

WINTER 2020

# Invention

THE MAGAZINE OF THOMAS EDISON STATE UNIVERSITY

## Finding Purpose Through Education and Coaching

EDWARD MACDONALD, BA '12, BRITTANY MACDONALD, BA '09, AND JOSHUA SHI, BA '17

HOMETOWN HERO: ANA GATSON, MSM '18 | ABOVE & BEYOND WITH CODY DOWNEY, BS '19 | KATIE MCSHANE'S HIGH TECH HUMANITY  
STAYING THE COURSE WITH ADAM FITTING, BA '15 | THE 28TH ANNUAL GRANDE BALL | ALUMNI AMBASSADOR IDA BIDDLE-MAYER  
PINNING CEREMONY FOR ACCELERATED 2ND DEGREE BSN PROGRAM | UNIVERSITY HOSTS MALE EMPOWERMENT EVENT



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**D**ear Alumni, Students and Friends,

For many, education can inspire purpose and direction.

That was the case for the three Thomas Edison State University alumni featured in our cover story. For Edward Macdonald, Brittany Macdonald and Joshua Shi, the inspiration to change their lives and launch their careers was the result of the educational opportunities afforded them at TESU.

This entrepreneurial cohort formed AGL (Apex Generation Leadership), which uses coaching, training and consulting to create a culture of engagement within businesses and teams. When forming their Colorado Springs-based company, they chose the name Apex Generation Leadership because they believed that young adults in the American workforce – and the international workforce at large – are at the “Apex” of a major workplace transition.

Continuing in the entrepreneurial spirit, Adam Fitting, a 2015 graduate of the Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Sciences program, has seen his endeavors take him to London, Shanghai, Germany, New Zealand and points across the U.S. in his various roles with the U.S. Air Force, Apple Inc. and Tesla.

“TESU’s ability to evaluate and equate training and professional experiences into academic credit was empowering for me and made it all possible. It validates my belief that true learning and innovation doesn’t have to occur in an ivory tower,” Fitting said.

Also in this issue, we meet Ana Gatson, who earned a Master of Science in Management degree in Nonprofit Management with the help of the New Jersey Army National Guard, for which she has served for more than 19 years. Now, she wants to use her education and military experience to give back to the underserved populations in her hometown of Trenton, N.J.

Through the generosity of the supporters of the University and its mission, stories like these are possible. We celebrated that legacy of providing transformative and affordable education to adult learners at the TESU Foundation’s 28th Annual Grande Ball at Jasna Polana in Princeton, N.J., last fall. More than 200 celebrants were in attendance, including New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy and first lady Tammy Snyder Murphy. The event raised nearly \$170,000 in support of the critical needs of the University and will aide our mission to help create more stories like the ones you will read here.

I hope you enjoy this issue of *Invention*.



Merodie A. Hancock, PhD  
*President*



# HOMETOWN



*"I wouldn't be the person I am today if it wasn't for the city of Trenton and the people. That's why I wanted to get a degree that I could use to help people that are under-represented in my community."*

Ana Gatson

# HERO



## ❖ Ana Gatson, MSM '18 **ALUMNI AMBASSADOR**

Born and raised in Trenton, N.J., Ana Gatson has had the opportunity to travel the world with the New Jersey Army National Guard, but her mission with her newly minted Master of Science in Management degree in Nonprofit Management is to help the underserved people in her hometown.

"When I retire from military service in two years, my plan is to work with a not-for-profit organization that services, supports and advocates for immigrants," Gatson explained.

It was the challenges early on in Gatson's educational journey that led her to serve her country while improving her own prospects. After graduating high school, Gatson was accepted to a 4-year state university, but her parents were unable to afford it, so the only other option for her to pursue the education she wanted was to join the military.

"The military has provided the financial assistance I needed to get my associate and bachelor's degrees and now my master's," she noted. "Because I was a member of the New Jersey National Guard, my tuition was covered completely. Thomas Edison State University's online program provided me with the flexibility that I needed to earn my degree while serving my country and being a mother and a wife."

Now with her MSM degree from TESU in hand, she will be able to use her education to help others. "My parents migrated to the United States from Guatemala before I was born, and I know the struggles that come with that. Therefore, I felt committed to assisting immigrants in transitioning into life in the USA," Gatson said.

Serving in the military for 19 years and counting, Gatson has held a number

of demanding commissions including communication specialist, human resource specialist, logistics officer, recruiter and training officer.

As an officer strength manager (OSM) until October 2018, Gatson was the primary officer recruiter and retainer for the N.J. Army National Guard and was responsible for achieving the officer recruiting mission assigned by the adjutant general to include chaplains, lawyers and medical professionals. Currently a captain, she serves as the Aide De Camp to General Officers in the N.J. National Guard and assists in coordinating meetings, preparing and reviewing correspondence and performing tasks and routines that save the generals' time.

"I joined the military a week after turning 18 to pay for college, and I stayed for 19 years," she explained. "Because of the amazing benefits the military provides, I have been able to travel all over the world and receive excellent educational benefits, and I have had the opportunity to work with some great people throughout my career."

Among her many career accomplishments, the one she is most proud of was training to become an officer.

"The training was 18 months long and, after being in the military for eight years, it was hard to go back into an environment where you are treated like a

private in basic training all over again," she recalled. According to Gatson, there were only 18 graduates in her cohort, of which five were females. "It was an honor to graduate from Officer Candidate School (OCS) while being a single mother of two and working on my bachelor's degree," she said.

