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CELEBRATING THE PAST, EMBRACING THE FUTURE

In 2021, TTUHSC El Paso celebrates the Hunt School of Nursing and the immeasurable contributions it’s made to higher education and health care in the Borderland.

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NEW NORMAL

TTUHSC El Paso students and faculty turn challenges into opportunities as the COVID-19 pandemic surges on.

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CHANGING THE COURSE:
CERVICAL CANCER PREVENTION

Faculty and staff at TTUHSC El Paso use health education to reduce cancer risk in Hispanic populations.

ON THE COVER:

Since 2011, The Hunt School of Nursing has educated more than 800 nurses, our community’s trusted heroes. From the treatment of everyday illnesses, to serving the Borderland during a global pandemic, our students and faculty are El Paso Strong.

Photography by Tommie Morelos

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A Timely Milestone

As we begin a new year, I’ve reflected on 2020 and our extraordinary efforts to keep our campus, colleagues and loved ones safe during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Navigating difficult circumstances presented challenges, but everyone at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso – our students, staff and faculty – found ways to continue educating talented health care professionals while caring for the Borderland in times of need.

This year we celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the Hunt School of Nursing. It seems only fitting since our nurses and nursing students bravely faced many challenges during the pandemic. Like many trusted health care heroes who came before them, our nursing students made their mark on our community. I could not be more proud of their commitment to successfully complete their education while providing outstanding care to patients in our community.

When the Hunt School of Nursing was established 10 years ago, our goal was to ease a critical shortage of nurses in the Paso del Norte region. In the years since, we’ve succeeded by educating many of the talented nurses working in local hospitals today and providing educational opportunities to nurses in the Borderland.

The TTUHSC El Paso Alumni & Friends Spring/Summer 2021 edition celebrates the Hunt School of Nursing’s impact on our community over the past decade. In its pages you’ll read more about the people at the very heart of the nursing school – from faculty dedicated to creating positive change, to students who are passionate about serving the Borderland.

Looking toward a brighter future for the new year, with the community by our side, we will lift our health care heroes up and support them as they fulfill the impactful mission of our university.

“Like many trusted health care heroes who came before them, our nursing students made their mark on our community. I could not be more proud of their commitment to successfully complete their education while providing outstanding care to patients in our community.”

Richard Lange, M.D., M.B.A.
Rick and Ginger Francis Endowed President
Historically underserved, El Paso has faced community-wide health care shortages for years. Ten years ago, nurses—often referred to as the backbone of health care teams—were especially needed as the city faced a 40% shortage when compared to nationwide averages.

Like the rest of the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso campus, the Hunt School of Nursing’s beginnings are rooted in philanthropy and a collective mission to provide bright futures for soon-to-be health care heroes and Borderland residents.

Understanding the substantial impact a nursing school on the TTUHSC El Paso campus would have on the community, the Woody and Gayle Hunt Family Foundation began...
the important work to come by donating $10 million to establish the school of nursing in El Paso. Since establishing their foundation in 1987, Chairman Woody L. Hunt and his family have made it their mission to improve the quality of life in the Borderplex. Their generous gift became a historic moment not only for TTUHSC El Paso, but for the Hunt family, as the school would be named after Woody’s wife and the foundation’s vice president, Gayle Greve Hunt.

Ten years after seating an inaugural class of 38 students in 2011, the Hunt School of Nursing has accomplished great achievements and overcome challenging moments. From implementing its distinct academic programs and educating more than 800 nurses, to being a source of resilience during tragic and unexpected occasions, the school – and its leaders – have shown that this first decade is just the beginning. This feature in our special edition of TTUHSC El Paso Alumni & Friends is a look at the people, programs and accolades that have shaped the Hunt School of Nursing to be a leading provider of higher education in our region.

A decade after the establishment of the Hunt School of Nursing, El Paso now faces a 20% shortage of nurses, which speaks to the accomplishments of the school’s leadership, students and alumni. Those accomplishments, however, are more than a number – they’re reflected in the lives changed, dreams realized and the influence of younger generations of students across the Borderland for years to come.
Since opening in 2011, 90% of the Hunt School of Nursing’s 824 graduates have stayed in the area, reducing the local nursing shortage from 40% to 20% compared to the national average.

Reducing the shortage in the Borderland is a primary goal of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso, but it’s also a personal mission for many students, current and former.

James Parker, R.N., an acute dialysis nurse at DaVita Kidney Care and a cardiovascular intensive care unit nurse at Del Sol Medical Center, was stationed at Biggs Army Airfield in Fort Bliss in 2012. After leaving the service, he enrolled at the Hunt School of Nursing and graduated in 2018, all while he and his family fell in love with El Paso.

“Many of my fellow nurses are natives of El Paso or Ciudad Juárez with strong family ties. They don’t wish to leave, but there’s also a growing number of nurses who choose to make El Paso home,” Parker said. “El Paso has a strong need for nurses willing to serve the community – I’m seeing that every day with the committed nurses I work with. I believe we’re making a difference.”

More will join the workforce soon, as 75% of current Hunt School of Nursing students are El Paso natives, including John Kirtley. After he graduates from the Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing program in May, he plans on working in the city, which is crucial due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its local impact.

“It’s our responsibility to relieve the current nurses – give them a break to relax and come back,” Kirtley said. “I’m definitely excited to help the community become healthier and stronger. In the last two years we’ve been hit with a lot, between the Aug. 3 shooting and COVID-19. Right now, as health care providers, we’re a symbol of El Paso Strong.”
The Hunt School of Nursing has multiple partnerships with local and state education leaders to make it easier for future nursing students to enroll.

In partnership with El Paso Community College, as well as Brookhaven Community College and Mountain View Community College in Dallas County, the Hunt School of Nursing has created a concurrent enrollment Bachelor of Science in Nursing (B.S.N.) pipeline. The agreement between the schools allows students to transition to the Hunt School of Nursing’s R.N. to B.S.N. program upon completion of an Associate Degree in Nursing program at either school.

Locally, school districts participate in the Hunt School of Nursing’s early-admission program, which creates a clear path for area students to attend the nursing school and receive their B.S.N. just 16 months after high school graduation. The program is currently available to students at Bel Air High School, Franklin High School and Maxine Silva Health Magnet High School.

Currently, more than 75% of Hunt School of Nursing students are from El Paso County, and an estimated 90% of graduates remain in the region to practice, fulfilling TTUHSC El Paso’s mission of creating more educational opportunities for Borderland residents.

2012
Jeanne Novotny, Ph.D., R.N., is appointed founding dean of the Hunt School of Nursing.

2013
The Hunt School of Nursing receives a five-year full accreditation for its baccalaureate degree program from the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE).
Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso is proud of the role we’ve played in preparing the next generation of nurses for the past decade. During National Nurses Week in May 2020, TTUHSC El Paso announced a $650,000 grant from the Helene Fuld Health Trust to establish the first-ever scholarship endowment for the Hunt School of Nursing. Funds from the grant will be used to support current-use scholarships to make an immediate impact, and to create a permanent endowment for future generations of students enrolled in the school’s Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing (B.S.N.) program.

The $650,000 grant is highly competitive among nursing schools across the U.S. Currently, the Hunt School of Nursing is the only recipient in the region to receive a grant from the Helene Fuld Health Trust.

According to Hunt School of Nursing Dean Stephanie Woods, Ph.D., R.N., socioeconomic factors impact student success just as much as GPAs and exam scores, and scholarships both reduce the risk of academic failure and allow the school to extend students a financial lifeline.

A majority of students rely on financial aid to complete nursing school, including Rachel Silver, a Hunt School of Nursing alumna who graduated from the school’s Accelerated B.S.N. program in May 2020.

“It would’ve been much more difficult for me to continue my studies without scholarship support because I would’ve had to find a job to make ends meet – that’s highly discouraged because of the program’s rigorous academics and clinical hours,” Silver said. “I hope to make a difference as a nurse by bringing a little bit of light to someone’s day, just a small impact that can make them feel better and give hope when needed.”

The state of Texas is projected to face a shortfall of nearly 16,000 registered nurses by 2030, according to a 2017 report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. An aging baby boomer population, increasing rates of health issues such as obesity and Type 2 diabetes, as well as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, are major drivers of the nationwide demand for nurses.

The Helene Fuld Health Trust is the largest charitable trust in the nation devoted exclusively to supporting student nurses and nursing education. Thanks to the trust’s generous donation, the endowment will keep talented students on track, and allow the Hunt School of Nursing to continue educating nurses for El Paso.
From hospitals to physicians’ private practices, health care would not be of the highest standard without nurses, who are considered trusted heroes.

