

SPRING 2018

# Invention

THE MAGAZINE OF THOMAS EDISON STATE UNIVERSITY

## A for Healthcare

*Jeff Gora, RN, BSN '14*

NEW PROGRAMS FROM CONTINUING AND PROFESSIONAL STUDIES | IN HIS HONOR: THE W. CARY EDWARDS FOUNDATION

DEAN DISCUSSES BUSINESS AND LEADERSHIP IN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE E. NORCROSS III

OPEN ITEMS: LEILA BANIHANI, BSBA, '12 | TO THE RESCUE: JUSTIN O'CONNOR, BS '16



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Merodie A. Hancock, PhD  
PRESIDENT

Joe Guzzardo  
EDITOR

Kristen Lacaillade  
Kelly Saccomanno  
Linda Soltis  
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Chris Miller  
ART DIRECTOR

## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Today, it is my honor to serve as the fourth president of Thomas Edison State University.

The University has played a critical and historic role in removing barriers for adult students through academic innovation and service excellence. For me, this new chapter in the University's story is about reaching new heights. I look forward to building on the strong foundation of academic excellence our students have come to expect from Thomas Edison State University, while continuing to expand and enhance our services, programs and partnerships.

In this issue of *Invention*, I am pleased to share the stories of three exceptional graduates who give testament to Thomas Edison State University's mission.

Jeff Gora '14, senior regional manager of Customer Solutions at Johnson & Johnson in New Jersey;

Leila Banihani '12, director of operations, North America, CMC Energy Systems in Fort Washington, PA, and;

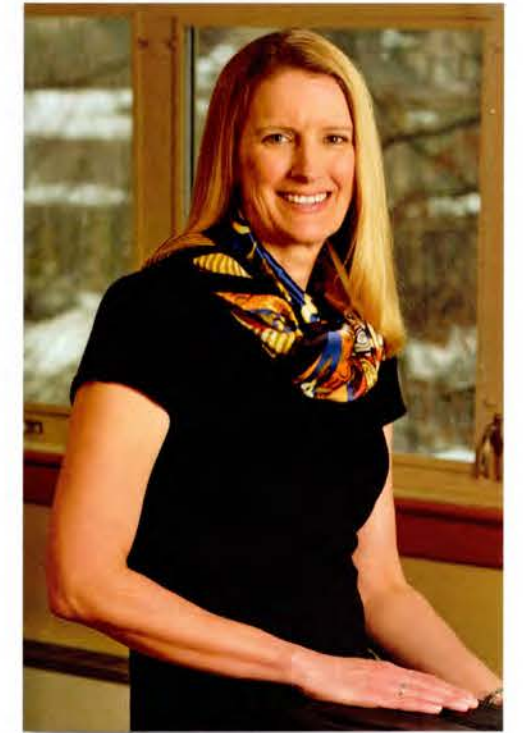
Justin O'Connor '16, lieutenant, Village of Ridgewood, N.J. fire department.

I hope you find these stories as inspirational as I do. As I assume my position as the University's fourth president, stories like these remind me of why I dedicate my life's work to providing access to higher education for adult learners.

I am looking forward to advancing the mission of providing flexible, high-quality collegiate learning opportunities for self-directed adults. Together, with our community of students, alumni, staff and mentors, our extraordinary University will continue to change lives and build communities one outstanding student at a time.

An exciting future awaits for Thomas Edison State University.

Merodie A. Hancock, PhD  
President





## Regional Cancer Care Associates Partners with Thomas Edison State University

Regional Cancer Care Associates (RCCA®) is partnering with Thomas Edison State University to offer educational opportunities to its 800 employees who are interested in taking courses, advancing their education or finishing a degree they may have started earlier in their career.

This is the first higher educational partnership of its kind for RCCA, one of the largest oncology physician networks in the U.S.

The partnership will offer RCCA's nursing and non-nursing staff, who work at 32 locations in New Jersey, Maryland and Connecticut, reduced tuition costs and access to flexible academic programs that meet their needs and busy schedules.

"RCCA is excited to partner with Thomas Edison State University and its W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing," said Terrill Jordan, president

and CEO of RCCA. "Due to the growing demands and challenges of personalized medicine, our patients and physicians need the support of nursing and healthcare professionals who are clinically competent and understand the significance of healthcare informatics. With a rich curriculum and committed student body, Thomas Edison State University is also a logical place to find professionals to add to our nursing and administrative teams."

Under the partnership, RCCA's employees will have access to a broad array of undergraduate and graduate degree programs, certificate programs and course completion options.

"We are elated to partner with an organization so firmly dedicated to the treatment and care of cancer patients and cancer survivors in our region," said Janet Eickhoff, associate vice president for Strategic Partnerships



Seated (from left to right) are Mary Ellen Caro, EdD, former vice president of Enrollment Management and Learner Services at Thomas Edison State University; and Terrill Jordan, president and CEO of RCCA. Back row (from left to right): Jessiah Styles, associate director, Office of Strategic Partnerships and Outreach at Thomas Edison State University; Janet Eickhoff, associate vice president, Office of Strategic Partnerships and Outreach at Thomas Edison State University; Filomela Marshall, EdD, RN, CNE, dean of the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing at Thomas Edison State University and Bruno S. Fang, MD, oncologist and managing partner at RCCA.

and Outreach, at the University. "By offering flexible degree pathways to their staff, we are making educational advancement attainable for the busy, committed healthcare professionals at RCCA."