Gatson lives in Hamilton, N.J., with her husband, Jay, "who always believed and supported me in all my ambitions," she notes, and her two children, Emanuel and Gabriel who, she said, provided "the motivation to better her life." Julian, her stepson, has been a wonderful addition to her family, she noted.

"I have a support network that includes my amazing family along with friends who have gone above and beyond to assist me in fulfilling my personal and career goals," Gatson said. She added that her entire family was there to help - when she needed a babysitter, to drive her kids to an event because she was serving her country, to move into her house, or take care of her sons for five months while she was away at military training (special thanks to sister, Sabrina) while attending every graduation and promotion.

Reminiscing about her childhood in New Jersey's capital city, Gatson recalled, "I have so many fond memories of growing up in Trenton: being able to hear the train every morning and cooling off from the summer heat at the fire hydrant with 20 other kids. I wouldn't be the person I am today if it wasn't for the city and its people. That's why I wanted to get a degree that I could use to help those who are under-represented in my community."

To learn more about the John S. Watson School of Public Service programs, visit [tesu.edu/watson](https://tesu.edu/watson).

# Above & Beyond

## A lifelong interest in flying culminates with TESU degree

### ❖ Cody Downey, BS '19

Cody Downey cannot recall a time when he didn't want to be an airline pilot.

Getting to that destination was a surprisingly seamless process. Once Thomas Edison State University (TESU) awarded him credit for his existing FAA certifications and his associate degree, the eight remaining courses he needed for his bachelor's degree took less than a year to complete – even while he worked full time.

“One of the first words I ever spoke was ‘airplane.’ My parents will tell you that in the middle of my little league baseball games, I would miss fly balls because I was busy staring up at the planes,” said Downey, a 2019 TESU Bachelor of Science (BS) graduate and pilot for PSA Airlines, a wholly owned subsidiary of American Airlines Group.

as a choir director while completing my associate in applied arts degree.”

At the age of 20, a mere six days after earning his associate degree, he moved to Texas and started flying freight transport planes. By the following year, he had already fulfilled his 1,500 mandatory flight hours to become an airline pilot by flying cargo on SA227 Metroliners into Mexico and Canada. Today, with 3,000 flight hours to his credit, Downey serves as a captain and Pilot in Command (PIC) for PSA Airlines, flying passenger jets out of the company's Charlotte, N.C., hub.

“I knew I couldn't rely on a 2-year degree to make me as competitive as I'd like and advance my career with a legacy airline, so I decided to complete my bachelor's. Doing so would also equip

“I ended up only having to take 24 credits – or eight courses – to complete my bachelor's degree without accumulating any student loan debt. Taking two courses at a time, it took me just under one year.”

He also benefitted from TESU's Corporate Choice® program partnership with the Air Line Pilots Association International (ALPA), of which he is a member. Through the educational partnership, he received discounted rates on tuition that helped him push through. “I did this all while flying full time as an airline pilot, working with ALPA on several committees and volunteering as a Line Operations Safety Audit (LOSA) auditor,” he said.

“Many ALPA carriers require, or highly desire, a 4-year degree for applicants to remain competitive,” said Andrew “Drew” Everett, a B717 captain for Hawaiian Airlines (HAL) who serves on the ALPA National Membership Committee and as a HAL ALPA membership chair. According to Everett, possessing a degree demonstrates personal drive, ambition and dedication to the field. “Above and beyond the professional advantages, higher education also provides an opportunity to open one's mind, expand horizons and provide a fallback should a career be sought outside the cockpit,” he said.

For Downey, TESU's program structure was compatible with his schedule as an airline captain.

“The courses and timeline are very easy to maintain,” said Downey. “During layovers, I was working on my papers or doing assignments. Often, I would

“I KNEW I COULDN'T RELY ON A 2-YEAR DEGREE TO MAKE ME AS COMPETITIVE AS I'D LIKE AND ADVANCE MY CAREER WITH A LEGACY AIRLINE, SO I DECIDED TO COMPLETE MY BACHELOR'S. DOING SO WOULD ALSO EQUIP ME WITH THE CREDENTIALS NEEDED FOR FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES.”

Cody Downey

Downey got an early start in heading skyward.

“I started flying when I was 14, soloed on my 16th birthday, completed my instrument training at 18 and became a commercial single- and multi-engine aircraft pilot and certified flight instructor at the age of 19,” he said. “During that time, I was working full time as a baggage handler for Delta Air Lines, waiting tables and volunteering

me with the credentials needed for future opportunities.” Focusing on a BS degree in Aviation Flight Technology at TESU's School of Applied Science and Technology, Downey was able to transfer most of his previously earned credits and all of his pilot certifications – including his Certified Flight Instructor (CFI) along with his regional and air carrier certifications – into his degree program.



finish my assignments nearly a month ahead of schedule and be able to reduce my workload and focus on other things. Many of my courses had written midterm and final assignments instead of exams, which made it far less stressful.”

Downey noted that the program is accommodating and custom-designed for pilots, but students need to remain engaged and committed nonetheless. “You have to be willing to put in the work. Most of my spare time was spent knocking out assignments. My parents taught me from a very young age to work hard for what I want and impressed upon me to always give back – I’m hoping that my degree opens even more doors to my ability to do that.”

Off the clock, Downey immerses himself in charity and volunteer work and serves in a number of industry-based initiatives. He volunteers with Pilots for Kids whose members spend time with pediatric cancer patients and their families during the holidays; Professional Pilots of Tomorrow as a pilot-mentor; The Planetary Society helping to further space exploration and scientific discovery; and participates in numerous career-focused events, study sessions and free ground school tutoring for young aspiring pilots.