In 2011, following a $10 million donation from the Hunt Family Foundation, the Hunt School of Nursing officially opened its doors to future generations of nurses who would change the scope of health care and ease critical nursing shortages in the region.

The Hunt School of Nursing features three degree programs, including the Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing, R.N. to B.S.N., and the Master of Science in Nursing.

Students in the Accelerated B.S.N. program take up to 17 credit hours per semester for four successive semesters.

The rigorous program allows students to graduate in just 16 months and is the only accelerated program of its kind in the region.

With the goal of preparing students to go straight into the workforce after graduation and passing of the NCLEX, the school’s curriculum includes cross-disciplinary collaboration, preparing its students to work in clinical teams.

The school also has partnerships with every hospital in the El Paso community, which includes both clinical rotation opportunities and job placements post-graduation.

In the past two years, Hunt School of Nursing students have had more than the usual experience while attending clinical rotations in local hospitals. They were on duty in emergency departments on Aug. 3, 2019, when a gunman killed 23 people and wounded nearly two dozen at an El Paso Walmart.

Then in spring 2020, nursing students began serving on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic, caring for patients in hospitals across the city.

The Hunt School of Nursing’s curriculum and unique programming has prepared more than 800 graduates to date for the important job of being a nurse and trusted hero, whether helping to treat everyday illnesses or battling a health crisis with compassion and care.
LIGHTING THE WAY

Every year, with help from community partners, Hunt School of Nursing students are awarded life-changing opportunities that give their careers a successful start. In 2019 and 2020, local organizations partnered with TTUHSC El Paso in support of the Hunt School of Nursing – all in anticipation of the school’s 10-year anniversary.

CASA NISSAN

In July 2020, Hunt School of Nursing student Emmanuel Muniz was chosen to receive a complimentary one-year lease of a 2020 Nissan Kicks crossover SUV from Casa Nissan. The lease also came with basic maintenance services to keep Muniz and his young family safe on the road.

The use of the vehicle came at a perfect time for Muniz. After selling his own car to help pay bills, he struggled to focus on his studies with the constant worry of leaving his wife with their one unreliable vehicle while she was pregnant with their now-infant daughter.

Casa Ford Lincoln Nissan general manager Ronnie Lowenfield is a member of the TTUHSC El Paso President’s Development Council.

GECU

In May 2019, GECU announced a gift of $5,000 to go toward scholarships for Hunt School of Nursing students.

“We are so grateful to support future health care heroes and be a part of the incredible work and impact that TTUHSC El Paso is making in our community,” said Crystal Long, president and CEO of GECU. “We’re proud to partner with universities that believe in the value of education.”

WELLS FARGO

In April 2020, TTUHSC El Paso officials announced a $50,000 grant from the Wells Fargo Foundation that provides a safety net for nursing students facing financial challenges and unforeseen circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. TTUHSC El Paso leveraged the funds from Wells Fargo to support students through partnerships with Project ARRIBA and Workforce Solutions Borderplex.

The generous grant helps students attending the Hunt School of Nursing achieve their dreams of graduating and entering the workforce as soon as possible.

2015

The Helix Garden, designed by artists Elizabeth Billings and Andrea Wasserman, is unveiled in front of the Hunt School of Nursing building.

2018

The Hunt School of Nursing welcomes its first class of M.S.N. students.

2018

In June, the Hunt School of Nursing's undergraduate programs receive accreditation for a 10-year term from the CCNE.
On July 31, TTUHSC El Paso welcomes Stephanie Woods, Ph.D., R.N., as the new dean of the Hunt School of Nursing.

In partnership with the Hunt School of Nursing and El Paso Community College, Franklin High School begins offering an early-admission nursing program to its students. In 2019, the program is expanded to students at Maxine Silva Health Magnet High School and Bel Air High School.

Desert Imaging announced the creation of a new $30,000 nursing student endowment during a special presentation in October 2020.

The Desert Imaging Nursing Student Endowment was created with a $25,000 gift from the El Paso company, beginning with a $5,000 installment, which was matched on El Paso Giving Day.

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In fall 2020, Sunflower Bank helped ensure incoming students from the Hunt School of Nursing received their white coats at no expense.

The community partner sponsored 20 white coats and stethoscopes for the Sept. 4 ceremony. Their in-house mortgage company, Guardian Mortgage, matched the gift and sponsored another 20 white coats and stethoscopes for the ceremony, which honored 76 students from the class of 2021 as they entered the nursing profession.

A $20,000 grant awarded in spring 2020 by the AT&T Foundation provided much-needed relief for Hunt School of Nursing undergraduate students amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The gift helped students unable to meet immediate, essential expenses due to temporary hardship or unforeseen emergencies related to the pandemic. Some undergraduate nursing students or their family members lost income after being laid off or furloughed from part-time or full-time jobs. Others also faced unexpected childcare expenses due to school closures.

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In 2020, The Hunt School of Nursing became synonymous with the DAISY Award for Extraordinary Nurses in Training.

The prestigious award, presented by The DAISY Foundation, was bestowed upon the Spring 2020 graduating class in May, as well as a second-year student in July.

The DAISY Foundation was created to honor and celebrate the care and compassion of direct care nurses, nursing faculty and nursing students.

The Spring 2020 graduating class was honored for their important roles in local hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic. All 86 members of the Class of 2020 individually completed the 1,008 clinical rotation hours necessary to complete their degree programs, despite challenges presented by the pandemic’s impact. Additionally, the Fall 2020 graduating class received the DAISY Team Award for their bravery in patient care during the pandemic.

Jenifer Reyes, a second-year nursing student, received the award for saving the life of a woman who was choking at a local Village Inn restaurant in March 2020.

“The color was already leaving her face – I could see she wasn’t breathing,” Reyes said. “I told her I was going to do the Heimlich, then stood behind her to begin. I wasn’t successful right away, but I kept trying. Finally, I heard her breathe. It just came so naturally – it was shocking because everyone said I looked calm, but my head was racing. Prior to this incident I questioned whether nursing was the profession for me, but after this situation, I knew I found my calling.”

In 2019, graduating students from the Hunt School of Nursing received the award after caring for patients following the Aug. 3 mass shooting at an El Paso Walmart. The DAISY Award is not only an honor for the school, but showcases our students’ greatest strengths: resilience, and the ability to quickly put their skills into action for the El Paso community.
CHANGE-MAKERS

HUNT SCHOOL OF NURSING DONORS ADVANCE THE UNIVERSITY’S VISION OF IMPROVING HEALTH CARE AND EDUCATION FOR THE PASO DEL NORTE REGION

“El Paso’s health care excellence is a communal effort. Desert Imaging supports the Hunt School of Nursing because we believe in the power of partnership in fostering compassionate, quality care.”

RAUL J. ARIZPE
President of Desert Imaging

“I choose to give because if not for financial aid and scholarships, many of the Hunt School of Nursing’s talented students would not have an opportunity to pursue their dreams.”

RHONDA D. NEWSOME, M.S.N., R.N.
Instructor, Hunt School of Nursing

2019

El Paso County sees a 31% increase in the number of registered nurses throughout the region, decreasing the local nursing shortage to 20%.

2020

TTUHSC El Paso celebrates the Year of the Nurse alongside the World Health Organization by partnering with local organizations to provide scholarships and other opportunities for nursing students.
In 2010, the Hunt School of Nursing was established at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso to counteract a long-term shortage of nurses in the medically underserved Borderland. With the goal of educating future generations of nurses who would remain in the region, the school seated its first class in 2011.

One of the Hunt School of Nursing’s longest-serving employees, Manny Santa Cruz, D.N.P., R.N., M.B.A., assistant dean, R.N. to B.S.N. Track, joined the faculty in 2014 ready to aid the school’s mission.

“When I arrived, we were only admitting 40 students per cohort; we are now at 80 students,” Santa Cruz said. “For the longest time, the El Paso community didn’t know we had a nursing program – that has changed dramatically. Added exposure and Dean Stephanie Woods’ continuous involvement in the community has helped our nursing program become a powerhouse in El Paso.”

The Hunt School of Nursing continues preparing students to become culturally competent and empathetic nurses in part by incorporating interdisciplinary teamwork in its curriculum and providing academic support that feels like family. The nursing school also offers opportunities for local and state community colleges and local high school students.

“The Hunt School of Nursing is known for innovation, thinking outside the box and providing unique opportunities for all students,” Santa Cruz said.

A new decade of educating nurses has Santa Cruz hoping that this innovation and growing involvement in El Paso will lead the nursing school to expand both student cohorts and academic programs.

“In the future, I hope to see 100 or more students per cohort in the B.S.N. program, while also working toward establishing a strong graduate program offering multiple programs in leadership, clinical expertise and research aligned with a doctoral program.”

