My Time as an Albany Journalist

Christian Hince

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My Time as an Albany Journalist

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Christian Hince: My Time as an Albany Journalist

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Forward

With my graduation in May, I’m pleased to say that my experience in journalism across these past four years has been a well-rounded one, and I hope this collection reflects this well. Some of my work came about from internships, such as my WAMC piece on Central Avenue. Some happened as class assignments, like my article on Troy’s No Fun. Some happened as freelance attempts to make a name for myself (i.e. my Times Union piece) and others were the result of consistent work with the Albany Student Press.

My time in the journalism program has exposed me well to more than one medium and has introduced me to a range of perspectives on how to be a journalist, an experience I wouldn’t trade for anything. I look to use my connections and skills for a long career in radio or print, and hopefully this collection is a strong showing of what I can do in the industry.
Culinary on Central: Albany at its most diverse

WAMC Northeast Public Radio | Published December 16, 2023

If you’re looking for proof of the City of Albany’s growing diversity, just visit a mid-city stretch of markets and restaurants.

With a population around 100,000, Albany is a hub for immigration in New York, and one street in particular showcases the city’s diversity.

Central Avenue is true to its name; it runs from east to west across nearly the length of the city, beginning just a couple blocks away from the state capitol. The commercial corridor is at the center of Albany’s immigrant neighborhoods and is populated with restaurants and markets that represent at least 18 different nations, according to an estimate by the Central Business Improvement District.

Lo Nuestro is a Dominican restaurant. In the kitchen, a large pot of chicken soup is simmering on the stove. It’s known for generous portions and strong flavors. Even an appetizer-sized portion of Picadera, a dish of salted and fried sausage, beef, chicken, and plantains, and sliced lemons, weighs down a 9-by-13 tin.

Lo Nuestro offers its international flavors to customers from all backgrounds. Angel Mejia, an 18-year-old server who emigrated from the Dominican Republic about a decade ago, has been on the job for three years. Lo Nuestro has introduced him to people from a variety of cultures.

“If it's easier for me to engage in a conversation with somebody I don't know now than it was before, because obviously I have to go to tables,” Mejia said. “I have to talk to people up close, and now it's just easier for me.”

Further down the street is Capital District Latinos, a social services and community advocacy non-profit. Founder and chairman Dan Irizarry thinks Latino-owned small businesses are especially important following a significant wave of immigrants arriving in Albany. Many came from South and Central American countries by way of New York City.

“Every immigrant that I have encountered, especially during this last surge in migration, has pretty much asked one thing: that they be allowed to work,” Irizarry said. “The creation of these businesses I think speaks to an independent spirit that is very much American.”

Across the street from Lo Nuestro is Irie Vybez, a Jamaican restaurant. Even after Irie Vybez closed its dining area during the pandemic, its kitchen is as busy as ever, with three chefs manning several large pans. The restaurant is filled with zesty, savory smells unique to Caribbean cooking. Irie Vybez is known for its creamy, spicy penne pasta paired with sauteed red and green peppers and garnished with basil.
Shaun Freeman, who’s originally from Jamaica and grew up in the Bronx before coming to Albany, is a co-owner. Despite Freeman’s origins in a multinational area, he’s more in tune with the international community in this corner of Albany than the big city.

“Over here we have relationships with a dude that’s from Sudan for example, or a dude that’s from Nigeria, or a dude that’s from Malaysia, so we get to specifically know different kinds of cultures,” he said. “I kind of personally get a chance to dive into a whole different kind of culture being on this block.”

Freeman started Irie Vybez with two partners 10 years ago, one of whom recommended Albany for its regional interest in Jamaican food and cheaper rent. He’s enjoyed seeing the block around him explode in diversity since.

“We can't just say we get Jamaican and Caribbean customers, you know? We get young, old, working class, non-working class, everything,” Freeman said.

Dtrae Carter, Director of Community Engagement for the International Center of the Capital Region, an organization that fosters dialogue with and promotes multicultural communities, thinks these restaurant and markets are a meaningful measuring stick for the city’s diversity.

“It’s just pretty spectacular to see different cultures that want to share their cuisine and share their food with us, and I think that's an indicator of how the local population is changing,” Carter said. “When you see when a restaurant pops up, that's because there's demand for that type of food.”

Carter thinks the storefronts on Central Avenue provide a beacon for new arrivals to the city.

