

SPRING 2020

Invention

THE MAGAZINE OF THOMAS EDISON STATE UNIVERSITY

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Dear Alumni, Students and Friends,

Even in the most uncertain of times, education prevails.

As we all continue to face the repercussions of the spread of COVID-19, we at Thomas Edison State University are proud to provide consistent, quality online courses and services so that students can pursue their degrees without missing a beat, even in the most trying of circumstances.

Constant access to education, no matter life's twists and turns, is vital to our adult students who are investing in a brighter future for themselves, their professions and their communities.

Such is the case for TESU graduate Isaac Wright Jr., who is featured as our cover story. As a family man working in the recording industry, he never anticipated that his life would take such drastic turns. Wrongfully convicted and given a life sentence in 1991 on baseless criminal charges, he would use his tenacity and growing knowledge base to eventually help in overturning the wrongful convictions of 20 fellow inmates before successfully having his own conviction dismissed. Now, Wright is an attorney-at-law and his saga has become the subject of the network television series, "For Life."

Also featured in this edition of *Invention* is Lavana Cephas, who graduated in 2019 with an associate degree at age 69. Growing up in the mid-1960s in West Baltimore, there was scant motivation for Cephas, one of 11 children, to focus on her own education. Once she had grown and was supporting a family of her own, Cephas began reading and studying. She used her passion for lifelong learning to pass N.J. Civil Service Exams and ascended in her career with the state, before retiring with more than 25 years of service and enrolling in TESU to earn her degree.

The theme of overcoming barriers continues with Abelardo Conesa. As a Cuban immigrant, Conesa overcame a cultural divide and used his personal dedication to academics to earn his Bachelor of Science and his Master of Science in Management (MSM) degrees in Accounting at TESU.

"Growing up in that environment certainly ingrained in me the innovative and dynamic culture of Cubans, but it did not challenge me to look outside of my own cultural sphere," said Conesa, who also serves as a TESU Alumni Ambassador, where he is leveraging his passion for higher education and conveying it to others. "There are many other 'Abes' out there who need to be motivated as I did. I would not want someone else to miss this incredible opportunity to grow."

And then there's Nicole Major, a 2016 Bachelor of Arts program graduate. While watching her daughters playing one day, she realized that there were no storybook princesses who looked like them. She became determined to change that. The inspiration prompted Major to publish *Amina's Wall*, a tale about a spirited and resourceful princess of an African kingdom that is now included in the library at every Trenton elementary school.

Student accomplishments such as these are made possible and accessible through innovative partnerships and invaluable contributions of charitable grants and gifts received by the University and the Thomas Edison State University Foundation. It is because of this unwavering support that we are able to consistently provide adults access to a quality, distinctive education at TESU, changing their life as well as the lives around them, even in the most uncertain of times.

We thank you for your support, hope you and your loved ones are healthy and that you enjoy this issue of *Invention*.



Merodie A. Hancock, PhD
President





Carving Out a Plan

❖ **Abelardo “Abe” Conesa, BSBA ’10, MSM ’15** **ALUMNI AMBASSADOR**

A degree defies monetary value for accounting program graduate Abelardo Conesa

Abelardo “Abe” Conesa began life wearing cultural blinders – an irony for a Cuban immigrant. Coming from a single parent household, Conesa said that he did not have much access to role models or customs outside of his own enclave.

“From an assimilation standpoint, it was unfortunate that the wave of Cuban immigrants moving into the United States during the 1970s often remained in their own communities,” he said. “Growing up in that environment certainly ingrained in me the innovative and dynamic culture of Cubans, but it did not challenge me to look outside of my own cultural sphere.”

The somewhat cloistered but ultimately worldly Conesa recognized quickly that education would provide the best outlet. He embarked on his higher education path at Mercer County Community College (MCCC) in New Jersey. Once he earned his associate degree in accounting, he continued his studies by pursuing his Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA) in 2010; and, five years later, earned his Master of Science in Management (MSM) degree in Accounting, both at TESU.

Conesa noted that his community college experience provided a valuable preamble for his academic track. “MCCC allowed me to obtain a valuable foothold on my developing academic path. I had many opportunities to work one-on-one with professors and counselors and quickly developed a good sense of my academic direction.”

As a result, Conesa only needed minimal guidance in his transition to TESU’s accounting program.

“Once I was accepted into TESU, I only had to meet once with an advisor to carve out a plan,” he said. “From that point forward, I just stayed on that course. With all of my previously earned credits being accepted and the cost effectiveness of the in-state tuition, it was a done deal. I have always been very driven and independent. Being placed in a live classroom setting is not what I was looking for in a bachelor’s degree program.”

With more than 15 years’ experience in financial analysis, budget and trend analysis, and team leadership, Conesa has spent the last three years as the certified tax collector (CTC) for the Township of Ewing, N.J., where he oversees field audits, account receivables

and tax reporting for the municipality. To qualify for the post, he completed a series of government services courses prior to passing his CTC board certification through Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. In January, Conesa was appointed to the position of municipal tax collector for the township upon his predecessor’s retirement. For the past 10 years, he has also served as a full voting board member of the Zoning Board of Adjustment in Ewing Township, where he also lives. The membership has given him the opportunity to collaborate in his community’s residential and commercial zoning activities.

“I cannot place a monetary value on my degrees. My experience trained me to seek beyond the obvious and present and observe my life and environment through a clearer lens,” said Conesa, who also serves as a TESU Alumni Ambassador, where he is leveraging his passion for higher education and conveying it to others while advancing the mission of the University. “There are many other ‘Abes’ out there who need to be motivated as I did. I would not want someone else to miss this incredible opportunity to grow.”

“WITH ALL OF MY PREVIOUSLY EARNED CREDITS BEING ACCEPTED AND THE COST EFFECTIVENESS OF THE IN-STATE TUITION, IT WAS A DONE DEAL. I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN VERY DRIVEN AND INDEPENDENT. BEING PLACED IN A LIVE CLASSROOM SETTING IS NOT WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR.”

Abelardo Conesa

Off the clock, Abe enjoys spending time with his spouse of 18 years.