In May, the Hunt School of Nursing establishes its first scholarship endowment, thanks to a generous grant from the Helene Fuld Health Trust.

Once more, students from the Hunt School of Nursing receive a DAISY Award in Training for serving on the front lines during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Spring Class of 2020 receive the award during a virtual commencement ceremony in May.
LETTER FROM THE DEAN:
A REFLECTION ON THE HUNT SCHOOL OF NURSING’S LEGACY

It wasn’t long ago I stepped onto the TTUHSC El Paso campus for my first day as dean of the Hunt School of Nursing. Seven years earlier, in 2011, 38 future nurses did the same when the school first opened its doors. It was an exciting moment in our university’s history – opening a nursing school gave us the opportunity to change the lives of many in our community. But there was also plenty of work to be done.

Then and now, there was a compelling case for opening the nursing school. Historically, the Borderland had 40% less nurses in the region when compared to the national average. This shortage continues today, and will worsen over the next 10 years. It’s the mission of our faculty and staff to educate the health care heroes we need today and into the future.

In the past 10 years, the Hunt School of Nursing has helped dreams become reality, created livelihoods for hometown students and helped parents set examples for their children. We’ve educated first-generation college students, students who followed in the footsteps of their families, and students who decided, after careers in other fields, that nursing was their true calling.

HOWEVER, WE’VE ALSO FACED CHALLENGES.

On Aug. 3, 2019, our nursing students jumped into action as victims of one of the worst mass shootings in U.S. history were rushed into El Paso emergency rooms. It was a moment in my career I will never forget, not knowing that soon after, our students would face an unprecedented global health crisis.

As COVID-19 reached El Paso, I knew our students and faculty were about to experience a component of their education and careers that would put their skills to the ultimate test.

It came as no surprise that they overcame their fears with determination, perseverance and courage. Our students amazed us with their resolve to become nurses during a worldwide pandemic. No words are adequate enough to express my pride in them.

Our students have soldiered on, partnering with their mentors in overwhelmed hospitals and volunteering to vaccinate their peers and faculty across the TTUHSC El Paso campus. In these ways, our students demonstrate their value to the community which they care for. They step up instead of backing down, no matter the challenges they face.

The Hunt School of Nursing owes so much to the stakeholders and philanthropists who made these first 10 years possible – this community invests in its citizens. Nursing students often struggle to complete their program of study – not due to a lack of academic ability, but rather the challenge of working while in school. Raising money for student scholarships has been my primary aim, and our community has responded.

As we envision our future, it’s my commitment to continue working with our community to educate nurses. We’ll grow undergraduate and graduate programs, develop an honors program, and facilitate pathways and create support systems so students can achieve their dreams.

In 2021, we celebrate every accomplishment, triumph and lesson we’ve learned in the past 10 years. It’s a celebration not only of a community that’s supported us along the way, but of every person who has walked into the Hunt School of Nursing as a student and walked out as a health care hero.

STEPHANIE L. WOODS, Ph.D, R.N.
Dean and Professor
For some, being a nurse is a lifelong dream. For others, it’s a passion that comes along unexpectedly. For Ruth Salais, a 2014 graduate of the Hunt School of Nursing, the path to nursing involved her children, her desire to find a fulfilling career and a special professor who inspired her journey.

“I had recently moved back to El Paso from Michigan and needed to stand on my own two feet for my kids. So, I decided to go back to school because I needed to begin somewhere,” said Salais.

It was in her first biology class at El Paso Community College where she was introduced to the potential of being a nurse – it came from educator Nic Lannutti, a former professor at both the community college and the University of Texas at El Paso. Lannutti died in April 2020 from complications of COVID-19, which Salais said was a great loss to the community. “He always talked about nursing and how biology was the foundation of everything, and it just became the path I decided to take. He was the most amazing educator,” she said.

Inspired by her new-found goal and excited to be a part of something new, she chose to begin her studies at the Hunt School of Nursing not long after the school opened. Through the ups and downs of nursing school, Salais said her biggest takeaways were the friendships she made with students.

“Nursing school is hard, and it made us all band together. The friends I made in nursing school are my friends today, and I can probably say they’re my friends for life,” said Salais.

A former nurse at The Hospitals of Providence East Campus, Salais faced what many health care heroes experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic: exhaustion, but a will to continue providing compassionate care and advocating for patients.

“As a nurse, you see everything patients are going through. Right now, many of them are alone, but they have us, so it’s nice to be that sense of comfort. You’re also nursing families over the phone, and it puts things in perspective – it’s more emotional, but it’s also rewarding,” said Salais.

Through the many triumphs of her career so far, Salais said the best part of her job is seeing former patients healed and happy. One patient who was very ill and anxious in the hospital left a lasting impression.

About a month after she cared for the patient, she got an unexpected visit at work. “We were having a terrible day, and he shows up to the nursing station with his wife, who had knit a scarf and a hat for me. There was all this chaos around me, and time just froze. Because that’s time they took out of their own lives to do that for me. Those are my triumphs. I’ll take that over everything.”

Today, Salais is taking on new and exciting challenges. She started a job as a school nurse for the Socorro Independent School District and is working toward her master’s degree from Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center in Lubbock. Taking things one day at a time and graduating from the program is her short-term goal. Her long-term goal involves caring for and educating older El Pasoans about health care.

“I would love to focus on our elderly and be part of creating something amazing for them,” Salais said. “It was never my plan to become a nurse, but I love it. This is what I was born to do.”
Whether finding the “secret” coffee and snack room, or spending late nights studying with his peers, Enrique Ortiz’s time at the Hunt School of Nursing was memorable, and it catapulted him to a successful health care career.

“Since I was a child, I knew I wanted to pursue a career where I’d have a positive impact on others,” Ortiz said. “I never thought I’d do nursing until I was exposed to it and saw how amazing nurses are.”

For several years, Ortiz worked as a critical care technician in the intensive care unit of a San Antonio hospital. It was there he set a goal of providing a higher level of patient care, first by becoming a registered nurse, with future plans of becoming a certified registered nurse anesthetist.

Today, Ortiz is a cardiovascular intensive care unit R.N. at Methodist Hospital in San Antonio. He is also a CVICU/transplant intensive care unit R.N. at University Health System. Before starting his career, he attended the Hunt School of Nursing in his hometown of El Paso.

“The Hunt School of Nursing was the only school that made the application process personal,” Ortiz remembered. “All my questions were answered, and if the admissions office could allocate that much quality to their admissions process, I knew the instructors would do the same with curriculum. I was correct.”

The school’s curriculum, including clinical rotations, prepared Ortiz and his peers for real-life scenarios they’d face once becoming nurses, especially now, as they’re serving during a pandemic. One challenge, he said, was the feeling of stage fright when speaking to patients and their families. However, using the experience he gained during rotations, he adapted to new environments and had quality conversations with his patients.

His educational experiences also prepared him for triumphs and memorable moments.

“It never fails to empower me when I advocate for my patients and have a positive impact on their care,” Ortiz said. “When patients are in the hospital, they’re typically in a vulnerable state, which is why gaining their trust is always an achievement.”

He said his most triumphant moment came the first time he assisted an open-heart surgery patient’s recovery. “I applied my knowledge of anatomy, physiology and pharmacology to safely meet the surgeon’s goals.”

As the Hunt School of Nursing celebrates its 10-year anniversary, Ortiz expects many more decades of success. “I’d like to see the Hunt School of Nursing continue to grow its graduate program and maintain their student-centered curriculum,” he said.

As for his own career, Ortiz’s future looks bright. He’s expanding his experience in the ICU while preparing for his long-term goal of becoming a CRNA. His childhood dream of making a positive impact has come true.

Hunt School of Nursing Alumnus Excels in the ICU

Graduated: Hunt School of Nursing, 2018
Hometown: El Paso, Texas
Cardiovascular Intensive Care Unit R.N., Methodist Hospital
CVICU/Transplant Intensive Care Unit R.N., University Health System (per diem)
San Antonio, Texas
With plans to be a social worker, Lacy Sexton graduated from the University of Central Missouri in 2014 with a Bachelor of Social Work.

“I originally went into social work with a focus on domestic violence,” Sexton said. “I wanted to work with women to empower and advocate for them.”

After moving to El Paso with her husband, Sexton had two life-altering experiences. In 2017, she was present for the birth of her first nephew, and shortly after, a close friend whom she supported during treatments died of breast cancer.

“That year changed my life,” Sexton said.

She decided to pursue a career in nursing by enrolling in the Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing program at the Hunt School of Nursing, with aspirations of becoming a labor and delivery nurse to continue supporting women.