“If one aspires to reach higher levels in the industry, a degree is paramount,” added ALPA’s Everett. “Due to the cyclical nature of supply and demand within the industry, some may have been

hired during a time when a degree wasn’t a minimum qualification. The TESU opportunity allows pilots to continue their education and advance their career with a degree in hand.”

To his colleagues who remain unsure about making a similar commitment, Downey advises, “Just do it. It’s cost-effective and schedule compatible. In an industry that’s so versatile and ever changing, you should never become complacent or sell yourself short when it comes to your credentials – they are your currency.”

To learn more about the School of Applied Science and Technology’s aviation programs, visit [tesu.edu/aviation](https://tesu.edu/aviation).

# High Tech Humanity



*Kathleen McShane's focus on nursing informatics is redefining her career and placing her at the heart of a community that is transforming the profession.*

## ❖ Kathleen “Katie” McShane, BSN ’14, MSN ’17

Kathleen “Katie” McShane, RN, CCRN, made a midcareer about-face when she enrolled at Our Lady of Lourdes School of Nursing in Camden, N.J., graduating in 2012 with a diploma in nursing.

“When I began my nursing journey, it was serendipitous; everything I needed to be successful fell into place. Now, I consider nursing my calling,” she said. Through the partnership between Our Lady of Lourdes School of Nursing (now part of Virtua Health System) and TESU’s W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing, McShane was granted provisional acceptance in the Finish in Four Dual Admission BSN Program. She immediately transferred her associate degree credits and began fulfilling her general education requirements before eventually passing the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) exam and completing her BSN degree requirements at TESU in 2014.

Her path to the field wasn’t a direct one. Prior to her nursing career, McShane served as an executive recruiter of sales professionals, engineers and executives for the industrial sector. A career shift led her to the field of healthcare where she followed in the footsteps of her mother and grandmother, who were both RNs.

“I chose Thomas Edison State University because, in order to be considered a qualified candidate, it was important for me to enroll in a quality BSN program,” she explained. As McShane completed her courses, she balanced a schedule of long shifts at Virtua Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital and caring for her young daughter. As a single mother, she found the program offered the maneuverability she needed.

“The online curriculum was convenient for me as a nurse working 12-hour shifts with three or four days off in between,” she explained. “I was able to complete my course work while my daughter was napping or in school. For me, a physical classroom isn’t a necessity, and I liked

being able to take my courses with me while on vacation.”

Finding the University’s BSN curriculum to be challenging but feasible, McShane continued her studies and enrolled in the Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) degree in Nursing Informatics at the University in 2017. “My mother is a clinical nurse analyst, and I found her professional choice to be one that I could envision stepping into,” she explained. “Having an informatics degree gives me the opportunity to support our health system as a whole while providing safety and satisfaction to patients.”

While completing her MSN degree requirements, McShane became involved with the Informatics Committee at her hospital. “I drew upon my knowledge of change theory in my interactions with peers who were anxious about the stream of new informatics initiatives,” she explained. “Using the nursing process and theories I learned throughout my studies has helped me to become a better facilitator of change and a mentor to new nurses and system end users. Nursing informatics gives me an opportunity to enhance patient safety, and our health system benefits through the collection of data supporting evidence-based practices and in meeting standards of care. The knowledge that lives are being saved through the work my colleagues and I perform inspires me every day.”

After serving briefly in the telemetry unit, McShane transitioned to the intensive care unit (ICU) where she found the pace and focus suited her skillset and personality.

“As an ICU nurse, I cared for critically ill adult patients as well as those with neurosurgical needs,” she noted. “Our unit also tends to transplant patients in the immediate postoperative period.”

Reflecting on that role, McShane is gratified at the impact her work and education continue to have.

“I have had the opportunity to help patients and support families on their most challenging days and the privilege of holding someone’s hand during their most vulnerable moments,” she said. “I recognize the importance not only of bedside nursing, but also of the impact of those supporting that endeavor.”

Recently, McShane was offered a position as a nurse analyst collaborating on the development and implementation of nursing and clinical software enhancements. She is also responsible for staff orientation and ongoing education. And, as ‘serendipity’ would again have it, she took over her mother’s position upon her retirement. “I am very excited to use my education to support nursing in my new role as a nurse analyst and am excited to be bringing Virtua’s Epic EMR implementation to fruition while continually playing a role in merging our two cultures.”

McShane lives in southern New Jersey with her 10-year-old daughter, Sadie. They are avid Philadelphia Eagles fans and enjoy traveling, shopping and cooking together. McShane has completed six marathons, and participates in numerous 10k and half marathons each year. She also holds multiple group fitness certifications and teaches classes several times a week. Additionally, she is a Critical Care Registered Nurse (CCRN), a nationally recognized certification awarded by The American Association of Critical Care Nurses.

Are you a nursing diploma program graduate interested in learning more about our BSN program? Email: [nursing@tesu.edu](mailto:nursing@tesu.edu) for more detail. To find out more about the programs offered at the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing, visit [tesu.edu/nursing](http://tesu.edu/nursing).

# Finding Purpose Through Education and Coaching

**F**or three Thomas Edison State University alumni - Edward Macdonald, BA '12, Brittany Macdonald, BA '09, and Joshua Shi, BA '17 - the inspiration to change their lives and launch their careers was the result of the educational opportunities afforded them at TESU.