“When marriage equality was finally adopted by the state of New Jersey, my husband and I were the first same-sex couple to be legally married in our township,” he noted. “That much time as a couple has allowed both of us to meet our challenges and gather the strength to overcome any obstacles we faced together. We now share our small home with two of our rescue dogs, Bubbles and Butch.”

Learn how TESU’s students can earn their associate degrees and complete 30 additional credits at a New Jersey community college, then, seamlessly transfer 90 credits toward a bachelor’s degree program at TESU by visiting tesu.edu/3plus1. For more information on the programs at the School of Business and Management, visit tesu.edu/business.



A Place to BELONG

TESU graduate pens children's books featuring an African princess

❖ **Nicole Major, BA '16**

As Nicole Major watched her daughters playing one day, she realized that there were no story-book princesses who looked like them. She became determined to change that.

The inspiration prompted Nicole Major, a 2016 Bachelor of Arts program graduate, to eventually publish *Amina's Wall* (Pink Butterfly Press). A December 2019 resolution passed by the Trenton Board of Education will ensure that two copies of her book are available in all 13 of its Trenton elementary schools. The tale centers on a spirited and resourceful princess of an African kingdom.

"I originally searched online to find a real African princess who I could reference as a heroine in the story," said Major. "I discovered the courageous Amina of Zazzau, a Hausa warrior queen who lived centuries ago in what is modern-day Nigeria, and composed a fictional story based on her life called *Amina, Princess of Zaria* in 2007."

Not completely satisfied with the final product, and with life and motherhood encroaching, Major stopped promoting the book with a plan to republish it someday.

During a spring 2019 move with her family to Mercer County, N.J., Major met Tynnetta Howard of Howard's Healthy Choices. She felt an immediate kinship with Howard and a connection to the nonprofit organization's advocacy of education, healing, empowerment and healthy life and lifestyle choices for area families.

"Tynnetta runs her community center in the former Briggs Branch Library in Trenton," noted Major. "She asked me out of the blue one day if I was an author, and, up until that moment, I had only contemplated the idea of re-releasing my book."

With Howard's encouragement, Major published a reworked iteration, titled *Amina's Wall*, through her

self-launched publishing company, Pink Butterfly Press. She held a well-attended book signing session at the community center soon after and a retired school teacher who saw the book persuaded the Trenton Board of Education to pass a resolution to supply each elementary school in the district with two copies of *Amina's Wall*.

Bringing great stories to life is nothing new for Major, who has written professionally for more than two decades for a variety of publications, including *The Fairfield Daily Ledger*, *The Jacksonville Business Journal*, and the *Rock Hill Herald*. Her international publishing endeavors include articles for *PC World Egypt*, *The Middle East Times* and AmCham Egypt's *Business Magazine*. Her other books include *Living the Word* (under the name Nicole Hester-Williams, Infinity Publishing) and *Indigo Sky* (Amazon-Kindle).

"I FELT FORTUNATE TO HAVE FOUND TESU AND I DON'T THINK THERE IS ANOTHER INSTITUTION THAT PROVIDES THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADULTS TO FINISH THEIR DEGREE ON THEIR OWN TERMS."

Nicole Major

Major's sense of rootedness in her new community comes after a life on the move. Born and raised in Pensacola, Fla., her family moved to Jacksonville when she was 9 years old.

"I grew up in a staunch Pentecostal home grounded in a Judeo-Christian belief system," she recalls. "I was one of those kids who loved running around barefoot in the grass during the summer, and I was always daydreaming. My grandmother always believed in and encouraged my desire to write - for that, I am extremely grateful."

After graduating from high school and serving in the U.S. Army Reserves, Major earned her associate in arts (AA) degree from Florida State College (FSCJ), Jacksonville. "I tease that I learned everything I needed to know about journalism during the time I served as a reporter and, later, an editor for the school newspaper," she said. After



graduating from FSCJ, she attended the University of Florida's Weimer College of Journalism. While enrolled, she studied abroad in Cairo, Egypt, and wrote for magazines and newspapers. Once she was back in the United States, Major married and settled in to raise her family.

"I always wanted to finish my degree, and I tried other schools. That's when Thomas Edison came into the picture," she said. "TESU accepted all of my previously earned credits, enabled me to complete my bachelor's degree and get back on track with my goals. I can't stress enough how invaluable TESU staff were to the experience. They were knowledgeable, professional and completely accommodating every time I called. This was essential to me, as I lived in different states while I was completing my degree. Their attention never wavered, even down to preparing me for graduation."

Like most adult learners with competing responsibilities, Major said that her degree pursuit was a bumpy road filled with starts, stops and challenges. Taking advantage of TESU's credit-by-exam program, TECEP®, and credits earned by taking Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) courses, helped to speed the journey.

"I learned about CLEP® and DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST®) from my uncle, who utilized credit-by-exams to complete his bachelor's degree years before. Using that method of earning credit was one of the best decisions I ever made, and I would urge anyone who is proficient at self-study and testing to do the same. It saves a tremendous amount of money and can significantly speed up the time to graduation."

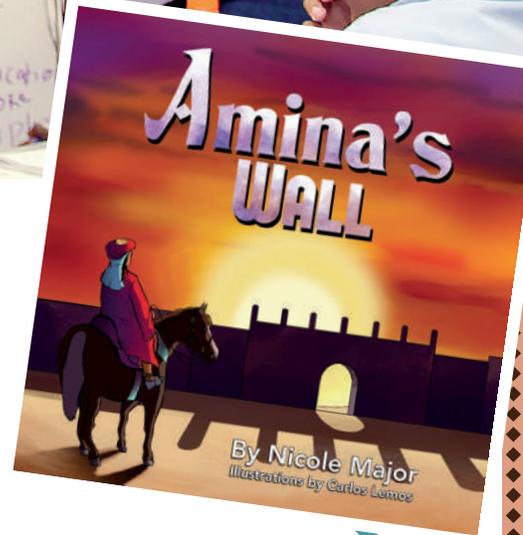
Through her publishing company, Major is currently working with a small group of new and rising authors and partnering with Howard's Healthy Choices to launch a Young Authors' Program later this year with a fourth and fifth grade cohort.