The 16-month program meant rigorous coursework and clinical studies, but Sexton made time to take on a leadership role as a member of the Student Government Association. This led to one of her favorite memories from her time at our health sciences center: She met and shadowed Texas Tech University System Regent Ginger Kerrick during Kerrick’s visit to TTUHSC El Paso in October.

“She was so inspiring and encouraging,” Sexton said of Kerrick, an El Paso native and accomplished NASA scientist. “It was a dream to hear her speak and meet her face-to-face.”

As a recent graduate, Sexton was excited to return to her hometown to work as a labor and delivery nurse at Saint Luke’s Hospital of Kansas City. The 36-bed unit has a patient population that’s underserved and high-risk.

“I feel honored to work with, support and encourage women during the incredibly special and unique experience that is motherhood,” Sexton said. “A dream for the future is to become a certified nurse midwife to create meaningful relationships with patients while advocating for them during every step of pregnancy and birth.”
For Hunt School of Nursing student Crystal Apodaca, the path toward a nursing career was forged early. “My love for nursing started in elementary school,” said Apodaca. “I remember kids wanting to go with their parents for career day, and I would ask permission to spend the day with the school nurse.”

Her enthusiasm for health care continued into high school, when she moved from Las Vegas, Nevada, to El Paso to live with her grandparents. She attended the Center for Health Professions at Bel Air High School and earned her high school diploma while also becoming a licensed vocational nurse.

Over the past 10 years, Apodaca worked as an LVN and managed nurses and social workers at an insurance company. She currently works at Hueman People Solutions supporting human resources departments across the nation in finding suitable candidates for demanding health care positions.

Apodaca chose to apply for the Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing program at the Hunt School of Nursing because it fit her family’s needs, and she was impressed by the reputation of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso.

Her journey at TTUHSC El Paso began in January 2020 and was immediately transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic halfway through her first semester. “Attending classes remotely because of COVID-19 has had its challenges. It’s called for great discipline and time management,” said Apodaca. “I would identify myself as a hands-on learner and have been grateful for the opportunity to work in the ICU and emergency department alongside front-line workers at University Medical Center of El Paso during the pandemic.”

She has continued her studies during the pandemic after receiving financial aid from TTUHSC El Paso’s Student Frontline Emergency Fund and will graduate in May 2021. The Student Frontline Emergency Fund has been entirely supported by private donations from donors and corporate partners.

Apodaca is eager to continue her nursing education in the not-so-distant future, but is excited for the opportunity to pay it forward in the community, through patient care and advocacy. “I’ve found my calling in giving a voice to patients who are unable to advocate for themselves,” she said.

CRYSTAL APODACA, LVN

For Hunt School of Nursing student Crystal Apodaca, the path toward a nursing career was forged early.

“My love for nursing started in elementary school,” said Apodaca. “I remember kids wanting to go with their parents for career day, and I would ask permission to spend the day with the school nurse.”

Her enthusiasm for health care continued into high school, when she moved from Las Vegas, Nevada, to El Paso to live with her grandparents. She attended the Center for Health Professions at Bel Air High School and earned her high school diploma while also becoming a licensed vocational nurse.

Over the past 10 years, Apodaca worked as an LVN and managed nurses and social workers at an insurance company. She currently works at Hueman People Solutions supporting human resources departments across the nation in finding suitable candidates for demanding health care positions.

Apodaca chose to apply for the Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing program at the Hunt School of Nursing because it fit her family’s needs, and she was impressed by the reputation of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso.

Her journey at TTUHSC El Paso began in January 2020 and was immediately transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic halfway through her first semester. “Attending classes remotely because of COVID-19 has had its challenges. It’s called for great discipline and time management,” said Apodaca. “I would identify myself as a hands-on learner and have been grateful for the opportunity to work in the ICU and emergency department alongside front-line workers at University Medical Center of El Paso during the pandemic.”

She has continued her studies during the pandemic after receiving financial aid from TTUHSC El Paso’s Student Frontline Emergency Fund and will graduate in May 2021. The Student Frontline Emergency Fund has been entirely supported by private donations from donors and corporate partners.

Apodaca is eager to continue her nursing education in the not-so-distant future, but is excited for the opportunity to pay it forward in the community, through patient care and advocacy. “I’ve found my calling in giving a voice to patients who are unable to advocate for themselves,” she said.

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At Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso, public art installations add to the state-of-the-art design of our campus, welcoming those it educates and employs. Our latest addition to the TTUHSC El Paso campus, Medical Sciences Building II, showcases its own new installation, highlighting the beauty of the community that surrounds us.

MSB II, which will house the Woody L. Hunt School of Dental Medicine, features an extensive art piece by American artist Thomas H. Sayre. Titled “Between Earth and Sky,” the piece, which adorns the exterior of MSB II, is a reflection of human anatomy and medical sciences.

The installation covers a 15,000-square-foot site with a series of earth berms and 23 wind-activated hovering sculptures meant to symbolize the 23 chromosomes in the human body. Each sculpture features a unique pattern and hand-blown glass ball that illuminates at night. While a reflection of science and anatomy, “Between Earth and Sky” also embraces El Paso’s Southwest terrain and the passion, skills and experience applied to the health care profession, which is instilled in our TTUHSC El Paso students.

Interested in seeing “Between Earth and Sky” in person? Stop by the TTUHSC El Paso campus to get a closer look at all 23 one-of-a-kind sculptures.
On the one-year anniversary of the tragic Aug. 3 mass shooting at an El Paso Walmart, members of the TTUHSC El Paso community honored victims and their families by observing a moment of silence at precisely 10:39 a.m. On that day of remembrance, TTUHSC El Paso employees received free luminarias distributed by the Student Government Association to illuminate their homes as part of the “Together We Remember, Together We Heal” commemoration.

In 2020, Corazón de Oro, the Student Government Association’s annual fall service event, was spread over the course of four Saturdays in October. Students partnered with the El Pasoans Fighting Hunger Food Bank to distribute items to community members in need. In total, student volunteers from all schools at TTUHSC El Paso assisted with the distribution of 4,265 shopping carts of supplies by the end of the month.
In October, TTUHSC El Paso’s Care Van provided free primary and preventive health care and education, including COVID-19 safety precautions, to residents in the rural area of Sparks and neighboring colonias. Community members had their blood pressure, BMI, glucose and lipids checked while following COVID-19 safety protocols. Hand hygiene demonstrations were also given during this visit.

TTUHSC EL PASO CARE VAN VISIT

Student volunteers with the Foster School of Medicine’s Medical Student Run Clinic (MSRC) hand-made nearly 140 reusable cloth face masks during mask drives in July and August. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, MSRC visits were postponed throughout the summer; however, medical student volunteers made and distributed the masks as a way to remain committed to the underserved Sparks community, where the MSRC is located.

FOSTER SCHOOL OF MEDICINE STUDENT MASK DRIVE

Since December 2020, students from the Hunt School of Nursing and Foster School of Medicine have volunteered to administer the COVID-19 vaccine to more than 3,000 front-line health care professionals. In a testament to TTUHSC El Paso’s commitment to serving the community, students have dedicated their time to help vaccinate as many physicians, nurses and other health care heroes as possible, despite rigorous school schedules. To date, students are still administering the vaccine to El Pasoans in Phase I of the city’s rollout.

COVID-19 VACCINE DISTRIBUTION
In a symbol of solidarity, the El Paso community joined TTUHSC El Paso in a student-led vigil on June 25 to mark the one-month anniversary of George Floyd’s death. Our campus was decorated with gold luminarias and red lighting in honor of Floyd’s high school colors, and remained lighted for 8.46 days, symbolizing his struggle for life. TTUHSC El Paso supports the efforts of our future health care leaders who continue progressing toward genuine equality and systemic change.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, last July’s Summer Medical Camp – held annually by the Office of Admissions’ Outreach Programs – became a week-long, virtual camp, attended by 82 local high school students. After picking up materials and summer medical camp swag, students learned from guest speakers from several health care fields, participated in college preparation workshops and took virtual tours of the TTUHSC El Paso Laboratory Animal Resource Center.

During this year’s MLK Day of Service, more than 115 TTUHSC El Paso students volunteered at community service events throughout the region. Held annually, students organize community events benefiting the Borderland while addressing needs in underserved areas. This year, students hosted a drive-through food distribution in Montana Vista, offered a nutrition webinar for local high school students and taught children how to take care of themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students also helped senior citizens battle isolation during the pandemic through a pen pal program.
Now more than ever, support from the community plays a vital role in Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso’s mission of educating the next generation of health care heroes and providing world-class patient care to the Borderland. In 2020, generous donors supported multiple initiatives – from the university’s Student Frontline Emergency Fund, to patient services at the Texas Tech Physicians of El Paso Breast Care Center – that contribute to the health and well-being of our entire community.