The entrepreneurial cohort created AGL (Apex Generation Leadership), which uses coaching, training and consulting to create a culture of engagement within businesses and teams.

"We have a similar passion for wanting to live in a world where people wake up and say 'YAY, it's Monday' instead of 'It's Monday... I hate my job, my life, my colleagues.' All three of us have experienced a range of positive and negative emotions at our jobs in the past, and we know the difference between going to work and actually showing up for work. AGL develops teams who show up," explained Edward Macdonald, AGL's chief executive officer, who earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from the University in 2012.

The team initially found each other through an education technology program that partners with the University - Lumerit Education.

"Through Lumerit Education, we experienced firsthand the power of coaching to develop us as leaders and fell in love with what coaching could do," Macdonald added. "We each decided we wanted to become professional coaches, and we worked for that company for 13 years combined. That was where we all met. After several years of working with students who were transitioning into their first major job or career, we decided we wanted to work with developing leaders in a different context."

When forming their Colorado Springs-based company, they chose the name Apex Generation Leadership because

they believe that young adults in the American workforce - and the international workforce at large - are at the "Apex" of a major workplace transition.

Edward Macdonald noted that millennials and Generation Z are the largest demographic in the workforce today. "As a whole, many of them are not

ready to rise to the level of leadership that will soon be required of them. They are in desperate need of development and engagement, yet they also bring fresh ideas, skills and perspectives that have the potential to help businesses thrive in a modern world. Developing this potential is why AGL exists."

Chief Operating Officer Brittany Macdonald, who earned her TESU Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Sciences in 2009, agrees. "Every respected study out there shows that finding purpose in their job is crucial if they're going to stay longer than two years. We use coaching and team training to help professionals stay engaged, find purpose in their work and, ultimately, show up to a job they love every day. The result is a more engaged workforce that helps boost a company's bottom line."

As the director of the board, Shi, who holds a Bachelor of Arts (2017) degree in Communications with honors from TESU, is focused on helping others realize their unique sphere of influence and maximize their impact. He enjoys



"THOMAS EDISON STATE UNIVERSITY HAS BUILT AN ATMOSPHERE OF PURPOSEFUL EDUCATION FOR ADULTS WHO ARE PURSUING THEIR NEXT STEP BECAUSE THEY WANT IT, NOT SIMPLY BECAUSE IT'S THE NEXT THING TO DO. TESU ALLOWED ME TO GRADUATE WITHOUT DEBT, WHICH HAS FACILITATED MY INVESTMENT OF TIME, EFFORT AND RESOURCES INTO BUILDING AND OPERATING THIS BUSINESS."

Edward Macdonald

mentoring young leaders and has guided numerous students through earning a degree, planning a career and achieving a well-lived life.

All three credit Thomas Edison State University with influencing them to find fulfilling careers that they are passionate about.

"Through TESU, I was able to clarify the bigger 'why' behind who I wanted to be and what I wanted to do," recalled Shi. "I gained communication skills, clarity around my future and the ability to really own my education. The decision to pursue a degree through TESU ultimately happened when I was empowered to understand what I wanted and to see how its program could help me get there sooner."

Brittany Macdonald explained that she chose to complete her education at TESU in a way that allowed her to travel, run political campaigns and manage a small business alongside earning her degree. "As a result, I graduated two years earlier than my peers and was able to start my career - an opportunity that



From left to right: Edward Macdonald, BA '12, Brittany Macdonald, BA '09, and Joshua Shi, BA '17

has directly contributed to my ability to start and run a business.”

“I like the caliber of students TESU attracts and supports,” said Edward Macdonald. “Thomas Edison State University has built an atmosphere of purposeful education for adults who are pursuing their next step because they want it, not simply because it’s the next thing to do. TESU allowed me to graduate without debt, which has facilitated my investment of time, effort and resources into building and operating this business,” said Macdonald, who is responsible for maintaining the vision, strategy and culture within the AGL team.

On a day-to-day basis, his duties can range from strategic business planning and speaking engagements, to facilitating communication with AGL’s offsite team of coaches and contractors, to meeting with business partners and representing AGL to the community. He holds six coaching certifications from the Applied Neuroscience Institute, The Center for Coaching Excellence and Coach Training EDU as well as the industry’s top credential as a

Master Certified Coach through the International Coaching Federation (ICF). Macdonald noted he has a wide range of interests, from the outdoors to music to cooking and being a handyman.

Brittany Macdonald’s passion is to help people align their thinking and their actions to move them more effectively toward their goals. She does this through managing the day-to-day logistics and operations of the team and also enjoys teaching, speaking engagements, developing course content and programs, and coach training. She holds several coaching certifications, including her credential as Master Certified Coach with ICF as well as certifications in Risk Avoidance, Non-Violent Crisis Intervention, Leadership and additional training in Applied Bioethics. In her spare time, Macdonald said she “enjoys hiking, exploring new coffee shops, reading anything I can get my hands on and investing time in friends and community.”

Shi, who initially built the AGL brand and led the marketing efforts for the company, now focuses on providing feedback and guidance to the team as

they continue to grow. He is a certified Academic Life Coach, holds a Signature Leadership certificate and continues to study life coaching. Though he originally hails from Massachusetts, he currently resides in Colorado, which he loves but says is just a little too far from the ocean for his taste. In his free time, Shi enjoys sailing, good books, deep friendships and adventure.