“They come to this area, they don’t know the language, they need food, but they don’t know where to go and maybe their diets are specific,” he said. “But if we have enough diversity for all of these types of restaurants for all these visitors that come here, there’s options for all of us to be fed, and I think that can only be a positive thing.”

Win Htain is a Burmese refugee and restaurateur who has spent the last quarter-century in the Albany area. His latest venture, Thai Garden, opened on Central Avenue in January. A freedom fighter against Myanmar’s military government in the 1990s, refugees like him have to scrape by after emigrating.

“Most people like me are not educated, they have no money,” Htain said. “That’s why whenever we got a job, we do it.”

Thai Garden’s Kee Mao Noodles are soft with crunchy vegetables and a fragrant dressing of teriyaki sauce and red pepper flakes. Despite his admittedly limited English, Htain has gotten along well with workers from the numerous Halal markets on the avenue, doing his best to offer friendship through food.
“I asked them, ‘Hey can you stop by my restaurant? I just opened here.’ They said ‘Yeah we will stop in there but do you have halal meat?’ I said ‘No I don't have it,’ but even though I have no halal meat they can eat fish and seafood, so no need to have halal meat,” said Htain.

One of the storefronts catering to Muslim dietary restrictions is Aladdin Halal Market, managed by Sajjad Hossen. While Hossen’s main mode of providing for others is through groceries, he also spends plenty of time answering questions from new arrivals looking to get around the Capital Region.

“Sometimes when I run this business, I feel like it's not just beneficial money-wise, I'm also helping community to build,” said Hossen.

Hossen thinks Muslims are at home on Central Avenue thanks to the mosque across the street, Masjid As-Salam.

“If we have any issues, we go there and there are people that can help us on anything,” Hossen said. “It doesn't matter from which country you come from, even some non-Muslim people go to the mosque and they get help.”

Irizarry at Capital District Latinos says immigrant-owned businesses are transformative points of contact for integrating people of foreign backgrounds into Albany and American life.

“You come into contact with the denizens of that community with people who have been here for a long time, and can explain to you how you can register your child in school, or what restaurant serves as the food that you're most likely to eat,” Irizarry said. “It’s that connection that merchants have with their customers.”

Anthony Capece, Executive Director of the Central Business Improvement District, sits on WAMC’s Board of Trustees. He says maintaining diversity and investing in the Central Avenue community are key to small business growth here.

“The more we can invest in these neighborhoods, the more we can provide opportunities to invest through incentives, then we can create a neighborhood where people want to move in, and then the diversity comes with it, because that’s the demographics of this community,” Capece said. “There’s a lot of people here that we’ve been working with through our ARPA dollars and care funds to invest in this neighborhood again, and they’re here. They want to do it, and that’s wonderful.”

With Albany continuing its trajectory of welcoming immigrants, people like Angel Mejia at Lo Nuestro hope to see an even wider range of businesses on Central Avenue.

“I feel like the only thing we have as Dominicans here is restaurants, and that’s not the full extent to our culture,” Mejia said. "I would like to see more of that in the community."
No Fun: One Year And Counting Of Something New In Troy

NYS Music | Published April 13, 2023

When discussing the capital region’s vibrant post-COVID music scene, it’s impossible to ignore Troy’s No Fun. Founded in Dec. 2021 by August Rosa, originator of the Albany/Saratoga Springs craft beer business Pint Sized, the venue has quickly become a hotbed for DIY music in the capital area and greater northeast region.

More than just a place, Rosa views it as a project and a springboard for creativity in the area. “I built it here so we could have new and different artists come through,” he said. “I’m trying to involve the folks that I think have their head in the same place that want to bring new, challenging different artists to the capital region.” While Rosa initially intended for No Fun to be an extension of his first enterprise, he’s enjoyed seeing the space take a life of its own.

Rosa fits the appearance of your prototypical mid-30s punk. He sports thick frame glasses and a brown beard, wearing a gray beanie, blue-yellow flannel, and gray jeans. Even though he scoffs a bit at his fashion sense, Rosa had an active eye for aesthetic when setting up the venue itself.

Made for 200 people, No Fun is an artsy yet minimalistic space, with a checkerboard floor, walls of white sheet rock, and a modest yet decently sized stage area in the back, complete with a disco ball. The single bathroom gives off a punk aesthetic, featuring a crude black paint job, walls covered by graffiti and posters for future No Fun shows. Aspiring for a genuine atmosphere, Rosa modeled the space with DIY venues of NYC in mind. “I want it to feel like you’re more at an art space or your friend’s apartment than a business,” he said. “I think that’s resonated, for sure.”