Superior HealthPlan awarded a $2,000 grant to the Foster School of Medicine’s Medical Student Run Clinic (MSRC) to provide health care services for residents in the rural area of Sparks and neighboring colonias. The MSRC primarily serves underinsured and uninsured residents of Sparks, a community of about 7,000 in Far East El Paso County. Medical students, under the direction of volunteer faculty physicians, operate the clinic in the Socorro Ramirez Community Center, providing care for patients of all ages. Superior HealthPlan’s contribution will help provide free primary and preventive health care and education – including COVID-19 safety precautions – at the clinic and through the university’s mobile care unit.

The James A. “Buddy” Davidson Charitable Foundation awarded a $30,000 grant to the Texas Tech Physicians of El Paso Breast Care Center (BCC) to provide patient services, including screenings, oncology care kits and survivorship program services. The costs of breast cancer treatment can become a financial burden to patients and their families. The BCC, which operates in large part on private donations, offers free or reduced-cost services to low-income and underinsured patients to help alleviate the financial stress of a cancer diagnosis. The survivorship program is a free, holistic program that helps patients navigate life after remission.
PHILANTHROPY IN REVIEW

THE TRELLIS FOUNDATION

THE FORT BLISS SPOUSES’ ASSOCIATION

THE AT&T FOUNDATION

JPMORGAN CHASE & CO.

ROBERT E. AND EVELYN MCKEE FOUNDATION

EL PASO GIVING DAY
The Trellis Foundation awarded a $100,000 grant to the Hunt School of Nursing to support stipends for students in the Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing program. The funds are matched dollar-for-dollar by the Texas Workforce Commission’s Texas Industry Partnership program, administered through Workforce Solutions Borderplex. The stipend will be offered to at least 30 students with financial need who are in the final three semesters of the Accelerated B.S.N. program. The support from the Trellis Foundation and Texas Workforce Commission will help nursing students focus on their studies, instead of having to work extra hours in part-time or full-time jobs to make ends meet.

The AT&T Foundation awarded a $20,000 grant to the Hunt School of Nursing to help undergraduate students facing financial hardships due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The gift assists nursing students unable to meet immediate, essential expenses due to temporary hardship or unforeseen emergencies related to the pandemic. Some nursing students or their family members lost income after being laid off or furloughed, and these funds help them stay on track to complete their degrees on time. After graduation, many of these new nurses will remain in El Paso to serve our community, which faces a critical shortage of health care professionals.

The Fort Bliss Spouses’ Association awarded the Department of Pediatrics at TTUHSC El Paso a $3,000 grant for the “Supporting All-Star Moms” project. The project is working to improve breastfeeding rates for very low birth weight newborns admitted to El Paso Children’s Hospital’s neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). The Department of Pediatrics used the gift to produce a handbook for mothers of very low birth weight babies, who are often born prematurely. Breast milk has long been considered the ideal form of nutrition for all newborns by public health agencies and pediatric health organizations. Benefits include decreased rates of infection and allergies, and higher IQ in infants who are exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life.

The El Paso-based Robert E. and Evelyn McKeel Foundation, for the fourth consecutive year, has supported the TTUHSC El Paso Brain Bank, which collects, studies and distributes brain tissue to scientists who study mental disorders. In past years, the foundation gave $10,000 annually for general support of the Brain Bank, which has been crucial to operations. In 2020, the foundation donated $20,000. Half of the funds were used for general support, and the remaining $10,000 was used to purchase a second specialized freezer equipped to store additional brain donations that allow for the expansion of research breakthroughs in treatment and prevention of mental disorders.

In June, JPMorgan Chase & Co. announced a $5,000 contribution to TTUHSC El Paso’s Student Frontline Emergency Fund, which was created to assist TTUHSC El Paso students experiencing financial hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “JPMorgan Chase remains committed to helping the El Paso community. TTUHSC El Paso and our future health care heroes are an integral and growing part of the community, and we’re honored to help support them during this time of need and uncertainty,” said JPMorgan Chase Market Executive Ruben Hernandez.

Thanks to community supporters of TTUHSC El Paso, over $60,000 was raised during the fifth annual El Paso Giving Day, including $10,000 in matching funds from Walmart via the Paso del Norte Community Foundation. These generous gifts will support TTUHSC El Paso students as they focus on their studies, graduate on time and enter the workforce to care for patients. During El Paso Giving Day this year, 216 local organizations received more than 7,000 gifts totaling $1,915,572.
The challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic haven’t diminished the sense of excitement on campus – and across the city of El Paso – as TTUHSC El Paso prepares to make history by opening the first dental school in Texas in over 50 years.

The Hunt School of Dental Medicine and its clinical arm, the Texas Tech Dental Oral Health Clinic, are on schedule to open in summer 2021. Student applicant interviews began in September 2020 and continued through the winter.

Across the region and beyond, interest in the school is off the charts: Over 900 students applied and approximately 300 applicants were interviewed for the 40-seat class of 2025, said Dean Richard Black, D.D.S., M.S.

Because of the pandemic, applicants could choose from an on-campus, in-person interview with safety protocols, or a virtual interview. Those who chose in-person interviews were treated to the sight of shining new facilities, including the state-of-the-art Dental Learning Center and fabrication laboratory on the third floor of the new Medical Sciences Building II, where the Hunt School of Dental Medicine will be headquartered.

In mid-December, the school began sending offers of admission to selected applicants. Meanwhile, the recruitment of faculty has been underway. Dr. Black estimated the school will have hired 30 to 40 faculty in time for opening day.

Dr. Black said students will be taught to work with the latest technology to deliver rapid and high-quality patient care. It’s a concept known as “chairside dentistry” or “same-day dentistry,” where dentists use 3D modeling and computer-aided design and manufacturing (CAD/CAM) machines to rapidly fabricate dental appliances in-house.

“It’s a totally digital workflow,” Dr. Black explained during a recent virtual town hall meeting to update the community on the school’s progress. “We owe it to this dental class to teach them what a dentist will be doing in 2025 and beyond. With chairside CAD/CAM dentistry, students will learn to digitally scan for restorations, crowns, bridges and all the other materials used to fix a person’s teeth.”

El Paso oral surgeon Vernon Burke, D.M.D., M.D., FACS, of High Desert Oral and Facial Surgery, co-hosted the virtual town hall, which was broadcast from the Dental Learning Center.

Dr. Burke is one of many local dentists who have volunteered their time and energy to help ensure a successful launch of the school and its clinic. The dentists and other community supporters are members of the school’s booster organization, Friends of the Dental School.
Dr. Burke and other El Paso-area dentists assisted Dr. Black’s administrative team by helping interview the hundreds of applicants vying for a slot in the class of 2025. State law requires each entering class to be composed of at least 90% Texas residents, and the school has drawn the interest of many applicants from the Paso del Norte region.

“We’d love for a large number of students to be from El Paso and West Texas,” Dr. Burke said.

Like the Foster School of Medicine, the Hunt School of Dental Medicine will offer a curriculum that will train students to serve the needs of socially and culturally diverse communities, with a goal of eliminating health care disparities in the Borderland and beyond. As with the medical school, there will be a community-service and public health component to students’ education. And perhaps most appealing to dentists-in-training, there will be quick immersion into supervised clinical practice.

“Students will be working in the oral health clinic six weeks after they arrive on campus,” Dr. Black said. “Frankly, it will be some of the best dentistry in the country because of how well-supervised the students will be.”

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The Dental Learning Center is a state-of-the-art facility where students will learn to deliver high-quality care to future patients.

Dr. Richard Black (right) and Dr. Vernon Burke (left) hosted a virtual Friends of the Dental School event in December, giving the community a first look at the school's facilities.

Students will train on simulated dental manikins, which will help prepare them for patients in the public clinic.

Beginning in September, prospective students toured the Hunt School of Dental Medicine during their interviews.

The dental school has successfully met each of its milestones on its journey to welcome the inaugural class this summer. This couldn’t have been done without the tremendous support of the community. Many individuals, organizations and businesses have stepped forward to be a part of health care history in El Paso.

In July, at the groundbreaking for the oral health clinic, Dr. Burke’s practice, High Desert Oral and Facial Surgery, presented a gift of $70,000 in support of the clinic. Two surgical teaching suites will be named after the High Desert practice.

In the fall, Bank of America announced a gift of $50,000 to create a dental care suite for students to learn techniques, treatments and sensitivities for the care of special needs patients.