"We received a community grant that will help us operate the program for three years," she said. "Students will be coached to write their own books and also learn basic computer coding skills. Our goal is to help elementary and middle school students improve their language arts, math and analytical skills while producing something fun that they can be proud of." The students' book sales will also qualify them for scholarships.

"I felt fortunate to have found TESU and I don't think there is another institution that provides the same



Nicole Major during her Author Visit at the Trenton Public Library in January.



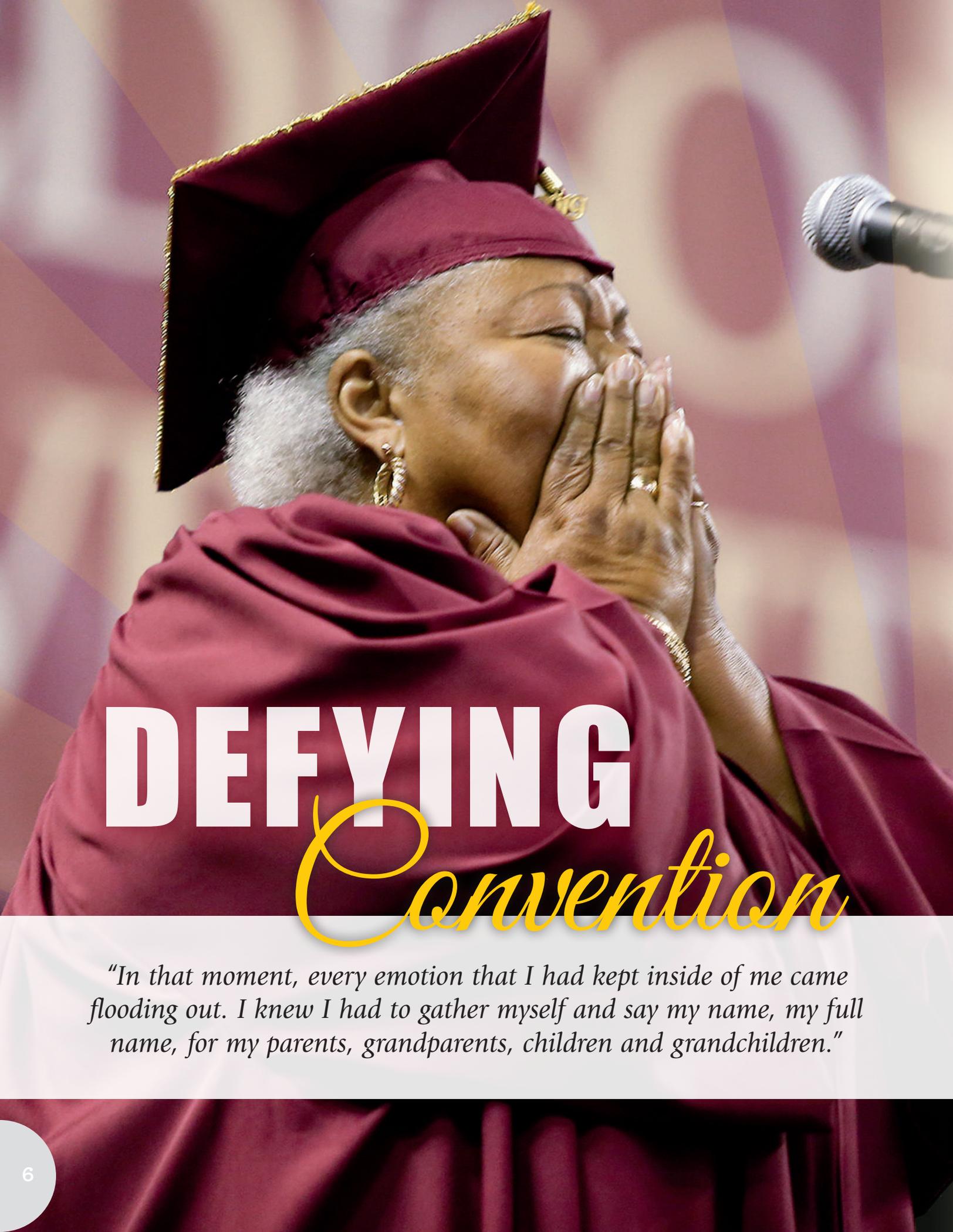
opportunities for adults to finish their degree on their own terms," she noted. "Earning my degree boosted my self-confidence and has qualified me for better opportunities. It was also important for me to graduate from a regionally accredited institution. It's tough going back to college with a family in tow, but I'm proof that anyone can do it."

Outside of her family and work life, Major serves on the board of directors for Howard's Healthy Choices and is now pursuing her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree with Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pa. She has another book scheduled for release titled *God is Love*.

In her spare time, Nicole loves to dance – especially Salsa. She lives in central New Jersey with her husband, Jason, and the couple's two daughters, Danielle and Gabrielle.

To learn more about the programs available in the Heavin School of Arts, Sciences and Technology visit tesu.edu/heavin.



A close-up photograph of an elderly woman wearing a maroon graduation cap and gown. She has her eyes closed and her hands clasped over her mouth, suggesting a moment of intense emotion or tears. A microphone is visible in the upper right corner. The background is blurred, showing other people in similar attire.

DEFYING

Convention

"In that moment, every emotion that I had kept inside of me came flooding out. I knew I had to gather myself and say my name, my full name, for my parents, grandparents, children and grandchildren."

❖ Lavana Cephas, AA '19

Determined to earn a degree before turning 70, Lavana Cephas credits her family support

At age 18, Lavana Cephas was married with two daughters and no high school education. Growing up in the mid-1960s in West Baltimore, there was scant motivation for Cephas, one of 11 children, to focus on her own education.

“Back then, there were not many incentives for a low-income black girl to pursue any form of college education,” she explains. “It was mainly expected of you to find a husband and become a mother.”