## University Vice President Named Chair of Burlington County Regional Chamber of Commerce

Dr. Dennis W. Devery, vice president for Planning and Research at Thomas Edison State University, was selected as the 2018-2019 chair of the Board of Directors of the Burlington County Regional Chamber of Commerce (BCRCC) during the installation of its new board in January. Devery, who has served on the board for the past five years, will fulfill a two-year term as chair.

"Dennis brings his unique style of collaboration and teamwork along with his experience in higher education, military, corporate and government organizations to the chamber," said president and CEO Kristi Howell of the Burlington County Regional Chamber of Commerce. "His ability to align business, education and government

entities in innovative collaborations creates economic opportunity in our region and for our members."

The Burlington County Regional Chamber of Commerce supports a culture where members build meaningful relationships to help advance their business opportunities through high-quality educational events and high-level networking. BCRCC fosters regional economic growth by connecting more than 500 businesses and 30,000 employees with unlimited opportunity to promote a healthy business climate.

"I am looking forward to working with my colleagues to link our business community with our great educational



Dr. Dennis W. Devery, vice president for Planning and Research at Thomas Edison State University

institutions, government officials and organized labor partners to promote economic opportunity throughout our region," said Devery. "The chamber is stronger than ever, continues to grow its connections across the state and the range of programs it offers. My challenge is to find ways to continue that great work."

## New Programs from Continuing and Professional Studies

The Continuing and Professional Studies unit within the John S. Watson School of Public Service and Continuing Studies has recently developed several new initiatives to help employers build capacity, retain top talent and improve work performance.

The goal is to prepare working adults for the realities of today's workplace by providing them with skills that align with workforce demands.

"More so than ever before, employers are looking for employees who can interpret and adapt to changes in the workplace," said Robert Herbst, executive director of Continuing and Professional Studies at the University. "By leveraging the resources of the University, we can be very creative in how we build our certificate programs and training courses. We are focused on meeting the workforce and professional development needs of various constituent groups, from the front line to the executive suite."

When describing continuing education, Herbst refers to the "T" model, introduced by Tim Brown, CEO and president of IDEO. In the "T" shaped model, the vertical stem of the "T" represents the hard skills and depth of knowledge typically gained in a traditional college degree program. The top of the "T" represents the breadth of knowledge and soft skills gained through lifelong learning.

"This is really about continuous improvement," said Dr. Steven Garwood, director of Transformational Learning in the Watson School. "We're focused on both the individual who needs to learn a new skill in order to advance professionally or move to a new field and on businesses looking for training and education to help them affect change within their organizations."

Programs are designed to bridge the skills gap in the workplace and offer professional development training that addresses the competencies that are most in-demand in today's workforce, including critical thinking, adaptive leadership, customer service, project management, innovation, effective problem solving and interpreting the work environment.

"We think of it as a journey," said Herbst. "As you move through each stage of your career, we are providing those skill sets necessary for you to excel in your lifelong learning journey, anytime, anywhere. That's what we are all about."

To learn more, visit [www.tesu.edu/cps](http://www.tesu.edu/cps) or email [cps@tesu.edu](mailto:cps@tesu.edu).



(l to r) Dr. Steven Garwood, director of Transformational Learning and Robert Herbst, executive director of Continuing and Professional Studies

## What's New?

### > BUSINESS LEADERSHIP SERIES

This leadership development program helps employers build capacity and retain top talent in the public and private sectors. Three areas of concentration in the series include:

- > *Front Line Supervisor*, which focuses on supervisory fundamentals, performance management, teamwork, resolving workplace challenges and workforce improvement
- > *Mid-Level Manager*, which focuses on the people, process and operational issues in the organization
- > *Senior Executive*, the strategic leadership component of the series

Developed in partnership with Centrestar Academy, the program can be delivered online, on-demand, on-site and in a blended format, depending on the needs of the organization.

### > LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE

The Leadership Excellence program is designed for large and small organizations that want to help their employees reach their potential as innovators, leaders and change makers. This gamified program, based in practical knowledge and backed by research, is especially relevant to organizations undergoing mergers that need to bring together different workplace cultures. Developed in partnership with Kennesaw State University in Georgia, the program uses the popular Competing Values Framework as students work to master its eight different leader roles. Participants tackle challenges, climb levels and work collaboratively to earn a digital badge. It is available 24/7 on desktops, laptops or mobile devices.

### > POLICIES AND PROCEDURES WRITING FOR PROFESSIONALS

This six-week, online course takes students through the basics of writing policies and procedures and reviews the differences between policies and procedures, how to develop and format policies and procedures, effective writing methods, generating employee buy in, legal concerns and delivery methods.

### > PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The Project Management Institute (PMI®) has recently approved the University as a Registered Education Provider. Continuing and Professional Studies is currently offering an online test prep course to prepare students for PMI® certification exams as its first project management offering.