The U.S. division of Bien-Air, a Switzerland-based manufacturer of precision dental instruments, donated components for handpieces used for dental procedures. The equipment donation has an estimated value of $678,000.

At the clinic’s groundbreaking, Dr. Burke captured the essence of how community support for the school will pay off in the improved oral health of Paso del Norte residents of all ages.

“We’re excited that with our gift, dental students will see and feel the support of the El Paso dental community,” Dr. Burke said. “It’s also important the dental community feels connected to the dental school so students can rotate into local offices and one day open their own practice in El Paso.”

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The New Normal

TTUHSC El Paso students and faculty turn challenges into opportunities as the COVID-19 pandemic surges on

In March 2020, days after the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 were announced in El Paso, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso began adjusting classes for students and allowing employees to work from home to prevent transmission of the virus on campus.

“Everyone at TTUHSC El Paso stepped up and is doing a wonderful job,” said Paul E. Ogden, M.D., FACP, provost and vice president for Academic Affairs at TTUHSC El Paso. “Patients are still receiving the world-class patient care they can trust and rely on from Texas Tech Physicians of El Paso. The students and residents are observing COVID-19 safety rules, and we have not had significant on-the-job COVID-19 cases. I’m very proud of everyone.”

Some of those adjustments remain in place with curriculum at the Foster School of Medicine, Hunt School of Nursing and Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences.

All large-group classes have moved to online instruction, and face-to-face ethics and professionalism courses, as well as simulation sessions, are limited.

“Clinical education has continued,” Dr. Ogden said. “The students are playing a significant role helping in overwhelmed hospitals and are helping to man monitor stations in the emergency department. About 90-100% of classroom instruction is online, depending on the school.”

Curriculum for TTUHSC El Paso residents hasn’t changed, but a rise in COVID-19 hospitalizations in the fall led to challenges.

“We experienced challenges with the volume and seriousness of the illness in patients,” Dr. Ogden said. “Residents aren’t supposed to work more than 80 hours per week and have limits on the numbers of patients they care for. We’re trying to balance the needs of the hospital, and make sure that we don’t overwork and burn out the
residents. They’ve all stepped up and are doing a great job. We do offer mental wellness support for residents as well.”

A support system helps make sure students and residents succeed during difficult times.

TTUHSC El Paso officials meet with students regularly, and deans from each school also take the time to listen and help.

Additionally, the offices of Student Affairs and Student Services have ramped up the amount of counseling support for students to help them cope with stress and anything else they may be experiencing.

As for future TTUHSC El Paso students, changes have been made to ensure the recruitment process is safe and efficient. Recruitment is done online, but conducted in a way prospective students and residents can see the scope of programs TTUHSC El Paso has to offer.

Across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed our way of doing everyday things, some of which may last beyond its duration. “We’ll likely keep many of the modules created because of the pandemic and decrease the amount of face-to-face lectures once the pandemic is over,” Dr. Ogden said.

Despite it all, faculty and students at TTUHSC El Paso remain committed to education, with goals of providing and becoming the next generation of professionals to shape the future of health care.

Residents at TTUHSC El Paso adjusted to new methods of learning, while continuing their training and developing important skills.

TTUHSC El Paso family medicine residents practice osteopathic manipulative treatment during didactic skills sessions.
A smile, a hug, a workout at the gym, a gab session with friends, a meal with extended family. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only altered how the world works, but how it heals.

“Our traditional coping mechanisms have been impacted with social and physical isolation restrictions aimed at keeping our community safe during a public health crisis,” said Melanie Olivas Longhurst, Ph.D., M.Ed., assistant professor, licensed clinical psychologist, and psychology training director in the Department of Psychiatry at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso.

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. The response to stress during the COVID-19 pandemic is dependent on social support, health and emotional histories, the community and many other factors. Public health actions, such as social distancing, can make people feel isolated and lonely, and can increase stress and anxiety.

Front-line health care professionals at the center of the pandemic are a group hardest hit by stress. The Department of Psychiatry, in an initiative led by Dr. Longhurst, has worked since spring 2020 to aid first responders, TTUHSC El Paso staff, Texas Tech Physicians of El Paso staff, residents and students with their mental well-being during the prolonged health crisis.

This includes launching a virtual series, “Sustaining Wellness During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” over Webex, which provides support and coping tips. The sessions aren’t considered psychotherapy, but are aimed at providing appropriate coping techniques for the COVID-19 era.

The department also offers student, employee and resident assistance programs which provide confidential, on-site counseling services to these groups and their immediate family members. Similar wellness programs are offered to faculty through the Office of Faculty Affairs.

Work to aid first responders hasn’t stopped there.

In November, The Meadows Foundation awarded a COVID-19 emergency grant of $160,000 to TTUHSC El Paso to provide mental health support to front-line health care professionals at TTP El Paso, University Medical Center of El Paso, El Paso Children’s Hospital and The Hospitals of Providence, as well as students and residents from TTUHSC El Paso. This includes a relaxing
wellness tent where health care professionals can recharge and devote a few minutes of self-care during busy days in hospitals and clinics.

The grant will allow for individualized services – including virtual wellness support sessions and a library of videos providing wellness tips – as well as group sessions, all with help from community partners, including Emergence Health Network. These sessions will give health care professionals the opportunity to share their experiences and learn about coping mechanisms.

“Front-line health care professionals at TTUHSC El Paso have borne the brunt of COVID’s devastation for almost a year,” said Peter M. Miller, president and CEO of the Meadows Foundation. “Not surprisingly, it has taken an enormous toll on mental health and well-being. We’re honored to provide this grant in gratitude for their care of our community.”

The grant also gave TTUHSC El Paso the opportunity to collaborate with the community by offering wellness training and consultation for physicians at the Texas Emergency Medical Task Force’s alternative care site at the El Paso Convention Center.

“First responders often fill multiple roles,” Dr. Longhurst said. “We’re not just health care professionals, but children, siblings, parents, virtual teachers and friends. We need to practice acceptance of the things we cannot change due to the pandemic, and allow space to practice healthy coping strategies, such as social connectedness, mindfulness, perspective change, compassion, self-compassion and gratitude. We hope that with resources from the Meadows Foundation and our collaborations, we can assist the community with improving overall mental wellness.”
FOCUS ON SUCCESS

TTUHSC El Paso Faculty Earn Inaugural Awards

Voted for by their own students, two TTUHSC El Paso faculty were named recipients of the inaugural Dr. Robert Suskind and Leslie Lewinter-Suskind Medical Faculty Awards for Educational Excellence.

Gordon Woods, M.D., received the Pre-Medical Education Award.

Karinn Chambers, M.D., FACS, received the Clinical Education Award. Each received a $500 cash award.

The Suskind Awards are part of a $30,000 gift to TTUHSC El Paso to create an endowment in support of exceptional faculty, like Dr. Woods and Dr. Chambers, who are teaching clinical and preclinical curriculum.

Dr. Alan Tyroch Appointed to Governor’s EMS and Trauma Advisory Council

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott designated Alan Tyroch, M.D., as chair of the Governor’s Emergency Medical Services and Trauma Advisory Council.

Dr. Tyroch, professor and chair of surgery at TTUHSC El Paso, has served on the advisory council since 2012. He was reappointed to the council by Gov. Abbott in 2018 and served as vice chair since 2019.

The advisory council makes recommendations to the Texas Department of Health and Human services to ensure communities receive comprehensive and efficient emergency care. Dr. Tyroch’s service on the council provides a voice for El Paso, which is far from other metropolitan areas of Texas.

Foster School of Medicine Student Presents at ADA Conference

Christy Lukose, a student at the Foster School of Medicine, presented her research on metabolic syndrome at the 80th Scientific Sessions of the American Diabetes Association, held virtually in June.

The ADA Scientific Sessions is the largest diabetes conference in the world, attracting between 15,000 and 20,000 leaders in research and clinical care. The occasion was a distinct honor for Lukose, as the opportunity to present student research at the conference is rare.
Dr. Scott Crawford Accepted into Prestigious Academy

Scott Crawford, M.D., FACEP, CHSOS, director of simulation for TTUHSC El Paso, has been accepted as a fellow into the Academy for the Society for Simulation in Healthcare (SSH). Dr. Crawford is one of less than 100 individuals globally to earn this distinction.

As a fellow, Dr. Crawford will have the opportunity to influence the advancement of healthcare simulation. This will directly benefit TTUHSC El Paso’s Training and Educational Center for Healthcare Simulation, where students, residents, physicians and first responders train and prepare for real-world scenarios.

Medical Student Earns Grant to Improve Mental Health

Shannon Tung, a second-year Foster School of Medicine student, was awarded a $5,000 Helping Hands Grant from the American Psychiatric Association to improve patients’ awareness of PTSD symptoms and available resources.