For some time, Cephas remained on that course with her own growing family. She and her husband welcomed their third child, son Robert, when she was in her early 20s, and everything was going as planned.

Then something changed when Cephas was on the other side of the globe with her husband, who was serving in the U.S. Army and stationed in Germany.

“I began reading every book I could find at the USO library,” she recalls. “The three years of living in Germany afforded me the opportunity to expand my appreciation for all forms of literature, and my knowledge of the world beyond the west side of Baltimore.”

She then had what she refers to as her “ah-ha” moment and walked in to a high-school equivalency testing session offered to military wives. She was able to pass the exam and was awarded her high school diploma. However, after returning to New Jersey, education would take a backseat to her career and being a mother and wife.

In 1978, she began working for the state of New Jersey as a housekeeper and maintenance worker at a developmental center. After a few years in that position, Cephas realized she could tap into her intellectual ability to advance in her career.

“Through my ability to pass N.J. Civil Service Exams, I was able to qualify for different vacancies,” she remembers. “By my retirement, I had worked my way up the ranks to a managerial position without a college degree.”

Cephas retired from the state in 2006 after 28 years of service. In her retirement, she found herself on the phone helping her granddaughter, Cayla, who was studying at Columbus College in Chicago, with her course work. After graduating, Cayla told her grandmother that she should use her ability and intelligence to complete her own college education.

From there, the goal was set. Cephas would strive to obtain her degree before she turned 70.

She had tried once before to attend college classes in 1995, but this time would be different. Along with the convenience and accessibility of the online format at Thomas Edison State University, she now had grown children as a lifeline.

“I knew going to TESU was the best opportunity for my parents to have the first of their 11 children earn a college degree,” she explained.

In 2019, Cephas completed all of the requirements to earn her Associate of Arts degree, crediting the achievement to the support of her family. She said her grandchildren helped her maneuver her online course space; her sister, Margaret, and best friend, Angee, who would call with words of encouragement; and her children, Marvella, Cheryl and Robert, who she proudly labels as “the most exceptional adults you could ever meet,” alongside many others, provided infinite help and motivation.

“With the support of my family, I learned to maneuver my online education with confidence, work through a myriad of emotional stress and physical illness, apply years of knowledge in a positive direction and finally earn the required credits for my degree,” she explains.

“This entire journey was for my family. I am so proud of the things they have accomplished, and I, in turn, wanted them, as well as my parents, to be proud of me. That is why I had to earn this degree.”



Proudly wearing her graduation cap, Lavana Cephas poses with her grandchildren (Front, left to right) Olivia, Stanton, and Riley Frances, alongside her best friend Angee Jones.

In September 2019, the time had finally come for her to take that walk across the stage at CURE Insurance Arena in Trenton, N.J., to receive her degree at Commencement.

“I had maintained control of my emotions throughout the ceremony, until I realized I had to go up and say my own name,” she recalls. “As I mounted the steps, I hesitated. In that moment, every emotion that I had kept inside of me came flooding out. I couldn’t stop crying, but I knew I had to gather myself and say my name, my full name, for my parents, grandparents, children and grandchildren.”

Cephas composed herself, approached the microphone and declared triumphantly.

“Lavana Gladys Ward Cephas!”

College graduate - age 69.

STUDENTS VIEW PATIENT CARE FROM A

First Responder's



Trenton Fire
Department
'Ride-Alongs'
Provide Valuable
Experience to
Aspiring RNs

When Thomas Edison State University's Accelerated 2nd Degree BSN Program students scramble into the passenger compartment of Trenton Fire Department's Ladder 4 fire engine with its sirens blaring, there's no predicting what will happen next. And that is the primary objective of W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing's recently launched Ride-Along program.

"Students in the program gain unique, valuable, firsthand experience in emergency prehospital patient assessment and care," says Dr. Filomela Marshall, dean of the School. "The synergies that will develop with fire fighters and emergency medical personnel on the front line is something they'll take with them to multiple healthcare environments throughout their careers."

Launched in 2019, the School's Ride-Along program with the city expands on the nursing program's condensed 12-month sequence of classroom-based courses, patient simulation lab exposure, online study and onground clinical experiences in area hospitals, visiting

Perspective

nurse services and community-based organizations like the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK).

“The clinical rotations and public health experiences ensure that students develop an understanding of key health issues in the community. This experience will prepare our students to better plan for care along the continuum required to keep people healthy in the community and to decrease illness and readmission into hospitals,” said Marshall.

During a typical shift, students accompany fire department and EMS personnel on medical calls in the city of Trenton, where they may check patient vital signs and assess the home environment. According to Marshall, in shadowing personnel, the students learn about emergency assessments and developing a system for prioritizing patient care and gaining a better understanding of the decision-making process during an emergency situation.

“Aspiring RNs in the program will gain a valuable understanding of the contribution emergency professionals make during the decisive timeframe in which patients are being evaluated, treated and transported to a medical facility,” said Derrick Sawyer, EFO, fire director for the city of Trenton, who oversees the fire company’s collaboration with nurse educators in the program. “They will also observe how first responders function in unique and often stress-inducing environments and what to expect during the crucial handoff between EMS and hospital personnel.”

The collaboration also allows them to identify and address the community’s most persistent healthcare needs.

“Cooperation between the city and our valued educational institutions is what makes our community so strong,” said Trenton, N.J., Mayor Reed Gusciora. “Nurses get the training they need, and



“STUDENTS IN THE PROGRAM GAIN UNIQUE, VALUABLE, FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCE IN EMERGENCY PREHOSPITAL PATIENT ASSESSMENT AND CARE.”

Dr. Filomela Marshall

TESU’s Accelerated 2nd Degree BSN Program students join Alisa McNeese – Trenton Fire Department’s first female firefighter – in conjunction with the Ride-Along program launched in 2019. With McNeese (center front), from left to right, are students Priscilla Maldonado, Nkiru Izzuka, Rose Sierra and Karolina Dul. On the second row are Sidney Hamm, Carolyn Stone and Jenna Garofalo.

our fire department personnel hone their skills in teaching the next wave of healthcare professionals in the capital city. Everybody gets a win here.”