## Dean Discusses Business and Leadership in Interview with George E. Norcross III

Dr. Michael Williams, dean of the School of Business and Management at Thomas Edison State University, sat down with George E. Norcross III, executive chair of Conner Strong & Buckelew, a national insurance brokerage and employee benefits consulting firm based in New Jersey which will soon be relocated to Camden, as well as chair of the Board of Trustees of the Cooper Health System, Cooper University Hospital, and MD Anderson Cooper Cancer Center, as part of the Camden County Regional Chamber of Commerce's 'Game Changer Series,' at Rutgers University in Camden, N.J.

Here are some excerpts from Williams' discussion with Norcross as part of the fifth interview in the series:

**Q: What influenced and impressed you in your youth to do the work that you do today?**

**A:** Well, undoubtedly my father influenced me greatly as he did each of my brothers; and, from a very young age, my dad used to bring at least two of us to every meeting he had on the weekends. We'd wear our suits and bowties and we'd be told to sit and not speak and listen. My father was a big believer in listening and learning, and I recall meeting most of the prominent business, political and governmental leaders in this region. I would say that was a great influence when I would spend time listening to people. I know it made a lot of people in the room uncomfortable who would sit at these meetings and wonder who these two little kids are sitting in a room. But, I was in some rooms that had some very spirited discussions.

**Q: How have you found over the years that your skills have morphed relative to who you are today?**

**A:** Neither my mother nor father had any business training. One of the more positive endeavors in my life was on the Rutgers University, Camden campus. I had probably the single most significant event take place when I was asked to leave in 1975. I would go into the

student center and eat breakfast with my peers. When we were finished, they would go to class and I would read *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, and I would drift over to the courthouse across the street because I wanted to be a lawyer in the worst way. But, I didn't want to go to undergrad, and I certainly didn't want to go to law school. I would sit there and watch trials in the courthouse. I would even go to Philadelphia sometimes to watch some of the more famous attorneys in the region in active trials. Then, I would go back to Rutgers-Camden's student center for lunch then they would go to class, and I would go back to what I was doing that afternoon. I would go home and pretend in front of my mom and dad that I was in school all day. So, at the end of the semester when I didn't manage to pass too many classes, I was encouraged to seek vocational training and that college wasn't going to be it for me. I left after my first year and that was lucky because I ended up starting my business the following year, which I still have today. So, I would say that was a lucky event for me. Not something I ever tell my children to replicate but I got lucky, developed my business and, it has continued on.

**Q: When your business really started to take off, how did you enable it to grow?**

**A:** When you do a multitude of things, and I generally take on more than I should, there are places that generally



George E. Norcross III, executive chair of Conner Strong & Buckelew and chair of the Board of Trustees of the Cooper Health System, Cooper University Hospital, and MD Anderson Cooper Cancer Center



Dr. Michael Williams, dean of the School of Business and Management

have to give. I would say the single most important thing I've learned in my life is to hire people that are smarter than you. You have to be pretty secure to do that. Most people in life are concerned about the people sitting next to them, whether they're going to try to outmaneuver them in a position they're in at a company or hierarchy. You have to be stubborn to an extent. You have to be someone who is very secure with who you are and what you are. If you're going to run big enterprises and you expect to grow and build a bigger organization, you have to give them the kind of authority to run what they're doing. Recognize that we're all going to make mistakes at times, but if you don't give people authority, and you don't allow them to exercise good judgement, you're never going to build something bigger. There are not enough hours in a day to run what you want to run. I have my life separated into four different buckets. Sometimes I joke that I have four full-time jobs. But I also have four brilliant people that act as CEOs who run these enterprises and that's the trick to getting bigger and growing and being able to build something.



George E. Norcross III, left, speaks with Dr. Michael Williams at the Camden County Regional Chamber of Commerce event.

**Q: Where do your philanthropic interests stem from?**

**A:** That came about over a course of years I would say. My father always told each of my brothers and I that instead of being involved in a multitude of philanthropic and charitable efforts, to pick one, maybe two, tops, and make a difference, versus being involved in five different organizations and being a contributor to 25 different ones. One for me was easy because my father was on the board of Cooper University Hospital back in the 70s and early 80s and that was obviously an organization that has become probably the biggest engagement of our family's interest. I joined the Cooper board in 1990 or 1991. My dad served for nine or 10, so our family has been involved there for almost 40 years and that involvement has been special to us and it has evolved over the years. To my father, the city of Camden was everything. He was born here, he was raised here, he graduated high school here, his office was here and it mattered to him. The other endeavor I became involved with was a dear friend when I was in my early 20s named Ed McDonald. He was a freeholder in Camden County who had a child who, unfortunately, after she was born, suffered severe brain damage, and he started something called the LARC School. I got involved in the LARC School 25-30 years ago, a place that he founded with others that were going to care for these children throughout their lifetime because they had such severe mental and physical incapacities that they needed help that was not available

in the way he wanted it. I would say it's become one of the preeminent schools in the state, if not the country. Those are really the only two organizations that I am actively engaged with and spend an enormous amount of time and try to make a difference.