Tung’s project will study El Pasoans with trauma-related symptoms and explore how they seek help.

AMFR Appoints TTUHSC El Paso Faculty Member to Board

TTUHSC El Paso faculty member Alexander Philipovskiy, M.D., Ph.D., has been elected as chair-elect of the Southern Section Council of the American Federation for Medical Research (AFMR).

As chair-elect, Dr. Philipovskiy hopes to improve research opportunities in the El Paso region by bringing visiting professors to the TTUHSC El Paso campus to give lectures, especially in the area of cancer research. Hispanics, who make up a majority of the region’s population, tend to be underrepresented in cancer research and clinical trials.

Dr. Philipovskiy began his term July 1 and is the first university faculty member to be chair-elect of the Southern Section Council.

Foster School of Medicine Faculty Member Named to Two Diversity Committees

Alonso Andrade, M.D., FACS, an assistant professor in the Department of Surgery at TTUHSC El Paso, has begun a three-year term on the Surgical Infection Society’s Ad Hoc Diversity and Inclusion Committee. He also joined the American College of Surgeons’ Committee on Diversity Issues in October.

Dr. Andrade’s appointment to both committees will have a large impact on both TTUHSC El Paso and the Borderland, as he will work to make education in healthcare more accessible to underrepresented minorities, including Hispanics.
Cervical cancer was once the leading cause of cancer death for women in the United States; however, in the past 40 years, cervical cancer cases and fatalities have declined thanks to an increase in screening methods and education.

With a goal of treating and preventing cervical cancer in the Borderland, physicians and researchers at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso are taking an in-depth look at the disease and how it affects Hispanic populations in particular.

**Studying A High-Risk Group**

The Cancer Prevention and Control Division of TTUHSC El Paso’s Center of Emphasis in Cancer is working on large community projects involving cervical cancer screening and HPV vaccination.

“We have several ongoing studies examining the best methods of health promotion regarding cervical cancer and HPV in the community and are investigating different HPV profiles in Hispanic women along the border,” said Navkiran K. Shokar, M.D., M.P.H., director of the Cancer Prevention and Control Division. “Our studies provide information about effective ways to promote cervical cancer screening among high-risk women.”

Lead investigators working in this area at TTUHSC El Paso are Jennifer C. Molokwu, M.D., M.P.H., associate professor and director of medical student education in the Department of Family and Community Medicine; Jessica Calderón-Mora, Dr.P.H., research instructor in the Department of Molecular and Translational Medicine; and Dr. Shokar.

In 2020, the three investigators published in the research journal “Cancer Control” an investigation of HPV’s association with the prevalence of cervical cancer in El Paso and other border counties.

“Our target population consisted of uninsured low-income women living close to the U.S.-Mexico border, a population that suffers a disparate burden of cervical cancer,” the study states. The study also discovered that a majority of women had not been vaccinated, and many were positive for HPV.
Prevention Is Key

Understanding the need for preventive programming and vaccine distribution across West Texas, Dr. Calderón-Mora and Dr. Molokwu established Tiempo de Vacunarte 2, a cancer prevention program focusing on cancers caused by HPV.

The HPV vaccine is the only existing vaccine that can prevent cancer, but it can cost close to $250 per dose.

Tiempo de Vacunarte 2 provides education on HPV and the HPV vaccine, no-cost vaccinations and follow-up reminders for all doses of the series for patients of all genders from 9-26 years old. The program focuses on serving uninsured communities, but addresses barriers for those who do have insurance.

For Dr. Calderón-Mora, the program takes on a personal note. “As a mom of two boys, I feel all the more passionate in providing the vaccine as a form of cancer prevention to those who otherwise couldn’t afford it,” she said.

In 2019, the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas (CPRIT) awarded a $1.9 million grant to TTUHSC El Paso for Tiempo de Vacunarte 2.

A second CPRIT-funded prevention program, De Casa en Casa 3, began in 2013 and offers services for women between the ages of 21 and 65.

The program provides health education on cervical cancer and HPV through community health workers, or promotores. Promotores also use narrative videos adapted from the AMIGAS program to educate the community. AMIGAS is a bilingual educational outreach program that assists health care workers in increasing cervical cancer screening among Hispanics.

The program has proved to be life-changing for some of its participants, as screening has helped detect cervical abnormalities before they became cancerous.

“When we see someone with a precancerous lesion that’s been removed, it’s satisfying to know that a potential cancer was stopped from developing,” said Dr. Shokar. “It means so much that someone’s mother, sister, grandmother or daughter was saved the pain of cancer. It makes everything we do worthwhile and meaningful, and encourages us to try even harder for our community.”

Ultimately, prevention programs like these follow TTUHSC El Paso’s mission of providing high-quality care and health education for all in the community. “Our overall goal is to reduce the burden of cervical cancer along the U.S.-Mexico border by facilitating early diagnosis and access to treatment,” said Dr. Calderón-Mora.
In the U.S., Hispanic women have the highest incidence of cervical cancer and are 70% more likely to die from the disease than non-Hispanic white women, according to the American Cancer Society.

Tiempo de Vacunarte 2 is designed to create outreach across a network of 175 community sites across West Texas, including school districts, community centers, clinics, faith-based organizations, local and state health departments, and more.
As a child, Bailey Escarzaga, M.D., had the unfortunate experience of seeing her mother diagnosed with breast cancer. While accompanying her to the hospital for treatment wasn’t the ideal childhood, it did plant the seeds for her future.

Her mother, who survived the battle with cancer, noticed the future Dr. Escarzaga was always playing with a child’s doctor kit. She had a clue about her daughter’s future.

“I spent a lot of time at the hospital with her and quickly figured out that I wanted to be in a health care role,” said Dr. Escarzaga, now an OB-GYN at Women Partners in Health in Austin. “I don’t think I ‘knew’ per se, but it was common for me to want to come home and imitate/play what I had seen.”

After earning a bachelor’s in mechanical engineering and master’s in medical sciences, she was accepted to the Foster School of Medicine at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso.

“I loved the new state-of-the-art facilities, and the idea of getting to be part of the inaugural class was very exciting,” Dr. Escarzaga said. “It was also clear that the hands-on skills you receive at the Foster School of Medicine were far more robust than other medical schools. This was due to the small class size and the volume and range of pathology seen at hospitals in a border city.”

While in El Paso, she also found lifelong friends, a husband and learned a second language.

“Lots of Spanish! I rarely need a translator anymore during patient encounters with Spanish-speaking patients,” Dr. Escarzaga said. “Being immersed in the border culture and the Hispanic community was so enriching. I met my husband in El Paso, and we’re five years happily married with two amazing children.”
FRANK AGULLO, M.D., FACS
Former TTUHSC El Paso Resident Now Educates the Next Generation

An alumnus of the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso residency program, Frank Agullo, M.D., FACS, not only teaches future generations of surgeons, but is an award-winning one himself.

In February, Dr. Agullo was declared the Top Plastic Surgeon of the Decade, Top Aesthetic Doctor and Top Plastic Surgeon West during the Aesthetic Everything Aesthetic and Cosmetic Medicine Awards 2021.

“It’s an award that gives us the validity of all the hard work we put into our practice and taking care of our patients,” Dr. Agullo said.

Dr. Agullo’s medical journey began at the Universidad Anahuac in Mexico City, where he received his medical degree. He completed residency training at TTUHSC El Paso, followed by plastic surgery training at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, New York.

Today, Dr. Agullo is a board certified plastic surgeon in both reconstructive and cosmetic fields. He’s a clinical associate professor of plastic surgery at the Foster School of Medicine and practices primarily at Southwest Plastic Surgery.

Dr. Agullo has welcomed Foster School of Medicine students and residents for clinical rotations with his private practice and says some have been accepted to the Mayo Clinic like he was.

“We’ve always been open to having students visit us. We’ve been able to help them with projects, and that’s helped them present at national and international conferences.”

Dr. Agullo says he’s proud of how his work is helping to shape the image of medical care in the El Paso region. He also hopes to see the Foster School of Medicine students he mentors become doctors in the region, raising the level of health care in the Borderland.

Photography by Tommie Morelos
First-year medical student Aden Springer is continuing a family tradition of becoming a physician via a nontraditional route.

Springer grew up dreaming of being a doctor like his father and grandfather, and chose to complete a master’s in biomedical science to become a more competitive candidate for medical school.

“My father and grandfather took the nontraditional route into medicine and took time between college and medical school,” Springer said. “These two men have influenced me to go into medicine for many different reasons. One is the innate desire to help others with their health and improve their quality and quantity of life.”