Edward and Brittany’s similar passions and backgrounds eventually led to building more than a business together. They were married March 1, 2019, and continue to thrive as life partners as well as business partners.

All three have also had personal challenges that may have guided them to their corresponding careers as coaches and mentors.

Edward Macdonald was very close to his younger special needs brother, who passed on New Year’s Eve, 2018. “Josh was three years younger than me, and he never let his health challenges keep him from pursuing life with positivity and joy. He tackled his dreams fearlessly and encouraged me to do the same,” Macdonald remembered. “I miss him every day.”

Brittany Macdonald, whose sister, Alyssa, also has special needs, noted “her love and enthusiasm for life is a driving factor in doing what I do. If she can wake up every day with the limitations and challenges she faces and embrace life without fear, I am convinced the rest of us can learn to do the same.”

Shi, who has dealt with Crohn’s disease for the past several years that resulted in a rare complication of stage 3 kidney failure, explained, “I have learned a lot about myself through the process...and while it has been one of the hardest challenges in my life, it’s not something I would change...or let it stop me from pursuing the things that are most important to me.”

Edward Macdonald summed up what working in a “job you love” means, not only to AGL’s clients but also to its team.

“Our mission is to help teams engage with each other and their work so everyone can look forward to Monday. We hope to build a world where everyone can spend the better half of their waking life engaged in meaningful work they love. We are thankful to TESU for the role it played in facilitating our growth and development, and the start of this journey.”



**Adam Fitting, BA '15**

## staying the course

*Adam Fitting's trajectory has been varied and bumpy, but ultimately rewarding*



**A**

dam Fitting's pursuits have taken him to London, Shanghai, Germany, New Zealand and points across the U.S. in his various roles with the U.S. Air Force, Apple Inc. and Tesla.

It was the same wanderlust that led him to Thomas Edison State University.

"It's the reason that TESU was such a great fit," said Fitting, a 2015 graduate of the Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Sciences program. "My curiosity has always fueled my career and my desire to interact with people and places. I'm always moving and exploring, and a traditional university was far too structured to allow that to happen. TESU enabled me to stay on an academic course even if I was blown off it from time to time."

**"TESU'S ABILITY TO EVALUATE AND EQUATE TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES INTO ACADEMIC CREDIT WAS EMPOWERING FOR ME AND MADE IT ALL POSSIBLE. IT VALIDATES MY BELIEF THAT TRUE LEARNING AND INNOVATION DOESN'T HAVE TO OCCUR IN AN IVORY TOWER."**

Adam Fitting

Fitting has found an ideological and professional sweet spot at this stage of his career and life, leading him into the spheres of retail strategy and entrepreneurship. "It's inspiring to have made so many meaningful connections - after years of receiving help and guidance from leaders in business and my communities, I'm getting the opportunity to give back," said Fitting, who recently joined Cresco Labs in



## alumni profile

the opportunity to support its mission of helping the world transition to sustainable energy, I felt a deep calling.”

A driven serial entrepreneur, Fitting and his wife co-founded Comprehensive Cranium Care® in 2015, a personal care product line for bald, shaved or buzz-cut heads that he describes as a passion project. “I was frustrated that there were no personal care products for millions of men and women in this category,” he said.

“My life has been a joyful exploration of new options and new locales. All along, TESU has been there for me as a base to consolidate my objectives. Experience has allowed me to take my interests and apply them to my academic goals in a way that was meaningful and enriching. The things that attracted me to TESU are its integrity, accreditations and institutional affiliations as well as its cross-functional programs with the military and community colleges. TESU’s ability to evaluate and equate training and professional experiences into academic credit was empowering for me and made it all possible. It validates my belief that true learning and innovation doesn’t have to occur in an ivory tower.”

Off the clock, Fitting enjoys utilizing his private pilot license, archery and traveling, along with what he describes as the unalloyed joy of creating things from wood or electronic components. Additionally, his days at the brewery have left him with an abiding love for the craft beer brewing process. His wife, a special education teacher working with children in all stages of the autism spectrum, whom Fitting describes as, “just brilliant,” and he work together with an ongoing focus on giving back. “My grandparents and parents had an enormous influence on me. Growing up, they instilled in me the necessity to take care of my community and the notion that we can make the world a better place together.” The Fittings volunteer and fundraise for cancer research-related causes and work with at-risk children.

“And, as a grateful alumnus, I proudly support the mission of Thomas Edison State University,” Fitting added. “My degree opened doors for me, and I want others to share in that experience.”

To learn more about the programs available in the Heaving School of Arts and Sciences, visit [tesu.edu/heavin](http://tesu.edu/heavin).

Fitting in the Delaware lab where Cranium Care® is being developed

Chicago as senior vice president of retail strategy.

He describes his childhood in Lambertville, N.J., as idyllic, but far from isolating.

“The town’s proximity to New York, Philadelphia and Princeton, afforded an amazing blend of influences and cultural access,” he recalled. Weeks after graduating from high school, he departed from the familiar for basic training in the U.S. Air Force. “I wanted to be of service to my country as my grandfather and stepfather had and enlisted during my junior year in high school.”

He said his military training in West Germany and duty during Operation Desert Shield broadened his worldview. Once Fitting was stateside again he focused on his education and enrolled in college, later transferring to Penn State where he thrived in the dynamic atmosphere of an outsized campus while shouldering a portion of his tuition, room and board. He later transferred to Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, where he met his future wife and soulmate, Melissa.