While No Fun’s physical layout was very much intentional, Rosa thinks the people occupying it matter more. “We’ve had packed houses on the regular here,” he said. “I think we’ve sold out about a dozen shows this year so far which is awesome.”

In terms of promotion and planning of shows, No Fun is a team effort. Some of Rosa’s favorite booking feats include NYC noise rock band A Place To Bury Strangers and global acts such as Algeria’s Imarhan and an upcoming show featuring Australia’s Surprise Chef. The team also includes Shane Sanchez, the frontrunner of Super Dark Collective, a capital region promotion which hosts shows on the grittier and experimental side. Rosa credits Sanchez as having “amplified the hip-hop angle” at No Fun.

Other major contributors include bartender Shane Secor, the man behind promotion arm Hey Greasy! “He had Gibby Hanes here from the Butthole Surfers, which was awesome,” Rosa said. “He has really good connections with Rochester, so he brings a lot of rock and roll stuff out.” Rosa also namedrops a couple peripheral figures such as Rachel Freeman, ex-runner of the Byrdhouse venue in Albany and current regional promoter through Byrdhouse Records. “I want
to give massive credit to the team that I initially put in place here, and I’m so grateful that they’ve stuck around,” he said. “Between the people that were initially hired here, and the folks that evolved with it as it continued, the place wouldn’t be the same without them.”

After an Omicron-delayed beginning for No Fun, the venue has become consistently active. “The difference from this winter to last winter, it’s like night and day,” Rosa said. “It feels like it's really happening now.”

Memorable moments at the venue for him include prolific New Jersey indie pop group Pinegrove and organizing for an interesting collaboration between Algonquin singers/drummers the Medicine Singers and members of legendary noise rock band Swans. “I’m seeing more of people just coming out to stuff where they’re like, ‘I saw some weird band that No Fun booked. It’s probably gonna be cool, even though I don’t know much about the band,’” Rosa said.

This same approach went into his program on Friday, March 3, a four-band showcase featuring some new and some native to the capital district scene.

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Tonight isn’t a sellout, but the crowd is still substantial and full of enthusiasm. Up first is Aaron Wilson, co-owner of Herbie’s Burgers on Lark Avenue, and tonight, front man of a folk rock four-piece. He has long auburn hair and dons a light beard and glasses, singing about beer and romance while manning guitar. The five-song set starts upbeat before becoming wistful for a couple tracks, closing out with an energetic and quick number backed by thwacking drums.

Next is Binghamton dream pop act Pleasure Dome. They’re a six-piece with two keyboardists and one guitar, fronted by vocalist Cydney Edwards who softly sings over waves of reverb. Their six-track set ranges between slow, moody shoegaze and up-tempo surf rock, featuring plaintive melodies. Their stage presence is expressive but not overzealous, inspiring dancing near the front of the crowd. “Tonight was really fun, but the venue is mislabeled because we had a good time,” guitarist Brandon Musa said after the performance.

Third is Precious Metals, a local alt-rock band. Lead vocalist J. Lee White reminisces of glam metal with frizzy brown locks and a jean jacket over a tank top, singing in a shrieky falsetto that harkens of Journey’s Steve Perry and Geddy Lee of Rush. The four-piece mixes groovy, urgent originals with covers such as Jimmy Eat World’s “Sweetness,” building the excitement and motion from the show’s earlier half.

Closing the night is singer-songwriter The Age, who steals the show while oscillating between blue-eyed soul and funk rock across his six-song set. He croons Billboard-worthy melodies and duels with his backing guitarist John Drabnik, interpolating Arctic Monkeys and the Outkast while effortlessly engaging his audience. His four-man group’s musicianship is commendable and their enthusiasm is infectious, with the checkered tiles of No Fun becoming a dance floor by
the second song. To finish, Age shreds the closing track in Purple Rain-esque fashion, capping off a magnetic performance.

The scene at No Fun as the night ended is exactly what the venue is about: wide-ranging regional music which engages with a diverse audience in intimate fashion. Rosa’s been patient, understanding that “just like anything, it takes time to develop your crowd, to have people feel comfortable to have them feel like the space is theirs.” If the space wasn’t theirs before, now it is.
Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake girls' volleyball advances to state final; Shenendehowa bows out

**Times Union | Published Nov 18, 2023**

With a three-set victory over Mineola, Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake is now one win away from its ninth Class A state title in program history, winning by scores of 25-23, 26-24 and 25-18.