**Q: What do you see for the future of Camden?**

**A:** I would say a decade or so ago I had an epiphany and realized that Cooper's long-term interests were going to be tied exclusively to the success, or lack thereof, of the city of Camden. Cooper had been around at that point for about 125 years, but things were not going real well 10-12 years ago and the arrow was pointed in a bad direction. I realized at that point if this city did not change, Cooper's long-term interests were not going to be fulfilled and the hospital would eventually collapse. Then, one of our senior executives, John Sheridan, and I sat down and said, 'what are we going to do to change this?' Camden is not that large that it can't be changed. I think we recognize that the political and governmental interest in the area were such that we're interested in reform and change. Unlike a lot of other areas in the state of New Jersey, where the political, community and governmental interests are not aligned, I felt we had an alignment of interests. We set out and were determined to change what was going on. Today it looks like a lot of this happened somewhat easily, but it was many, many years of hard work on behalf of a lot of folks who spent a lot of time trying to build a plan and

build a dream. Susan Levin, president and CEO of the Cooper Foundation, has led the foundation that has largely been the organizing entity that has formulated and implemented a lot of the change that has taken place with the school system and public safety. We had a brutal battle with reorganizing the police department in the city of Camden, and, truth be told, we had a governor who became our partner. He turned around and adopted this city and worked with the mayor, county board of freeholders and those of us in leadership that he respected, people who were actually able to execute a plan. We were, meaning the city and the county, something that he was prepared to invest in. When you look at more than \$3 billion in investment that's either happened or is happening in this city, a lot of that is due to his leadership, his partnership with the leaders of the legislature and otherwise. In some ways, our schools and public safety are national models.

**Q: From where does your interest in presidential libraries come?**

**A:** I remember going to the first presidential library, it was probably the Kennedy library, back in the late 60s, early 70s, and it was a fascinating experience. I've been a student of history. I love studying history; history repeats itself frequently. I tell people all the time, they think the United States is this incredible nation that's never going to change and it's always going to be the way it is. What I enjoy about presidential libraries, though, is history. I've been to almost every one except the Carter and Ford libraries, and I spend a great deal of time there. I have taken my own children to the libraries because you learn about things outside of a book. There is a lot of visual learning that goes on and you re-experience things, particularly since the 60s, things that you've lived through and you perhaps don't appreciate as much. I've always enjoyed it.

To view the full interview, visit: <https://www.tesu.edu/gcseries>.



## ❖ In His Honor: The W. Cary Edwards Foundation

For the W. Cary Edwards Foundation and its late namesake, affording others a quality education is personal.

Edwards, who is most known for serving as attorney general of New Jersey from 1986 to 1989, relied on financial assistance to put himself through school. The son of a single mother, he diligently worked earning a scholarship from his then-employer Bamberger's.

It was when Bamberger's owner, Louis Bamberger, selected Edwards as the sole recipient of a scholarship that he was able to fund his education at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., where he would eventually earn a law degree.

"For Cary, there was no question that education was near and dear to him," explained his wife, Lynn, who, alongside daughters Kari and Marcy, work tirelessly to continue Edwards' legacy of giving back. "Had it not been for education, it's very likely that Cary would not have had the ability to do many of the things in life he was able to."

Since Edwards' passing in 2010, Lynn and her daughters have worked hard to maintain his legacy through the creation of the W. Cary Edwards Foundation, a nonprofit organization that offers individuals in New Jersey the opportunity to pursue a quality education at all grade levels.

"Though Cary passed from cancer, it wasn't what defined him," said Lynn. "We support education because it makes the most impact in other's lives and Cary benefited greatly from his own excellent education. This work keeps our family together, which we know is what Cary would have wanted and was always about."

In 2013, the W. Cary Edwards Foundation established a nursing scholarship, available to New Jersey residents who are currently enrolled or seeking enrollment in an undergraduate or graduate nursing degree at the University and whose tuition is not fully covered.



W. Cary Edwards gives the Commencement address at the institution's 15th annual ceremony held on Oct. 18, 1987.

"We give not only to remember Cary, but bring his memory to the forefront of others' lives," said Lynn. "Though it makes a difference in our own lives, it's much more fulfilling for us to know we have the capacity to help others and shape their future."

## ❖ W. Cary Edwards Foundation Nursing Scholarship Recipient: Marie O'Donnell, BSN '14, MSN '17

Marie O'Donnell went from crunching numbers to patient care all in a span of 20-plus years.

"My career in healthcare began 20 years ago after more than a dozen years working in the financial markets and co-owning a small business," she said. "Although I enjoyed the field, I became intrigued by the work of emergency responders and became an emergency medical technician (EMT), volunteering on my local first aid squad."

Soon after, O'Donnell became a nationally registered paramedic and, in 2007, earned her RN license.

"I chose Thomas Edison after careful consideration of the accreditations it has earned and from the accounts of colleagues who spoke very highly of

the institution," O'Donnell said. "As an adult learner, I was pleased with the values, process and plans for degree completion set forth by the University."

After enrolling in the RN-BSN/MSN degree program in 2011, O'Donnell earned her Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree in 2014, followed by her Master of Science in Nursing degree in 2017.

O'Donnell, who has been working as a certified flight nurse on New Jersey's State Medevac Helicopter, NorthSTAR for the past five years, is grateful for the financial support that helped her throughout her journey.

She was a recipient of the W. Cary Edwards Foundation Nursing Scholarship.



Marie O'Donnell, BSN '14, MSN '17

The scholarship, established in 2013, is funded by an annual grant from the W. Cary Edwards Foundation.