For more information on the Accelerated 2nd Degree BSN Program at the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing, visit www.tesu.edu/bsna.

OUT of

inside

❖ **Isaac Wright Jr.,
AS, BS '02**

It was at the lowest point in his life that higher education threw Isaac Wright Jr. a lifeline.

As a family man working in the recording industry, Isaac Wright Jr. never anticipated that his life would take such drastic turns.

Wrongfully convicted and given a life sentence on baseless criminal charges, Wright would eventually help in overturning the convictions of 20 fellow inmates before successfully having his own conviction dismissed in 1996. His saga has become the subject of the network television series, “For Life.” Being on the set during filming of the ABC dramatization has helped the TESU alum come to grips with the enormity of his odyssey.

“I fought so hard for so long, not only for many others who shared my misfortune, but for myself. I never had the time to reflect on what I was experiencing,” he noted. “Being on the set and, later, watching the series unfold on TV, provided the opportunity to witness my suffering as a third party and to reflect on what I had been through in ways I never contemplated before.”

Isaac Wright Jr. (right) stands beside his “For Life” portrayer, Nicholas Pinnock (center), and executive producer Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson.

Getty Images



“EARNING MY TESU DEGREES MEANT THAT I WAS NOW ELIGIBLE TO APPLY FOR LAW SCHOOL. IT WAS PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST PROFOUND FEELINGS OF ACCOMPLISHMENT I’VE EVER HAD.”

Isaac Wright Jr.

Wright's personal journey, representing himself at trial and on appeal, as well as his dedication to others marginalized by the justice system, are the basis of "For Life," which counts among its producers the rapper and entrepreneur Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson. The series is based on Wright's transformation from prisoner to prison paralegal as he helps to handle the cases of fellow inmates who were also failed by the system.

Now a practicing attorney, Wright was originally arrested and jailed in 1989 and handed a life sentence in 1991 for a litany of drug charges that included leading a cocaine trafficking ring. Ineligible for parole for 30 years, he had already served seven years at the maximum security New Jersey State Prison (NJSP) and had exhausted his direct appeal options. He was eventually granted a post-conviction relief hearing during which he represented himself and proved that he was unlawfully convicted by a lead prosecutor who was later charged himself with embezzlement, extortion and abuse of power. That same year, a judge overturned Wright's conviction and released him from prison on \$250,000 bond. With his claims of police and prosecutorial misconduct now proven and his release certain, Wright hired attorney Francis Hartman who successfully moved to dismiss the case against him.

While incarcerated, Wright made the most of his time and the resources available at the Trenton, N.J., facility, studying prison law books and building his own successful prosecutorial misconduct case. Once released, he enrolled in the Associate in Science degree in Public and Social Service program at Thomas Edison State University and went on to earn his Bachelor of Science degree in Human Services in 2002. Both degree tracks centered on legal services.

"I had to make a living, prepare to send my daughter to college and repair and mitigate some of the significant damage done by my wrongful conviction and imprisonment — all while adjusting to life on the outside," noted Wright. "TESU's various avenues and platforms available to obtain college credits were uniquely suited to accommodate the sensitive nature of my position and challenges in life."

His connection to the legal system didn't end when his freedom began.

"When I got out, there was this feeling that I'm leaving thousands of people behind in that same situation, who have no support and are alone," Wright said in a recent *Blackfilm.com* interview. "That was the single motivating factor for me to continue to help."

Wright said that he originally chose TESU because it was an accredited school with a wide-ranging curriculum. He also found it was the only school at the time that provided the kind of flexibility and personal attention he needed to power through his undergraduate degree course work while rebuilding his life outside of the prison system.

"Earning my TESU degrees meant that I was now eligible to apply for law school," said Wright, who still collaborates with paralegals inside the prison system on cases. "It was probably one of the most profound feelings of accomplishment I've ever had. Those degrees not only highlighted my status as a college graduate but also meant that I could move to the next level. It was a very exciting time for me."

In 2007, Wright graduated from St. Thomas University School of Law in Miami, Fla., and passed the bar exam the following year. Today, he is an attorney-at-law for the Newark, N.J., firm of Hunt Hamlin & Ridley.



"We are proud of the work that Isaac continues to do and honored to be a part of his journey," noted University President Dr. Merodie A. Hancock. "He embodies the spirit of so many other TESU graduates through his dedication to changing the world around him for the better."

"For Life" debuted on Feb. 11, with a 13-episode first season. Wright serves as an executive producer for the series. "It's therapeutic in the sense that a heavy weight was lifted that I never knew existed until it was gone," said Wright. "In this way, the show has had a powerful personal, positive effect on my life."

V.P. Robin Walton Among State Relations Leaders Honored for Their Work

The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) honored the recipients of the 2019 Service Awards in State Government Relations last December at the 2019 Higher Education Government Relations Conference in New Orleans, La.

During the ceremony, Robin Walton, vice president for Community and Government Affairs at TESU, received the Marvin D. “Swede” Johnson Achievement Award recognizing her leadership in supporting adult learners at the University.

Her efforts in positively influencing government policy, quality assurance, allocation of budgetary resources and local and state initiatives that improve access to higher education for adults were highlighted during the ceremony by the global nonprofit.

“Ms. Walton is competent, professional, dedicated, articulate and intellectually curious,” TESU president Dr. Merodie Hancock said. “Her optimistic outlook

and readiness to take on any challenge is infectious.”

At the state level, Walton has developed bipartisan relationships with legislative and executive branch staffs, recruiting advocates throughout state government in support of the University’s unique mission.

New Jersey State Sen. Troy Singleton said of his work with Walton: “She is a professional of exceptional ability, dedication and integrity. She is committed to excellence and to public service... She has the gift of being able to work with and relate to a wide range of people and to quickly gain their trust and respect. Because of her talent, energy and determination, Ms. Walton has been successful in making significant contributions to the students of Thomas Edison State University.”