“When you beat a great team like Mineola, oh my goodness. It’s these kids toughing it out,” Burnt Hills coach Gary Bynon said.

On offense, McKenna Law paced the team with 17 kills. “We executed everything and we muscled towards every ball,” she said. “There were some times we kind of fell down, but we got right back up. We knew what we had to do.”

Setting for Law was Cassie Vaughan, who finished the match with 31 assists. She was proud of her team’s resolve, especially in a second set in which the Spartans trailed 16-12 coming out of a timeout. “I think we did a really good job of not getting so down,” she said. “We were able to celebrate everything, just refocus, and be able to keep going.”

Bynon was glad with his team’s passing in the back row, where libero Abbie Harper totaled 17 digs. “I’m just so happy with the way this whole group played,” he said.

For Law, the Spartans’ level of teamwork makes sense. “We’ve been playing volleyball with each other for almost our whole lives,” she said. “We know each other, we know how to pick each other up, and we’ve been through this before.”

With Saturday’s triumph, the Spartans now sit at 40-4-1. They were Class A state champions in 2021 and hope to reclaim that title Sunday against Williamsville South.

“We’ve been preparing for tomorrow since August 21st,” Bynon said. “The biggest thing about the final is that you’re just not happy to be there. This group is in it to win, so we’re looking forward to the challenge of a great team.”

In Class AAA, a stellar first season in the division for Shenendehowa ended in four sets against Massapequa.

The Lady Plainsmen started the morning with a 25-18 victory before dropping the following three sets by scores of 27-25, 25-18 and 25-19.

“I’m super proud of everything that they have accomplished,” head coach Lori Kessler said. “I’m sad that it’s over, but I’m happy that it happened.”

Outside hitter Reagan Ennist dominated the stat chart as usual, leading the team with 31 kills while adding the second-most digs (20), service aces (6) and blocks (4).
Her primary setter Megan Rogers split time with sophomore Jessica Macken, but still led the team with 23 assists, adding 17 digs.

Junior Genny Sala paced the team in digs with 25 and service aces with seven, while Sabrina Kincaid led blockers with seven.

They faced a new level of difficulty against the Massapequa offense, with Carly Elfenbein and Shea Ringel both recording 12 kills. Ringel scored the match-ending point while adding 18 digs, following Jolie Kanceler with 20.

The end of Shenendehowa’s run means the exit of seniors such as libero Kasia Barletta, who will start again at the University at Albany next year. “Shenendehowa volleyball was where I started to find the love for the sport. It's just gonna be so tough, it's gonna be a different team next year,” she said. “Every single girl here I have so much love for, and the coaches I have so much love for,” she said.

Ennist, who’s already committed to West Virginia with a year left at Shenendehowa, is heartbroken to see the departure of seniors such as Barletta, with whom she’s played volleyball since the age of 10.

“I’m just super grateful to have my senior teammates because they turned me into the player that I am today,” Ennist said.
Fifth-year head coach Colleen Mullen has women’s basketball at the University at Albany firing on all cylinders. Coming off an America East conference title and March Madness appearance in 2022, the Great Danes have won a second-straight regular season title in the conference and are in a poised quest to return to March Madness. Mullen is proud of the foundation she’s created at UAlbany, whether it’s in regard to recruiting, scheduling, scheming, or acting as a role model and leader for her players.

On Feb. 1, the coach and I talked about this foundation and a little bit more.

**CH:** You haven’t played on campus at UAlbany all season. Last year you went 16-1 at home. You’re currently undefeated at HVCC. What does home court advantage mean to you?

**CM:** Being able to play in front of our own crowd, and have the players – I mean granted it’s not SEFCU, it’s not here, it’s not exactly what their usual routine is – but being able to not get on a bus, not having to travel, [being able] sleep in their own beds, and have that comfortability, it’s a nice way to feel like “OK, you can be home in front of your own crowd.” And we like to protect our home court.

**CH:** Last year: you’re the 16 seed. Louisville’s the one seed. March Madness. How do you keep your team locked in?

**CM:** Yeah, I think they were really excited to No. 1, go up to Maine, win the championship, earn the automatic bid. We didn’t know who we were going to face, we knew it was probably going to be maybe UConn, Louisville, could’ve been possibly Baylor. Then we found out it was Louisville, and we just focused on trying to win the game. We knew that player-per-player they were really talented, they had some WNBA prospects.

