked then-head coach Hank Stram if he could read it to fellow players before leaving training camp. Amos said the recitation was so well received, “it helped build the foundation for the confidence that I might be able to make it in the entertainment industry down the road.”

After paying his dues in advertising and comedy writing, Amos won acting roles in numerous theatrical productions, the landmark television miniseries *Roots*, as well as other critically acclaimed shows such as *Good Times* and *West Wing*, and films including *Die Hard 2* and *Uncut Gems*.

And finally, similar to the newest graduating Class of 2021, Kareem Rosser (B.A., ’16) has overcome challenges and celebrated remarkable achievements. Recently, he served as a stunt double for Idris Elba in the new Netflix film *Concrete Cowboy*, an urban Western inspired by the Fletcher Street Stables, a North Philadelphia community of Black cowboys. It was a perfect role for Rosser, who grew up in Philly and learned to play polo through the nonprofit organization, Work to Ride, which teaches low-income children to ride horses and play polo in exchange for their help with chores in the stable. Later, Rosser played polo for CSU’s club team, where he won a national title and was named Intercollegiate Player of the Year by the U.S. Polo Association.

In February, St. Martin’s Press released Rosser’s autobiography titled *Crossing the Line: A Fearless Team of Brothers and the Sport That Changed Their Lives Forever*. His inspiring story motivated the spring commencement planners to invite Rosser to deliver the virtual commencement address to the Class of 2021 on May 14. His prepared remarks are as follows:

Hello, Class of 2021; you made it! Congratulations! You conquered one of the most difficult academic years in recent history and reached an incredible milestone during a pandemic. I am beyond proud of you – you showed Ram toughness.

As you prepare for the next chapter, I imagine many of you are excited, and some even nervous.

I have no doubt this class is ready to take on whatever is waiting for you next.

Commencement is a meaningful ceremony, but it is not the final goal you have been working toward. It is part of the larger journey of life. Wherever your future takes you, life is a journey, and all accomplishments we achieve during its course should be taken as starting points for further achievement. Your graduation serves as a launching point, whether you are headed to a new career, continuing your education, or exploring another avenue entirely.

As you make your transition, you will inevitably face new challenges. This was true for me, too, when I was in your position. A few weeks after graduation, I began working as a financial analyst. The first six months were overwhelming, as I struggled to maintain a healthy work-life balance. There were moments, just like during my time at CSU, when I wanted to quit.

As a student, I failed multiple tests. As a student-athlete, I lost many games. But I did not let the failing moments define me. Instead, I look back at my struggles as a college student and see that I chose to persevere. I used my challenges as motivation to pursue a greater goal: to become the first member of my family to receive a college degree.

Now you, like me, have the honor of calling ourselves CSU graduates. Now, it is time to put the knowledge you’ve gained over the last four years to use. CSU has equipped you with the tools to create your own plan. Creating a plan does not mean success will come overnight.

As we experienced this past year, life forces us to adjust. The pandemic delayed my first significant capital raise as the lead analyst. I did not let the challenges of the virus dictate my success. I pivoted and remained patient. There will be moments you will feel discouraged, but you have already proven to be resilient. You have received an education from one of the greatest institutions in the world, and I know you are prepared!

You are about to close one door while simultaneously opening a new one. I am encouraging you to walk through with confidence. As I said before, life is a journey, and you do not stop growing once you get your diploma.

Today, you have a lot to celebrate; enjoy this moment, and the best of luck to all of you.

Go Rams! 🐾



▲ John Amos in *Coming 2 America*.



▲ Kareem Rosser, left, published his autobiography in February.



▲ Kareem Rosser accepting the Distinguished Graduate of the Last Decade Award in 2019.

Top photo: courtesy Uber Eats; bottom two photos: courtesy Amazon Studios

Clockwise: courtesy Amazon Studios; used with permission of St. Martin’s Press; Joe A. Mendoza, CSU Photography, courtesy of Ralph Lauren

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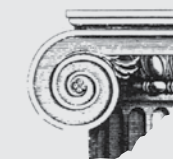
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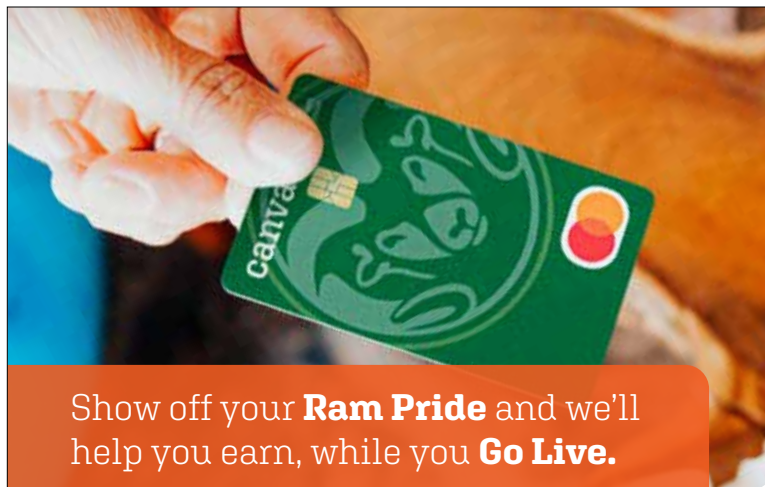
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