"This financial assistance provided me with the ability to reduce my time-to-degree completion, propelling me further toward my goal," she explained. "As a recipient of these funds, I am thankful to the W. Cary Edwards Foundation for its support, and, on behalf of scholarship recipients, I would like to say 'thank you.'"

## ❖ PSEG Foundation Awards \$200,000 Grant to Support Career Enhancement Program for Military and Veteran Students and Advance the University's STEM Initiatives

The PSEG Foundation recently awarded a two-year, \$200,000 grant to expand programs for active-duty service members and veterans and advance the development of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) courses at Thomas Edison State University.

The funding will support substantial improvements to the University's existing Military and Veteran Portal (MVP) and Career Enhancement Initiative. The University plans to expand career advising and job placement resources offered through the MVP that meet the needs of veterans and service members. In addition, the grant will support the development of simulations and virtual laboratories in online STEM courses offered by the University.

"This support from the PSEG Foundation will play a critical role in the development of innovative programs designed for our active-duty service members and veterans to promote the achievement of their personal aspirations and career goals," said John Thurber, vice president for Public Affairs at the University. "Funding of these initiatives will allow the institution to foster a pathway of success for our students and continue to prepare a strong pipeline of STEM-educated adults for today's workforce."

Support for the Career Enhancement Initiative will bring improved functionality to the MVP by focusing on connecting users with career advisement and specific job opportunities based on their interests

and training. The implementation of laboratory simulation technology in online courses will assist in meeting the needs of adult students, and expanding the academic rigor of the entire STEM curriculum.

"Our country's veterans and active military professionals are exceptional leaders and trained professionals that add tremendous value to our workforce," said Barb Short, PSEG chief diversity officer and senior director corporate citizenship and culture. "As a company of colleagues dedicated to service and operational excellence, we're proud to continue our longstanding partnership with Thomas Edison State University and support the University's career initiatives dedicated to service members and veterans."

## ❖ University Receives \$47,240 Grant in Support of Institution's New Jersey Summer Institute and Mentoring Program

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

The program is supported by a Community Impact Grant, which is intended to fund organizations whose initiatives transform the lives of low-income individuals, families and communities. The grant will support the mentoring component for 15 classroom teachers who will be trained this spring and begin monthly mentoring shortly thereafter.

"We are grateful for the continued generosity of the Princeton Area Community Foundation," said Barbara George Johnson, executive director of The John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy at the University. "This funding will allow us to further

engage educators in a dialogue about the connection between culture and language as an anchor for academic success, giving teachers the ability to be more culturally responsive to their students."

The Program is an 11-year, evidence-based professional development model that transforms the thinking and practices of teachers (pre-K to fifth grade) to improve the interactions and instruction of English Language Learners (ELL) so that they will be able to academically succeed within the context of their strong cultural identities.

"Our Community Impact grants work to transform the lives of low-income individuals, families and communities," said Jeffrey M. Vega, president and CEO of the Community Foundation. "The University's program has an 11-year track record of success, and teachers in 15 more classrooms, as well as their students, will benefit from it."



Pictured (from left) Barbara George Johnson, executive director, the John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy; Nelida Valentin, vice president, Grants and Programs, Princeton Area Community Foundation; and John P. Thurber, vice president for Public Affairs, Thomas Edison State University.

This year's Program will continue its partnership exclusively with the Trenton Public Schools for a second year. The Program is expected to impact 700 students in one school in the city of Trenton.

To learn more about the Program, visit [www.tesu.edu/watson/institute/summer-institute.cfm](http://www.tesu.edu/watson/institute/summer-institute.cfm)





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Healthcare

*Jeff Gora, RN, BSN '14*



# A for Healthcare

## Jeff Gora, RN, BSN '14

Immediately following his high school graduation, Jeff Gora did what countless new graduates do; he went to college. His decision found him at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Mass., at the age of 18.

"I attended for just three semesters before leaving school and moving back home," Gora admitted. "I didn't have my head in the game back then, and I don't think I really knew what I wanted to do, or what I felt would be meaningful to do."

After taking some time to think about his future, Gora followed an opportunity to work at Johnson & Johnson in New Brunswick, N.J., accepting a part-time position in the company's mailroom. That decision, he explained, set forth a series of events that unfolded as his career led him to opportunities of

Hospital in New Brunswick, N.J., as a night shift pediatric nurse.

"I had the privilege of caring for some very sick kids and their families at some of the most difficult times of their lives," Gora said. "During my tenure at Saint Peter's, I also became chemotherapy certified. I have so much admiration for nurses overall and such a soft spot in my heart for those that work with children."

Gora knew from the start of his nursing education at RVCC that he wanted to

**"BEING ABLE TO TAKE NURSING CLASSES ONLINE, ON MY SCHEDULE, IN MY OWN HOME WAS A COMPLETE GAME CHANGER FOR ME. THE RN-BSN/MSN PROGRAM EVEN ALLOWED ME TO GRADUATE WITH 9 CREDITS TOWARD A NURSING MASTER'S DEGREE AT THE UNIVERSITY."**

Jeff Gora

increasing responsibility in customer service and supply chain management across the consumer products, pharmaceutical and medical device businesses within the organization.