Seeking sources of income while feeding his entrepreneurial spirit, Fitting blended his education with what he describes as far-flung, albeit prolific career endeavors that began as hobbies. These interests resulted in a trajectory that was varied and sometimes bumpy, but ultimately rewarding.

In 1990, he founded a computer consulting firm, Fitting Solutions, and used the income to defray his tuition costs at Penn State and Rutgers. His

client list would eventually include Apple Inc., Rutgers University and Covenant House. From 1994 through 2006, he also became a member of the founding team and eventual CEO of the Triumph Brewing Company in Princeton.

Concurrent endeavors that followed included professional acting and a stint in New Zealand developing a vineyard and retreat center before returning to New Jersey to serve as an executive coach and consultant while leveraging his real estate license and serving on the Washington Borough Planning Board in Warren County, N.J.

“I spent that decade as an itinerant student and entrepreneur, taking courses at Rutgers and, later, at TESU while accruing various IT certifications and licenses,” he noted.

In 2005, Fitting sold the majority of his share of Triumph and landed a position with Apple Inc., progressing to a store leader for the company’s flagship Fifth Avenue, New York City, location. He advanced as a senior manager and retail strategist leading special projects initiatives for its European and Greater China retail organizations in London and Shanghai. All the while, he completed TESU’s online and e-Pack® courses and TECEP® exams whenever his schedule allowed, eventually parlaying his transfer credits, certificates and professional licenses into a degree.

Just prior to his current role at Cresco Labs, he served as a regional general manager for Tesla – a role he found inspiring and affirming. “Tesla is one of the most audacious and remarkable companies to hit the scene in my lifetime,” he said. “When I was offered

THOMAS EDISON STATE UNIVERSITY FOUNDATION

# 28th Annual Grande Ball



Thomas Edison State University (TESU) Foundation held its 28th Annual Grande Ball at Jasna Polana in Princeton, N.J., on Oct. 26. More than 200 guests were in attendance to celebrate the University's legacy of delivering flexible programs that meet the changing needs of adult learners and their employers.

Among the celebrants were New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy and first lady Tammy Snyder Murphy, marking the first time a sitting governor has attended the University's signature event, which raised nearly \$170,000 in support of the critical needs of the University. Each year during the event, the TESU Foundation presents the Spirit of Edison Awards, to recognize community leaders and alumni whose

creativity, commitment to innovation, entrepreneurial spirit and concern for public good continue to fuel the institution's success.

Jeffrey Stokes, senior director of Power Generation at PSEG, U.S. Navy veteran and TESU Foundation Board member, received the Spirit of Edison Distinguished Alumnus Award. In accepting his award, Stokes, a 2015

graduate of TESU, described the transformative power of his degree. "I have a passion for what's happened to me; I have a passion for higher learning; I have a passion for doing the work of the Foundation because of how my education has changed me," said Stokes. "When I attend Commencement every year, I love listening to fellow grads tell their stories and what motivated them to earn their degree....The work that the Foundation does is amazing, and I could not have earned my degree without PSEG and its support."

During the evening's program, Dr. Merodie A. Hancock, president, spoke about her commitment to serving adult students and her gratitude to those being honored. She lauded Stokes for serving as an outstanding example





Jeffery Stokes '15, distinguished Alumnus Award Honoree

*"I have a passion for what's happened to me; I have a passion for higher learning; I have a passion for doing the work of the Foundation because of how my education has changed me."*

Jeffrey Stokes '15

of what TESU strives to accomplish for every student who puts their trust and resources in the institution. "For every dollar spent earning a degree - the outcome must match the investment, and you have experienced that firsthand," she said.

Murphy presented the Community Leader Award to Dr. Ralph Izzo, chair of the board, president and CEO of the University's longtime educational partner, PSEG. On the institution's synergetic relationship with its educational and community partner, Hancock commented, "When I met Ralph Izzo, I was inspired by his desire to invest in all of his employees at all levels. Leveraging our core strengths, we are collaborating together to build pathways for underrepresented minorities and women to grow into positions of leadership and influence... PSEG has been a true partner-leader

with us in this arena and in supporting and hiring our active-duty military and veterans. As organizations, we gauge our own health based on the health of the communities we serve, and we both believe in the power of education to develop an inclusive workforce that is strengthened by diverse perspectives and lifelong learning."

Others who presided, presented or were honored during the event included: Dr. Michael Toscani, TESU Foundation Board chair, a research professor and director for Pharmaceutical Industry Fellowships, Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, who made the opening remarks; Delores "Dee" Kelley, Esq., Gala Committee chair, shareholder, Stark & Stark; Randy Mehrberg, partner, Jenner & Block, who introduced the Distinguished Alumnus Award; and John P. Thurber,

vice president for Public Affairs and executive vice president of the TESU Foundation, who presented the Distinguished Alumnus Award.

The Thomas Edison State University Foundation thanked the 2019 Gala Committee and the generous sponsors, program advertisers, attendees and donors who supported the event and helped make it a success. "The Gala is a wonderful acknowledgment of the indispensable nature of our work in creating opportunities for adult students and our community partners who support our work and our students' success," said Hancock. Sponsors of the event included PSEG, Wells Fargo, NJM Insurance Group, Capital Health, PNC, Stark & Stark, Bernie and Ann Flynn, GE Power, RWJBarnabas Health, Republic Bank, The Bank of Princeton, St. Francis Medical Center and Waters & Bugbee.