As a global nonprofit membership association of educational institutions, CASE helps develop the communities of professional practice that build



institutional resilience and success in often challenging times. The CASE awards are given annually for leadership in state relations and institutional advocacy. They are the only national awards in higher education state relations, a field that encompasses advocacy and outreach efforts on behalf of colleges and universities to governors, state legislators and other key policymakers.

TESU to be Innovative Partner Providing College Credit for edX’s MicroBachelors™ Programs

Thomas Edison State University will be a provider of college credit for the newly announced MicroBachelors™ programs created by *edX.org*, the trusted platform for learning. These programs will be the first credit-backed stackable credential, marking a significant milestone in online learning and will deliver immediately transferable skills to meet the real-world needs of employers while providing a pathway to a full bachelor’s degree.

MicroBachelors programs are designed for adults without a college degree who

believe they need additional education to advance in their careers, but may not be able to afford traditional bachelor’s degree or cannot take the time away from work to pursue one. Additionally, the rate at which technological change is affecting the global workforce means that adults need immediately transferable skills that can be delivered in months, not years.

“The University was founded to create innovative ways to deliver flexible, high-quality collegiate learning. We are proud to collaborate with edX to continue this tradition and play a key role in expanding access to high-quality undergraduate education for nontraditional students and workers,” said TESU President Dr. Merodie A. Hancock. “By recognizing MicroBachelors programs for credit, we are creating yet another diverse and alternative method to gain access to a

relevant and affordable undergraduate education.”

MicroBachelors programs are affordably priced and can be completed fully online. Once earned, learners can elect to apply credit from one of edX’s university credit partners toward a full bachelor’s degree.

The first MicroBachelors programs are IT Career Framework from Western Governors University and Computer Science Fundamentals from New York University. TESU has evaluated the NYU MicroBachelors that will be recognized for credit by Thomas Edison. Additionally, Arizona State University will be offering Professional Writing, with further offerings to be announced.

To learn more about MicroBachelors programs on edX, visit www.edx.org/microbachelors.



Doctor of Business Administration Program Begins with Inaugural Cohort in Place

DBA IS SECOND DOCTORAL PROGRAM LAUNCHED AT UNIVERSITY

Thomas Edison State University officially began classes for its second doctoral program, a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) in the January term, with an inaugural cohort of students coming from a diverse assortment of locations, careers and backgrounds.

With a class size of 20 students, members of the cohort hail from six states including New Jersey, originating from a variety of professional backgrounds that includes four U.S. service members who are active-duty, military-reserve or veteran status.

The program has specializations in Organizational Leadership, Human Resource Management and General Management, and is completed in 48-credits including an end-of-degree Scholar-Practitioner Field project. All requirements can be met online. This is the second doctoral program for the University, which currently also offers a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) with a specialization in Systems-Level Leadership.

School of Business and Management Dean Michael Williams emphasizes the importance of this degree for business students and professionals to advance their career paths toward becoming executive leaders, educators and consultants.



School of Business and Management Dean Michael Williams welcomed the inaugural cohort of the DBA program with an orientation at the University's George A. Pruitt Hall earlier this year.

"These students will be prepared to fill or create their next role," Williams said. "Each candidate will demonstrate their discipline and capabilities that will serve as powerful professional differentiators enabling a competitive advantage in the global market."

A generous grant from the Thomas Edison State University Foundation helped support the cost of developing low- or no-cost course materials for the DBA to minimize the costs to students. Students interested in enrolling in the next cohort, which begins in July, should visit the website www.tesu.edu/business/dba.



On March 3, Atlantic Cape Community College became the first New Jersey community college to officially sign the agreement with TESU. (From left, Atlantic Cape Community College president Dr. Barbara Gaba and TESU president Dr. Merodie A. Hancock)

TESU Announces Guaranteed Admission for NJ Community College Graduates

After a successful launch of the TESU/NJ 3+1 Pathways program last summer, President Dr. Merodie A. Hancock announced that the University decided to expand the program. Now, students who graduate from any New Jersey community college will be guaranteed admission to Thomas Edison to pursue a bachelor's degree, the University will waive the application fee, and the program will include more than 50 programs of study.

The announcement builds on TESU's commitment to work with the state's community colleges to reduce costs and streamline access to higher education credentials for New Jersey students.

"The University has decades of success working with adult learners to help close the gap between the needs of employers and the skills of employees," said Hancock. "As outlined in the Jobs

NJ plan, the governor is seeking to increase degree attainment for adults. With this announcement, TESU is providing another pathway to achieve that important goal."

Through the innovative 3+1 program, students can remain at their community college for an additional 30 credits beyond the associate degree and pay for those credits at the community college rate. All community college degrees, including AA, AS and AAS will be accepted for transfer.

The partnership aligns with the goals of the N.J. Office of the Secretary of Higher Education to enhance degree completion across all populations and fulfill the state goal of 65 percent degree attainment by 2025, with the added benefit of keeping students in state.

To learn more, visit tesu.edu/3plus1.

TESU/NJ 3+1
PATHWAYS
PROGRAM

❖ Rising Above: Scholarship Recipient Hazel Robinson

Hazel Robinson knows firsthand how addiction can tear families apart.

After conquering her own dependencies, Hazel Robinson is now focused on helping others keep their lives and families intact.

“My involvement in drug and alcohol addiction called me to action, so I have turned my life around from this terrible disease,” said Robinson, the 55-year-old mother of five and grandmother of six, who is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology at the University. “Now, I am nine years clean and working on my bachelor’s degree in the hope of helping others avoid the horrors of addiction.”

For many generations, Robinson said that her family had been a victim of the

To aid Robinson on this noble journey, TESU Foundation has awarded her two scholarships: a \$2,500 Robert Sydney Needham Memorial Scholarship and \$1,500 from the Ammon Foundation.

The Robert Sydney Needham Foundation was established by Doris Edwards Needham, of Verona, N.J., at her death on Oct. 14, 2008, in memory of her son, Robert Sydney Needham. The foundation provides grants to New Jersey colleges and universities to establish and support the Robert Sydney Needham Memorial Scholarship.