But we played to win the game, and we believed that if we executed the game plan and we played very well, we would’ve had a chance to win. It was a really great game, it was one of those things where it was a team that presses the whole time, and we didn’t actually have a pure point guard, so that was kind of a tough matchup for us. But it was a great environment, we chartered the flight down there, we played in front of a huge crowd, and they really rolled out the red carpet for us. So it was really special being part of March Madness.

**CH:** The last America East team to win a game in March Madness: UAlbany in 2016. How does that happen again? What’s the formula?

**CM:** I was actually there for that game, Christian, because I was coaching at Army and I watched UAlbany beat Florida. And that was really cool and really special, and really put UAlbany on the
national map in terms of a mid-major. The recipe for that is No. 1, having a really competitive schedule so you have a good seed. And that year, I believe they got a 13 seed in facing Florida? Or maybe they were the 12th seed facing Florida as the fifth seed. Check my facts. [UAlbany was seeded 12th in the 2015-16 NCAA Tournament.]

But they were able to get a pretty good matchup in terms of a Power Five that wasn’t a number one seed. Going against a number one seed is always difficult, but it took years and years to get to that point. They won many championships in a row, that was their sixth championship in a row that Abe had won, Coach Katie Abrahamson-Henderson, and they had gotten to that point where they were very veteran, very experienced and won a lot of games in the non-conference.

Unfortunately, this year for us, we had many injuries. Four of our starters out in the non-conference, we had a very tough schedule trying to increase our NET ranking which helps for the seeding, but all that doesn’t really matter because you got to get there. So the recipe is to do as best you can to be playing your best basketball in March, and to hopefully keep everybody healthy. And then whatever the opponent is, you come up with a great game plan and you trust your preparation.

CH: As this team gets more and more successful, how does the importance of scheduling, or specifically non-conference scheduling change?

CM: Yeah it’s very hard because when you’re a good mid-major program, people don’t want to play you. So the higher level schools don’t want to risk losing to you, so they don’t really want to play you, and then the lower level schools, the lower mid-major schools don’t want to play you because they’re trying to schedule wins, and coaches are often trying to keep their jobs and want winning records. So scheduling becomes really difficult and really strategic, and we really try to have a plan where we try to challenge our team the best that we can based on who we have coming back.

We try to build confidence in terms of getting games where we think they are good 50-50 games, meaning they’re strong opponents like us, and then also stretching it past to some Power Fives. This year we played Boston College, Syracuse, Ohio State, UNLV, all really, really tough opponents that challenged us. Had we had our whole roster, they maybe would’ve had a different outcome. But again, more of the same for next year because we have many of those players returning.

CH: How does winning or being competitive in those games early on in the season in big environments shape the trajectory of a mid-major program’s season going forward?

CM: It’s huge, because that builds so much confidence. Last year for instance, us playing at Boston College and being in a position to win the game. I mean, we did very well playing Vanderbilt, keeping it within under 10 points the majority of the game, and you're going and playing on that stage, you've done it before. So you can call on those experiences, and you know
that they're just another athlete, a similar athlete that you may have faced when you played AAU or when you were younger. You know that at any given point, even though they may be taller and faster, at any given point, if they're not working as hard as we are, hard work’s going to beat talent nine times out of 10.

So I think calling on those experiences, having those successes gives you confidence as you head into your conference season. But then also saying, “OK, for instance this year, we played Ohio State, and we played them the closest that any opponent had played them, we were down by three at half.” Played Syracuse, leading at the half. If we can compete that way against Syracuse and Ohio State, we can compete and defeat the teams in our league.

**CH: What are the challenges of recruiting at a small mid-major school?**

CM: There are a lot of challenges. Luckily, UAlbany has a couple really key selling points. One, it's a state institution; so it has many different majors to draw from. It's a diverse campus, so there's people of many different identities, cultural backgrounds, nations represented. Its proximity to New York City, to Boston, to Canada makes it a great location, easy to get in and out with airports and stuff. And it's been a history of success, so we've been a really good program.

I think at any point when you're going against other teams, I think facility wise, we're getting a new renovated facility, we don't have a facility right now, that's going to be a huge drawing point. So that's been tough, not having that type of facility. And just being able to constantly compete against other schools when there's so many Division I schools in this region, it’s hard really trying to differentiate yourself, because everybody has something to offer. And that's where you really try to sell yourself as a coach, and as a program and as a culture.