## ❖ NJ Council for the Humanities Awards \$19,974 in support of the Cultural Conversation Circles Project

PARTICIPANTS WILL DEVELOP UNDERSTANDING, EMPATHY AND COMPASSION THROUGH THE SHARING OF CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE EXAMINATION OF PERSONAL BIASES

The New Jersey Council for the Humanities (NJCH) awarded \$19,974 to the Thomas Edison State University Foundation for the project Cultural Conversation Circles - A Humanities Approach to Cultural Competency in N.J. Public Schools and the Communities They Serve as part of its commitment to create culturally and linguistically responsive communities.

“In New Jersey, we are fortunate to have so many institutions and organizations committed to encouraging members of their communities to think deeply about their view of the world and the views of others,” said Director of Grants & Programs Gigi Naglak. “All of our recent Action Grant recipients proposed projects that take a proactive approach to using the power of the humanities to address and explore significant topics and issues. The residents of New Jersey benefit greatly from these grant projects and their long-lasting effects.”

The program, which is under the direction of The John S. Watson

Institute for Public Policy’s Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children (CPDUC), will use lessons learned from its 12-year evidence-based New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners (ELL) Institute and Mentoring Program in working with teachers and school leaders in creating culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms and designing cultural conversation circles with parents, students, community providers and residents. The Cultural Conversation Circles project will host six dinners, dialogues and deliberate cultural simulations that provide meaningful understanding of the power of diversity.

Since 2007, the ELL program has transformed the thinking/instructional practices of more than 290 teachers and 200 leaders in 99 schools. Evaluations demonstrate the program’s positive impact on teachers’ ability to become culturally and linguistically responsive to the academic/social needs of their diverse students.

As a humanities-focused nonprofit regranting organization, NJCH awards Action Grants from \$2,000 to \$20,000 to implement or expand programs. Action Grants help organizations implement a wide array of humanities-based projects, including public programs, exhibitions, installations, tours and discussion groups. Each dollar invested into communities through the grant program is matched by the grantee partners.

“The NJCH funding support will enable this new part of the program to expand its reach in New Jersey, and include families and the public in a productive dialogue about an appreciation of culture and language in the education of our children,” said Ana Berdecia, director of the Center. “Participants will see the connection between embracing others’ cultural identities and how acceptance and appreciation can fuel community members’ success and broaden their global perspectives to become world changers.”

Pictured from the left are New Jersey Council for the Humanities staff: Angela Speakman, director of Development and Communications; and Gigi Naglak, director of Grants & Programs, and Thomas Edison State University staff: John P. Thurber, vice president for Public Affairs; Ana Berdecia, director, Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children; and Joseph Youngblood II, vice provost and dean, John S. Watson School of Public Policy.



## TESU Hosts Passport to Your Benefits Fair



More than 1,000 visitors took advantage of the 2019 Passport to Your Benefits Fair, sponsored by the New Jersey Department of Pensions and Benefits, the New Jersey State Health Benefits Program (SHBP) and the New Jersey School Employees' Health Benefits Program (SEHBP). Hosted at Thomas Edison State University, employee benefit information was provided by multiple exhibitors.

## University Hosts Male Empowerment Event

THRIVING IN TODAY'S SOCIETY: LEADERSHIP, ADVOCACY AND EMPOWERMENT

The TESU Division of Community and Government Affairs collaborated with University partners, UIH Family Partners, St. Francis Medical Center, The Burke Foundation and the state of New Jersey legislative members of the 15th District, to present workshops that provided participants with practical and useful information on pathways to degree and certificate attainment,

career and financial planning, health, wellness and constitutional rights.

More than 85 guests attended a series of leadership, advocacy and empowerment workshop sessions. During the event, Dr. Merodie A. Hancock, president of TESU; New Jersey State Senator Shirley K. Turner; N.J. General Assembly member Verlina Reynolds-Jackson; and

Mayor Reed Gusciora offered opening remarks. Chair of the N.J. State Assembly Health and Senior Services Committee, Herb Conaway; city of Trenton Councilman Jerrell Blakely; and Robin Walton, vice president for Community and Government Affairs of TESU, played significant roles in the success of the summit.



## Accelerated 2nd Degree BSN Program Pinning Ceremony

EVENT SYMBOLIZES AN OFFICIAL TRANSITION TO THE NURSING PROFESSION

The W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing honored graduates of its October 2019 Accelerated 2nd Degree BSN Program cohort with a pinning ceremony and reception on Oct. 3 at the New Jersey State Museum Auditorium.

The culminating event signifies a symbolic entrance into the nursing profession for the graduates of the program who are now eligible to take the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN).

Keynote Speaker Susan Utterback, a 2019 graduate of the School's Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program, shared her personal experiences and relayed the tremendous rewards and challenges that lie ahead for the graduates in their own professional journeys. "I have been a registered nurse for more than 30 years, working in a variety of roles in the areas of women and children's health and informatics," said Utterback, who recently transitioned to a newly-created role as a nursing systems

coordinator for Abington - Jefferson Health in Pennsylvania. "Although my varied experiences and education provided a strong foundation, the DNP program at Thomas Edison was the catalyst that propelled me toward higher-level leadership. I have gained a renewed level of enthusiasm and excitement about my role in the future of healthcare."