The Ammon Foundation, based in Linden, N.J., is the philanthropic endeavor of Ammon Labs. The foundation’s mission is to empower

and residents in Rowan Towers (a HUD apartment building in Trenton).”

Her strategy now includes assisting with capacity building in her community. “In the future I hope to work with city officials to develop proposals for financial support of programs and recreational centers as well as improved transportation services for school-age children. I also plan to revive my community through urban and cultural improvements that beautify our neighborhood structures.”

Robinson, who lives in Trenton and spends her spare time volunteering at the local after-school and summer programs, added, “I would like to mention my children, Omarr, Deja, Candice, Shanese and Davion, who have struggled because of my addiction problems, and I hope they will eventually understand my efforts in trying to help them succeed.”

With her TESU degree, Robinson hopes to achieve all her goals and aspirations. “The University and its staff have been like the family I never had,” she said. “The instructors gave me endless support to complete my assignments and even listen to my whining at times. Everything given to me in the last two years I will graciously give back to any deserving individual who is willing to accept it.”

“THOMAS EDISON STATE UNIVERSITY AND ITS STAFF HAVE BEEN LIKE THE FAMILY I NEVER HAD. THE INSTRUCTORS GAVE ME ENDLESS SUPPORT TO COMPLETE MY ASSIGNMENTS. EVERYTHING GIVEN TO ME IN THE LAST TWO YEARS I WILL GRACIOUSLY GIVE BACK TO ANY DESERVING INDIVIDUAL WHO IS WILLING TO ACCEPT IT.”

Hazel Robinson

same destructive behavior. “I plan to be involved with healthy living resources to teach families better lifestyle choices and good eating habits, which will begin a process for families to take pride in themselves, their culture and their community,” she said.

Robinson added that helping at-risk youths with the support needed to be productive members of society can instill appropriate behavior patterns earlier and compassion for others.

individuals in addiction recovery through combating stigma and providing strategic support to enable personal success through the Ammon Recovery Scholars.

“Receiving this financial support means my community has faith in me,” Robinson acknowledged. “These scholarships will help me with offsetting the cost of traveling back and forth to assist students



Hazel Robinson

Wells Fargo Donates Historic N.C. Wyeth Painting

DONATION IS MOST GENEROUS GIFT EVER CONFERRED TO THE UNIVERSITY

Officials from Wells Fargo and Thomas Edison State University celebrated the University's most generous gift ever with the announcement that Wells Fargo had donated a historic N.C. Wyeth painting to the University.

**WELLS
FARGO**

The N.C. Wyeth painting titled "Reception to Washington on April 21, 1789, at Trenton on his way to New York to Assume the Duties of the Presidency of the United States" has been on loan to the University from the bank since 2013. In November 2019, paperwork was finalized to allow the painting to become the sole property of the University.

"N.C. Wyeth's 'Reception to Washington' is an important part of Trenton history, and we have been honored to display it in our foyer for several years," said Dr. Merodie A. Hancock, president. "We are extremely happy to receive this beautiful and historic painting from Wells Fargo and look forward to showcasing it even more in the future."

The oil-on-canvas mural was commissioned in 1930 by First Mechanics National Bank (a legacy company of Wells Fargo) and had been on display at 1 West State St. But when the bank moved its downtown branch to the Capital Center at



The N.C. Wyeth painting titled "Reception to Washington on April 21, 1789, at Trenton on his way to New York to Assume the Duties of the Presidency of the United States."

Member Carlos Arroyo. "We're thrilled that this heirloom was able to find its home here at TESU, an institution that is doing outstanding work right here in the heart of the state capitol."

N.C. Wyeth, who lived from 1882 to 1945, was one of America's greatest illustrators. During his lifetime, Wyeth created more than 3,000 paintings and illustrated 112 books. According to the Brandywine River Museum's N.C. Wyeth Catalog, the artist used an article published in the *Columbian Magazine* on April 25, 1789, that describes Washington's entrance into Trenton as a reference for the mural's creation, which he painted in his studio in Chadds Ford, Pa.

"This extraordinarily generous gift of the beautiful N.C. Wyeth painting represents the most unique gift in our history," said John T. Thurber, vice president, Public Affairs, Thomas Edison State University. "We are grateful to Wells Fargo for this

"We are grateful to Wells Fargo for this remarkable expression of support for our mission, which also reflects our shared commitment to Trenton."

John T. Thurber, Vice President, Public Affairs

50 East State St., the new space could not accommodate the 17-foot-tall by 12-foot-wide mural.

"As a financial institution with more than 200 years of history in the state of New Jersey, we understand how important it is to maintain our historical treasures," said Wells Fargo Region Bank President and Thomas Edison State University Board

remarkable expression of support for our mission, which also reflects our shared commitment to Trenton. The painting depicts an important moment in our capital city's history. It is a great privilege to continue to display it within our Trenton campus, just a short walk from where the events it depicts took place in 1789."

Corporate, Foundation, and Government Grants Support for Innovation and Student Success

NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

A TESU degree is now more feasible for students enrolled in qualifying programs at the University's Heavin School of Arts, Sciences and Technology programs thanks to more than \$340,000 in scholarship support in the upcoming cycle from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC).

The grants support bachelor's degree students enrolling in TESU's Nuclear Energy Engineering; Electronics Systems Engineering Technology; Radiation Protection Engineering Technology; Computer/Information Technology; Environmental, Safety, and Security; and Technology, Cybersecurity, and Technical Studies degree programs as well as the Master of Science degree in Nuclear Energy Technology Management. Furthermore, the upcoming NRC grant cycle has been expanded to focus on associate degree-seeking students interested in enrolling in TESU's Nuclear Science; Nuclear Engineering; Computer/Information Technology; and Environmental, Safety, and Security degree tracks.

"The ongoing NRC scholarship funding removes the barriers of cost for many qualifying students, during all stages of their higher education journey," said Dr. Richard Coe, assistant dean, Heavin School of Arts, Sciences and Technology. "This latest phase of support is a vote of confidence in the strength of our nuclear power and utility-related programs and the value our graduates bring to the workforce."