The experiences and passion for healthcare Gora cultivated gave him the courage to step away from Johnson & Johnson in 2009 to follow his heart and attend nursing school. He enrolled fulltime in Raritan Valley Community College's (RVCC) nursing program in Branchburg, N.J., two years later graduating with an associate degree and successfully passing his NCLEX exam. With this, Gora immediately began a career at the Children's Hospital at Saint Peter's University

eventually complete his Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree, and he saw Thomas Edison State University as his best opportunity to do so. The time was finally right.

"The BSN program at the University takes the clinical knowledge and real-world nursing experience you already have and adds a whole new dimension that helps to enhance your skills around critical thinking, research, policy analysis and physical assessment," said Gora.

He acknowledged that working the night shift and having a generally nontraditional work schedule put stress on his home life. "But being able to take

nursing classes online, on my schedule, in my own home, was a complete game changer for me. The RN-BSN/MSN program even allowed me to graduate with 9 credits toward a nursing master's degree at the University."

Shortly after earning his BSN in 2014, Gora rejoined Johnson & Johnson, this time as senior regional manager of Customer Solutions, a position he still holds today, which is part of the organization's medical devices supply chain area.

"I was looking to bridge my previous healthcare business background with my clinical nursing experience and found the perfect opportunity to do so at Johnson & Johnson," he said.

Gora now works with large hospital systems in the Northeast and Midwest as part of his position. He explained that his experience, training and education as an RN have given him the unique ability to understand multiple sides of the healthcare challenge: as a nurse, a patient and as part of the healthcare landscape.

"I have always had a passion for the medical field," he said. "I worked professionally for Johnson & Johnson before entering the nursing profession, and one of the many things I admire about the company are the values outlined in our Credo. The Credo is the values that guide Johnson & Johnson's decision making, challenging us to put the needs and well-being of the people we serve first."

Gora also had the opportunity to cultivate his nursing experience through his work with Operation Smile, a medical mission charity dedicated to providing reconstructive surgery to children around the world who suffer from facial deformities like cleft lip or cleft palate. Over a 15 year period, Gora said he had the privilege of supporting



**"THE SEEDS OF MY PASSION AROUND NURSING WERE REALLY SOWN 20 YEARS BEFORE THEY MATURED INTO MY DECISION TO BECOME A REGISTERED NURSE."**

Jeff Gora

Jeff Gora, pictured in front of Johnson & Johnson's Operation Smile display at the organization's headquarters in New Brunswick, N.J.

this endeavor by serving on 10 different medical missions to the Philippines, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay and China.

"During this time, I met some truly amazing and inspirational people who worked in all aspects of pediatrics – most notably pediatric critical care nurses," he said. "The seeds of my passion around nursing were really sown 20 years before they matured into my decision to become a registered nurse."

Gora lives in northern New Jersey with his wife, Jaime, who is also a nurse, and their four children. Off the clock, Gora enjoys cooking and playing music, specifically guitar and piano. "I was on the '28-year plan' when it came to completing my bachelor's degree," he said.



# OPEN ITEMS

## Leila Banihani, BSBA '12

Leila Banihani's career was progressing rapidly – that is, until an economic downturn pitted her work experience against competition from degreed job seekers.

Banihani had advanced in her career on the merits of her job performance and professional accomplishments. During a 10-year period beginning in the late 1990s, she progressed from an executive assistant position for an energy consulting firm, to the director of operations for the North American arm of a global real estate company.

"During the economic downturn in 2008, our company went bankrupt, so I was left to compete for job openings against many, many others in the same job market," said Banihani, vice president of Operations for CMC Energy Services, Inc., a woman-owned and operated national provider of energy efficiency and conservation services. "Lacking a college degree put me at a disadvantage, reducing my opportunities. I had the experience and I was capable, but without possessing a college degree it was challenging to compete with those who did."

As soon as Banihani regained her career footing, she promised herself that she would complete her bachelor's degree.

"Much of my education has come from hands-on experiences, but completing my degree was always an open item on my to-do list," said the 2012 Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA) degree in Human Resources/Organizational Management alum. "I have had much success and, like everyone else, some

setbacks professionally. However, a degree creates a solid foundation on which to build on your successes. The University's process, content and curriculum provided me with an intensive academic experience and equipped me with the critical knowledge base and credentials to advance."

During Banihani's search for an institution in which to finish her degree, the University emerged as a good fit.

**"THE UNIVERSITY HAD THE COURSES I WANTED, A REPUTATION AS AN EXCELLENT ACADEMIC RESOURCE AND THE CONVENIENCE OF AN ONLINE PROGRAM THAT MADE EARNING A DEGREE MANAGEABLE DURING A TIME WHEN I WAS JUGGLING A GROWING FAMILY AND A CAREER."**

Leila Banihani

"The University had the courses I wanted, a reputation as an excellent academic resource and the convenience of an online program that made earning a degree manageable during a time when I was juggling a growing family and a career. My career has always been focused on getting things done efficiently and effectively, therefore the degree concentration in organizational management helped me foster relationships with the people who work with me to ensure that our deliverables are on time and on budget. The program also taught me a great deal about running a business, which has helped

define the direction of my career. I am passionate about operations and my course work helped me focus that passion into success."