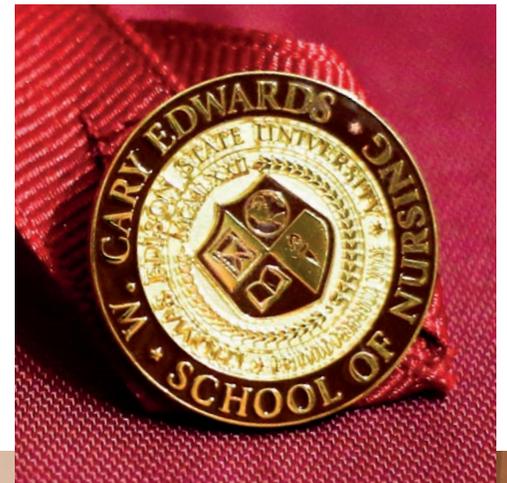
With their family members and supporters in attendance, the graduates were conferred their pins and took part in reciting the Nightingale Pledge to fulfill their duties to their patients throughout their careers.

The cohort was comprised of students who came into the program with non-nursing undergraduate degrees and completed the School's nursing degree requirements within one year. Students satisfied their degree requirements through a condensed sequence of classroom-based courses and patient simulation lab exposure, online study and onground clinical experiences in area hospitals, visiting nurse services

and Trenton-based community organizations.

The prognosis for this cohort looks favorable. The April 2019 Accelerated BSN Program that preceded this graduating class achieved a 100 percent pass rate on their NCLEX-RN exams. That outcome marked the fifth time that graduates of the program achieved a 100 percent pass rate on the exam since the program's launch in 2011.

To learn more about the programs offered at the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing, visit [tesu.edu/nursing](http://tesu.edu/nursing).



October 2019 graduates of the Accelerated 2nd Degree BSN Program



## MEET ALUMNI AMBASSADOR

### Ida Biddle-Mayer, BA '11, BSN '14, MSN '16

#### ALUMNI AMBASSADOR

Although Ida Biddle-Mayer has been in the nursing profession for nearly 50 years, she explains that she was not 'one of the girls who always wanted to be a nurse' when she was a child. Her inspiration developed over time due to the care and guidance of her school nurse Mrs. Feehan.

"I was blessed with having Mrs. Feehan for all 12 years of school. She was the kindest woman I knew, besides my own mother. Mrs. Feehan calmed my fears when my mother was in the hospital with breast cancer. She is the reason I became a nurse."

**"BEING AN ALUMNI AMBASSADOR IS A LIKE BEING A CHEERLEADER, BUT INSTEAD OF CHEERING FOR A SPORT, WE ARE CHEERING STUDENTS ON TO GRADUATION."**

Feehan eventually invited Biddle-Mayer to come out for a Future Nurses of America Club meeting, and Biddle-Mayer soon adopted the same sense of devotion to others during their difficult times as Mrs. Feehan had done for her.

After being a registered nurse for 40 years, Biddle-Mayer realized that she needed to complete an accredited

degree program to remain current in nursing practice. "I had gone to a few colleges before I decided to enroll at Thomas Edison State University (TESU). I finished my BA degree in Liberal Studies first and then went on to earn my Bachelor of Science in Nursing and Master of Science in Nursing degrees through the RN-BSN/MSN Program."

Biddle-Mayer's favorite role is being a school nurse. She enjoys helping children learn good health habits and promoting holistic care, including championing children's mental and behavioral health. "I treat every child who comes into my office like the little child I once was. It's my hope that children I help today will remember me as the kindest woman they knew besides their mothers, like Mrs. Feehan was for me."

In addition to being a compassionate nurse, Biddle-Mayer is a dedicated Alumni Ambassador for TESU. "I can relate to other adults who have life experiences and a drive for academic success. I enjoy sharing my own experience with prospective and enrolled TESU students. Being an Alumni Ambassador is a like being a cheerleader, but instead of cheering for a sport, we are cheering students on to graduation."



## Be an Alumni Ambassador!

Support TESU by participating in the Alumni Ambassador program. Volunteers refer friends and family, share TESU news on social media, mentor prospective students and identify potential corporate partners.

For more information, visit [tesu.edu/ambassador](https://tesu.edu/ambassador).

## Keep Us Posted!

To connect with the Office of Alumni Affairs and fellow TESU alumni, join the conversation on social media:

**Alumni Facebook Group:** [tesu.edu/FacebookGroup](https://tesu.edu/FacebookGroup)

**Student and Alumni LinkedIn Group:** [tesu.edu/LinkedInGroup](https://tesu.edu/LinkedInGroup)

**Alumnifire:** [tesu.edu/Alumnifire](https://tesu.edu/Alumnifire)



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## University Store

**TESUshop.com** is Thomas Edison State University's online store for TESU students, alumni, employees, mentors and TESU families. Declare your TESU pride with apparel and products bearing Thomas Edison State University's logo.



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B E C O M E A  
**TESU**  
**Genius!**

New for 2020,

alumni and friends of TESU are invited to join the brand-new **Genius program**. Simply complete five steps to be eligible for the prize! Your participation helps foster the University's mission of providing flexible, high-quality, collegiate learning opportunities for self-directed adults.

1. Be an **INVENTOR**  
Share your employment information with the University
2. Be an **ENTREPRENEUR**  
Make a donation of any size
3. Be a **WIZARD**  
Participate in the 1-Hour a Month volunteer initiative
4. Be an **INVESTOR**  
Refer a friend or participate in peer-to-peer advising.
5. Be an **ILLUMINATOR**  
Send us a picture wearing your favorite TESU gear or tag us on social media with #TESUniversity.

See more details at [tesu.edu/genius](https://tesu.edu/genius).



Thank you for your support of TESU!