PRINCETON AREA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

The TESU Foundation received a \$47,240 grant from the Princeton Area Community Foundation (Community Foundation) in support of the University's New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners (ELL) Institute and Mentoring Program based in The John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy.

The ELL Program, now in its 13th year, has been receiving ongoing support through the Community Foundation's Community Impact Grants program, which funds organizations whose

initiatives transform the lives of low-income individuals and families. This year's grant is from the Community Foundation's Community Impact Grants and the Burke Foundation Legacy Grants program.

The funding will support the ELL program's mentoring component for select teachers in the Trenton Public School district who will receive formal cultural competency training and monthly mentoring thereafter. The program teaches theory and best practices in cultural competency; first and second language acquisition and English learning strategies; models best practices through simulations; and equips teachers to use culture and language as tools in developing their students' positive cultural identity and self-esteem.

TD CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

The ELL Institute and Mentoring Program has also garnered support in the form of a \$10,000 grant to the TESU Foundation from the TD Charitable Foundation, the charitable giving arm of TD Bank. The grant will support culturally responsive classrooms in the Trenton, N.J., public school district and will help educators create classroom environments that celebrate and affirm their students' cultural identities. The funding will enable the ELL Program to dramatically expand its efforts to provide critical teacher development in the Trenton District's Dual Language classrooms, including those in the newly opened Trenton Global Academy.

"We are truly grateful to the Princeton Area Community Foundation and TD Charitable Foundation for continual support of this endeavor," said Ana I. Berdecia, senior fellow and director, the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children at the Watson Institute. "These grants enable the ELL program to expand its evidence-based professional development model and broaden its outreach to the local Trenton-area schools."

AMMON FOUNDATION

The TESU Foundation has partnered with the Ammon Foundation to provide scholarship opportunities for individuals in recovery from substance use disorder. Ammon's Recovery Scholars Program will provide up to \$3,000, matched

by the TESU Foundation, to support individuals in addiction recovery who are pursuing higher education. The Recovery Scholars program also assists scholarship recipients with academic, personal and professional support.

The Ammon Foundation, launched in October 2016 as a philanthropic endeavor of Ammon Labs, awarded two scholarships to two TESU students in the 2019-2020 term. The Foundation's mission is to empower individuals in addiction recovery through combating stigma and providing strategic support to enable personal success.

"This collegiate recovery program reinforces our dedication to supporting our students regardless of their circumstances," said John P. Thurber, vice president, Public Affairs. "More than simply matching the scholarship dollars, we strive to empower our students to change their lives through education and career opportunities."

JAMES KERNEY FOUNDATION

The TESU Foundation received a \$5,000 grant from the James Kerney Foundation to replicate a unique home care environment. The development of the new Home Care Simulation room and its associated technology for nursing students in TESU's Accelerated 2nd Degree BSN Program in TESU's W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing will develop the skills necessary to safely care for patients in a home-like setting. Practicing in a home healthcare environment will become increasingly important for nursing students. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), healthcare employment is expected to grow by 18 percent through 2026, with careers related to home healthcare projected to grow 36 percent during the same timeframe.

"The funding ensures that our students have an opportunity to perform patient assessments and common nursing interventions in a simulated homelike suite," said Dr. Filomela Marshall, dean of the School. "The room creates a realistic environment in which our students can practice therapeutic communication, physical, psychosocial and environmental assessments as well as educating patients on medication management."

MEET ALUMNI AMBASSADOR

Casey Criswell, AAS, BSBA '19

ALUMNI AMBASSADOR

Casey Criswell's dream to graduate from college was personal – he would be the first in his family to do so.

But like many people, Criswell had to put that objective on hold after high school in order to earn a living. He soon realized that to advance in his career, he would need a degree.

Fortunately for Criswell, his employer, United Parcel Service (UPS) understands the value of a college degree for its employees. Through a partnership between UPS and Thomas Edison State

Criswell said. "My job is demanding, especially around peak seasons. The flexible course structure and schedule at TESU makes it possible for everyone to be a student while working full time."

Criswell believes that his TESU education has broadened his perspective and ability to think outside of the box at work, which is extremely valuable as a distribution manager at UPS. He tells his colleagues at UPS about TESU, and he believes that a TESU education not only will benefit his colleagues personally, but also professionally. "I really want to help others completing their degrees. Seeing people coming together in order to accomplish a goal is always something that inspires me. I enjoy seeing people's hard work pay off. I've always worked hard for the betterment of my team or project," he noted.

Criswell is a TESU Alumni Ambassador and welcomes his UPS colleagues to reach out to him should they have questions about his TESU experiences. To learn more about the TESU/UPS partnership, check out the hub at www.tesu.edu/ups.

"THE FLEXIBLE COURSE STRUCTURE AND SCHEDULE AT TESU MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR EVERYONE TO BE A STUDENT WHILE WORKING FULL TIME."

Casey Criswell

University (TESU), Criswell was able to utilize UPS' tuition reimbursement to complete both his Associate in Applied Science and Bachelor of Science in Business Administration degrees in Operations Management in 2019.

"I don't think I would have been able to finish my degrees if it wasn't for TESU,"



Be a TESU
Genius!

Alumni and friends of TESU are invited to join the new Genius program. Simply complete five steps to be eligible for the prize! See complete details at tesu.edu/genius.

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

Student and Alumni LinkedIn Group: tesu.edu/LinkedInGroup

Alumnifire: 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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The spirit and generosity

of Thomas Edison State University
alumni, friends and supporters

is a shining example of how, together, we can
have an impact on others' lives.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the
TESU Foundation has established the Student
Relief Fund to provide critical assistance to those
with sudden financial needs. Please consider
a donation knowing that 100 percent of what
you are able to give will be used to support the
urgent needs of our students.

We will continue to be here for our students
during every phase of their academic journey
– because earning a degree is a tremendous
accomplishment – and we are committed
to doing everything possible to assure our
students have the opportunity to continue their
education.

Thank you for your continued support and
partnership as we face the challenges ahead.

give.tesu.edu/studentrelief

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