In her position at CMC Energy Services, Banihani develops, implements and administers business strategies and operations to ensure her company meets its goals and objectives. She leads all operational functions across seven states and more than 25 utility and government contracts with an emphasis on safety, quality, cost and timely delivery of CMC's services. She also plays an integral role in the growth of her company through management and expansion of the company's existing and new contracts.

While completing her course work, she said she greatly valued the flexibility of the online academic platform.

"Raising children and building a professional career was all part of my process, and the flexibility was the only way I could continue my college education," said Banihani, who also distinguished herself as a Sigma Beta Delta Honor Society inductee on the merit of her academic achievements.

"The professors and staff understand the TESU student. Their responsiveness and understanding kept me on track. The format of the online group

sessions supported my understanding of difficult subject matter by creating an open learning environment. The years of experience I already possessed were also taken into account, and I was able to utilize some of my professional life experience to earn credit through prior learning assessment."

Banihani described the value of her family's support as she met her academic goals.

"I love my 'Fam Squad' as I like to call them, and we are all there for each other. During the years that I took courses, my

children came to understand my aspirations and helped by giving me the space and time to complete my assignments," noted Banihani. "Witnessing the effort I dedicated to finishing my degree, my children were influenced to understand its importance. They've now adopted that mindset to their own personal goals. Today, my daughter is a graduate of the University of Delaware and works as an associate scientist for a pharmaceutical company; my son is a sophomore at Rowan University, still deciding on a major."



**"RAISING CHILDREN AND BUILDING A PROFESSIONAL CAREER WAS ALL PART OF MY PROCESS, AND THE FLEXIBILITY WAS THE ONLY WAY I COULD CONTINUE MY COLLEGE EDUCATION."**

Leila Banihani



# TO THE RESCUE

## Justin O'Connor, BS '16

Justin O'Connor fell into firefighting completely by chance. Now he recognizes it as a chance he'd take over and over again.

A U.S. Army veteran and National Guardsman, O'Connor always knew he was suited for a career in civil service.

He initially enrolled at Pennsylvania State University in State College, Pa., out of high school, with the intention of becoming a teacher upon graduation. It was there that O'Connor played football on the university's National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I team for three years before suffering an injury ending not only his time on the field, but also at the institution.

"I was at home at the beginning of the next school year and really didn't know what to do at that point," O'Connor said. "Next thing I knew, I saw an army recruiting video on television and it just clicked. When I signed up, it was one of the hardest decisions I've ever made and one of the most incredible decisions I've ever made."

O'Connor went on to serve in the Army with pride for the next four years, where, during that time, he was deployed to Kosovo for the United Nations Mission for nine months.

As he neared the end of his enlistment, he reflected on his next steps and decided to transition back to civilian life.

After separating, O'Connor took his first step toward finishing his degree by enrolling in a local university, using his GI Bill benefits to supplement his costs.

"Using my GI Bill to pay for school made things easy because I was only working part time," he said. "However, no sooner than I got back into my schooling I was deployed through the National Guard to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for about a year putting my life on hold once again."

With the promise of finishing his degree, if only for himself, O'Connor returned with a renewed sense of determination to get his educational pursuits back on track.

"Earning my degree was a promise I always made to myself that I wanted to finish," he explained. "It was also 100 percent for my family and more so, my wife. She was absolutely amazing and really encouraged me even in the times where I was frustrated. She was just a great source of encouragement and stability for me."

When O'Connor returned home, a family friend offered him a chance that would change the course of his life and career.

"A family friend of ours who was a local fire chief dropped off an application for me one day, telling me that he thought I'd make a good firefighter," he said. "I didn't think much of it at the time, but I filled it out, sent it back and admittedly forgot about it. Only after I received a letter to take the test weeks later and received my scores did the wheels start turning."

Soon after his fire testing had completed, O'Connor was hired by the Village of Ridgewood Fire Department in Bergen County, N.J., where he's been employed for the last 12 years. For the past three of those years, he has served as a lieutenant.

"From the moment I was hired, I found that it's been an amazing experience and truly an incredible job that suits who I am," O'Connor explained. "There's something different every day. I consider myself lucky to have found this profession and being able to become a fireman."

With his new career underway, O'Connor saw the benefits of supplementing his new career path with a completed degree.

"In our post-9/11 world, especially in my profession, incidents are ever changing," he said. "We're now not only dealing with putting out your everyday fire, we need to be concerned with bombings, mass shootings and medical calls, all while protecting ourselves."

While earning his degree, O'Connor admitted he saw the value applied to his job almost immediately.

"My degree definitely helped me to become more aware," he explained. "While law enforcement and firefighting are two separate entities, they're also very similar. With the knowledge I gained through earning my degree, this will not only benefit me in retirement, but will make me very marketable coming from a background as a fire lieutenant and being former military."

O'Connor completed his Bachelor of Science degree in homeland security and emergency preparedness in 2016 and credits the University's flexibility for assuring his goal remained within reach.

"I could open up a computer anywhere I was to complete my course work, and that was crucial for me," he said. "Even in the evening at the firehouse when I was done with my work, I could sit down and complete discussion forums that wouldn't take a lot of time. And, when I did get called away, it was never hard to come right back to it."