Before beginning his studies at the Foster School of Medicine in 2020, Springer attended Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso’s Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, graduating in 2019 with a master’s in biomedical sciences.

Springer chose the GSBS because of its location on the U.S.-Mexico border, its proven track record with medical school applicant matriculation and its emphasis on volunteering within the El Paso community.

While attending the GSBS, Springer researched the microbiome of intestines, as well as the eye. He describes the master’s program as a strong, wonderful program that can aid a person in their journey of becoming a doctor.

“You must put the work into it to see results,” Springer said. “If given this opportunity, don’t let it go to waste. I’m glad and thankful that I completed the master’s program at the GSBS. I felt that it prepared me for the rigors of medical school.”
Three important reasons brought Colby Genrich, M.D., to the Borderland and Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso: family, academia and sports.

After graduating from Kenyon College in Ohio, Dr. Genrich taught for 10 years at boarding and private schools in Pennsylvania and California.

During his teaching career, he took evening medical school prerequisites and in 2011, began medical school at St. George’s University School of Medicine in Grenada. There, Dr. Genrich met his future wife, K.C., who is a proud El Pasoan.

"Since the moment I met her, she’s told me about El Paso and how friendly the people are,” Dr. Genrich said.

In 2018, following his residency in New Jersey, Dr. Genrich was accepted into the sports medicine fellowship at TTUHSC El Paso.

“During medical school, my goal was always primary care, and I knew very little about sports medicine. During residency, I worked with some of the best sports medicine physicians in the U.S. I knew then that it was the perfect fit for me. I jumped at the chance to complete a fellowship at TTUHSC El Paso,” Dr. Genrich said.

At TTUHSC El Paso, Dr. Genrich is professionally fulfilled with his interests in sports medicine and academia. He’s a team physician for the University of Texas at El Paso, Andress High School and El Paso Locomotive FC. He also serves as a faculty member at the Foster School of Medicine and physician at Texas Tech Physicians of El Paso at Kenworthy, located in Northeast El Paso.

One title he still keeps: active athlete.

“I’ve completed two Ironman Triathlons and have ridden my bike across the U.S., all of which I promised myself I would never do again,” Dr. Genrich said. “I think I’ll break that promise, though, and would enjoy participating in another Ironman. A dream would be to ride across the U.S. with my family.”
SALUTING OUR VETERANS

TTUHSC El Paso honors its former service members

On Nov. 11 of every year, the United States honors those who have bravely served in the military with a day to commemorate their sacrifices: Veterans Day. Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso and Texas Tech Physicians of El Paso salute veterans who bring their valuable experience and knowledge to our community and health sciences center as faculty, students and staff.

In November, TTUHSC El Paso celebrated four veterans currently serving the Borderland as physicians, medical students and nursing students, including: Roberto Prieto, M.D., assistant professor in the Department of Internal Medicine, and hematologist with TTP El Paso; John Kirtley, a student at the Hunt School of Nursing; Christopher J. Castagno, a student at the Foster School of Medicine; and Blake Busey, D.O., assistant professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine, and family medicine physician with TTP El Paso.

Blake Busey, D.O., is an assistant professor in the TTUHSC El Paso Department of Family and Community Medicine and a family medicine physician at TTP El Paso. He served in the U.S. Army for seven years, but not before being encouraged to go into medicine by his wife. His journey took him from California, to North Carolina, then to Texas, where he served as medical director and clinical chief for William Beaumont Army Medical Center before arriving at TTUHSC El Paso.

“I wanted to serve my country, and my wife convinced me to go to medical school first,” Dr. Busey said. “As such, I joined the Army through the Health Professions Scholarship Program. This paid for osteopathic medical school. My military service allowed me to develop leadership skills, which make it easier to assure patients that the treatment plan is beneficial to their overall health.”

Roberto Prieto, M.D., is an assistant professor in the TTUHSC El Paso Department of Internal Medicine, specializing in oncology/hematology, and a hematologist with TTP El Paso. He served in the U.S. Air Force for 13 years. Upon entering medical school, Dr. Prieto also enlisted in the military, not wanting to pass up the chance to serve his country while earning his medical degree from the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences in Maryland.

Following his military service, Dr. Prieto went into private practice in San Angelo, Texas, but a desire to return to his hometown led him to his position at TTUHSC El Paso and TTP El Paso. His transition from military to civilian life was made easier because of the similarities between the military and medicine. “An ideal that reverberates in anyone who’s worn the uniform is ‘service before self’ – this is an idea shared between military and medicine,” Dr. Prieto said.
Christopher J. Castagno is a first-year student at the Foster School of Medicine and serves as a captain in the U.S. Army Reserves. He served in the U.S. Army for four years prior to beginning his medical career. With a desire to serve his country and give back to the community, Castagno decided to attend medical school after his service in the Army and continues a lineage of medical professionals in his family. His grandparents, Dr. Joe and Dr. Mary Castagno, practiced medicine in El Paso for many years. His service prepared Castagno for a career in medicine.

“The civilian sector takes a lot of their practices and structure directly from the military,” Castagno said. “The entire team-based mentality is vital for both organizations. Without the entire team working together, whether in combat or in a medical practice, the best outcome will not be achieved.”

John Kirtley is a student in the Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing program at the Hunt School of Nursing and currently serves in the U.S. Navy Reserves. He served in the U.S. Navy as an active member for five years. He joined the Navy not only to help pay for school, but to serve his country while also learning about different cultures and cuisines. During his time in the Navy, Kirtley was stationed in Fujairah and Dubai, both located within the United Arab Emirates. His lifelong interests in anatomy and physiology of the human body led him to pursue a career in health care, beginning at TTUHSC El Paso.

“As a sailor and now a nursing student, I can say that working under pressure in stressful situations is definitely seen a lot in both professions,” Kirtley said. “I’m excited to graduate and provide compassionate and competent care for all patients because it makes me feel I’m making a difference and contributing to my community.”

“I JOINED THE MILITARY TO SERVE MY COUNTRY AND GIVE BACK TO MY COMMUNITY – I WANTED TO TAKE MY PASSION FOR HELPING MY COMMUNITY AND TRANSLATE THAT INTO THE CIVILIAN WORLD. THE OVERLAP BETWEEN PHYSICIAN AND MILITARY OFFICER ARE VERY SIMILAR IN THE MEDICAL COMMUNITY.” - CHRISTOPHER J. CASTAGNO
Our Reasons for GIVING

The Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso Employee Giving Campaign is a simple way for TTUHSC El Paso’s faculty and staff to give back to the institution they love. Participating in this campaign sends a powerful message to the community that employees not only work here, but also truly believe in our mission to serve all people through exemplary patient care, education and research.

WENDY WOODALL, D.D.S., MAGD
Professor and Associate, Academic Dean, Hunt School of Dental Medicine

“I give to the Employee Giving Campaign because I believe in the mission of the Hunt School of Dental Medicine. I see the coming impact of our efforts on community health, I trust our institution to utilize funds well, and I’m grateful and value that I’m able to give back.”

Jorge Caballero
Managing Director for Systems and Network Operations, Office of Information Technology

“I give to the Employee Giving Campaign because I realize how fortunate I am to be part of the institution. It’s my way to pay it forward and support our students and future health care heroes.”

Manny Rubio
Specialist, General Services Mailroom

“I give because I enjoy helping others who may be facing challenging times or who cannot afford paying rent, buying food or paying for tuition. I simply give because I enjoy and want to help people.”

Brianna Huffman
Associate Director of Special Events, Office of Institutional Advancement

“Giving to the Medical Student Run Clinic through the Employee Giving Campaign lets our students know that their impactful work in the underserved areas of our community is greatly appreciated.”
DAN SMITH
Technician, Office of Information Technology, Classroom Technology

“I give to this campaign because I’m proud of TTUHSC El Paso, and I admire the young women and men fulfilling their ambitions at our schools.”

RITA MARTINEZ
Administrative Assistant, Student Services

“Helping people is so rewarding. As an employee of TTUHSC El Paso, on the very first day of orientation, you’re taught that our mission is to serve all people. As El Pasanos, we’re known for our kind hearts and family values. TTUHSC El Paso is a wonderful place to work because we make a difference in our community.”
Being a mother is a constant reminder of why I’m working toward my nursing degree. The Hunt School of Nursing has allowed me to follow my passion while teaching my daughter to pursue her dreams.

“VALERIE ALVARA
HUNT SCHOOL OF NURSING CLASS OF 2021
YOUR SUPPORT CREATES BRIGHT FUTURES.
INVEST IN OUR STUDENTS TODAY SO THEY CAN BECOME THE TRUSTED HEALTH CARE HEROES OF TOMORROW!"