O'Connor and wife Lisa have three children: daughter Shannon (3) and twins Erin and James (1). The family resides in northeastern New Jersey.

"EARNING MY DEGREE WAS A PROMISE I ALWAYS MADE TO MYSELF THAT I WANTED TO FINISH."

Justin O'Connor





## Michael Balka

BSAST '14

### ALUMNI AMBASSADOR

Michael Balka graduated from Delta State University College of Business and Aviation in Cleveland, Miss., with a master's degree in commercial aviation.



## Rev. Timothy P. Carr

BA '10

Rev. Timothy P. Carr, priest of St. John's Episcopal Church, was named the Boonton, N.J., 'Citizen of the Year.' The award was presented to Carr in December 2017. Carr is involved in many of Boonton's community activities and various organizations.



## Todd Doney BA '01

Todd Doney, professor of fine arts at County College of Morris in Randolph, N.J., received second prize for his watercolor painting "Swamp, April 15, 7:16 p.m." at the Highlands Coalition Juried Art Exhibit at the Morris Museum in Morristown, N.J.



## Jorge Escobar

BSBA '98

Jorge Escobar was recognized as one of Hispanic IT Executive Council (HITEC)'s 100 Corporate Award Honorees. The award honors the top 100 most influential and notable Hispanic professionals in the information technology industry. Escobar currently serves as vice president of Administrative Services at San Jose City College (SJCC) in San Jose, Calif.



## Florence Francis BA '83

### ALUMNI AMBASSADOR

Florence Francis earned her master's in social work in 1996 and doctorate in social work from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, in 2016. For more than 27 years, Francis has worked for the state of New Jersey serving the community in child protective services, community mental health, parenting education and prison-based mental health services. She has also had a small private practice in central New Jersey. Francis is currently employed by the federal government, Department of State, providing clinical mental health services.

## Helen Johnson Giles BSN '15

Helen Johnson Giles was honored in December as an "exemplary public health nurse" by the N.J. Local Boards of Health Association. Giles is the Township of Flanders' (N.J.) public health nurse, who provides various health services to residents in surrounding towns, including screenings, consultations, referrals and clinics for all ages.



## Luong Huynh BA '11

Luong Huynh was recognized for his work with the American Red Cross, responding to hurricanes, tornadoes and other disasters. Huynh, who works out of the organization's Northwest Chapter, serves as a disaster program specialist, where he helps manage and coordinate response activities.



## Janice Kovach BSBA '01

Janice Kovach was named vice president of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities. Kovach, who has served as the mayor of Clinton, N.J., since 2012, will help lead the organization and the interests of its 565 municipal governments.



## Ryan Nabors MSM '13

### ALUMNI AMBASSADOR

Ryan Nabors started a position with WestCare Foundation, assigned to a program called WAServes. WAServes works with transitioning military members, active military and veterans to match their needs to services available through its providers within the organization. In addition, Washington State Gov. Jay Inslee appointed Nabors to a second term on the State Independent Living Council where he serves as the legislative chair.



## Donald Prather BSAST '08

Donald Prather serves as technical services manager of the Air Conditioning Contractors of America (ACCA). He has been developing standards-based training materials for heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration (HVACR) technicians, contractors, code officials and instructors. The latest offering, *Maria's Restaurant Technician's Guide and Workbook* covers the HVACR design and equipment selection process for a typical strip mall restaurant.



## Keith Raymond BSBA '98

Keith Raymond was elected to the County College of Morris (N.J.) Board of Trustees in November. Raymond serves as a sales executive at Kyriba Corporation based in New York, N.Y.



## Lou Sager AA '05, BA '07

Lou Sager was named police chief of Montgomery Police Department in Minnesota in January. Sager spent the previous year as Lac Qui Parle County Sheriff and, prior to that, served 25 years as a federal agent.

## ChiQuita Singletary

AA '09, BA '17

ChiQuita Singletary was promoted to supervisor at Verizon Communications. She is currently pursuing a Master of Arts degree in organizational leadership at Strayer University.



## Dare Summers BA '06

### ALUMNI AMBASSADOR

Dare Summers was featured in an article in the Tampa, Fla., trilingual newspaper, *La Gaceta*, highlighting his interests in literature. Summers, a four-year U.S. Navy veteran, spent his career postmilitary working in the pharmaceutical sales industry before retiring. Upon retirement, Summers worked as a tour guide for West Point Tours giving tours to visitors at the United States Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., and as a volunteer at the American Museum of Science and Energy in Oak Ridge, Tenn.

### ALUMNI AMBASSADOR

To learn more about the Alumni Ambassador program at Thomas Edison State University, please visit [www.tesu.edu/ambassador](http://www.tesu.edu/ambassador).

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

Alumni Facebook Group: [www.tesu.edu/FacebookGroup](http://www.tesu.edu/FacebookGroup)

Student and Alumni LinkedIn Group: [www.tesu.edu/LinkedInGroup](http://www.tesu.edu/LinkedInGroup)

Alumnifire: [tesu.alumnifire.com](http://tesu.alumnifire.com)

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THOMAS EDISON STATE UNIVERSITY  
INVENTION EDITOR  
111 W. STATE ST.  
TRENTON, NJ 08608

or [Invention@tesu.edu](mailto:Invention@tesu.edu)







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