**CH: What would you say is the No. 1 strategy for flipping a player from let’s say, Syracuse, Boston College, UConn is?**

CM: If I was competing against those teams, or if they were competing?

**CH: If you were competing against them.**

CM: OK. Well, UConn it would be very hard to flip them. I think that they would want definitely a little bit more of a balanced experience. If you're going to go to UConn, a player that maybe we would be recruiting that would go to UConn, maybe they're going to be the best player, and could be a potential player of the year, four-time player of the year.

We have many players that have played professional, so [we’re] trying to show that you can come here and have a huge career or you could go to UConn and maybe be a reserve and not play. Similar to maybe Syracuse. What was the other school you mentioned?

**CH: Boston College.**
CM: Syracuse, I think is another kind of similar ‘You come here, have a bigger role, similar education, we have football.’ Boston College is a little bit more of that academic piece. So they're a little bit more focused on the academics, so we really sell how UAlbany has multiple majors. If you're trying to do the sciences, we have multiple segments or sections that you can take. At Boston College, it's a smaller school, it's a smaller student body, less classes, more likely to impede your ability to do both basketball and your major.

So completely different cells there, but it just all really depends on positioning it for what the desires and the needs of that individual. So that's why it's so important in the recruiting process to get to know the recruit, what motivates them, what's important to them, what they're looking for in school, and then you kind of tailor the message of your school to what they want.

CH: So the transfer portal, I know that this is something that's personal for you, being a transfer to New Hampshire back in your playing career. How has this sort of recent revolution in the transfer portal in college sports transformed that aspect of team building and recruiting?

CM: It changes the whole face of it, back when I transferred, no one transferred. There was something wrong with you, and now it's just kind of what everybody does. I think that the one issue is that there's an instant gratification that if players aren't playing, they immediately go in the transfer portal and want to play somewhere else.

And that's not always the case because when you're part of a winning program, and there's veteran players, you have to learn and have a role. Everybody has a role. Only one person can be the leading scorer, only one person could be the leading rebounder, only one person, only five people can start. So everybody has a role, but there's 15 people on a team.

So understanding that the grass isn't always greener, you could transfer to another school and play more, but you might have a coach that's not respectful, or teammates that don't care as much or they don't have your major. We do have a couple players that have transferred, and they sort of fell in our laps.

Grace Heeps wanted to come home. We got lucky with her, she really wanted to come back to the Albany area. We first tried to recruit her when I first took the job, and she went to UMass and then Providence. We had a player on our team that was her high school teammate, so she decided to come here for that.

And then Ellen Hahne, who was at Wake Forest, was good friends with Helene Haegerstrand -- they are both from Sweden -- she wanted to play with the Swedish player, and she wanted to leave that level and go to more of a mid-major, and so they kind of fell in our laps. And I think we want to utilize it as is not our main recruiting strategy, but something that enhances or adds pieces to the puzzle, because we're always looking for the bigger picture when we recruit players.
CH: How does it feel having seniors on your team who you recruited just coming into the university?

CM: Yeah, it's really exciting. To be able to watch the growth, for instance Lucia Decortes, she's in her fifth year and I recruited her, she was one of my first recruits. I recruited her off film, because I didn't have any players when I took the job here, and she came in barely having confidence to speak English. Just Italian, skinny, eyes wide open, completely out of her comfort zone.

And now watching how she's developed and grown into a really confident, strong, speaking English all the time individual. It's really amazing to watch that happen full circle, and to see the growth and the maturation of your players. And I hope that they always feel like they're a part of the university, that they feel a connection to our program. And that's the most important thing, is that they feel like they left a more well-prepared person for the professional world and a life of future success.

CH: You started your tenure at UAlbany with multiple losing seasons, now you're poised for your second straight tournament appearance. What does that teach you about confidence, growth and patience for a program and for a coach?

CM: Patience is never easy, but it's critical. And when I first took the job here, I really didn't know what I was getting into because I had never been a head coach before. We were down players, and here it was very disjointed because I was the third head coach in three seasons. Players had played for multiple head coaches, different programs, different styles, and tough times don't last, tough people do. And I think that's the most important lesson I learned, is that I just chipped away. I had the long game in mind, and I tried every day to do the right thing by my players and my staff.

There's no replacement for hard work and doing things the right way. You can't take shortcuts to success. So I focused on building up the players I had, developing them, building them up, building confidence, building trust, recruiting more players, more talented players, learning about myself as a coach of, ‘Who are the types of players that I'm successful at coaching, what kind of characteristics do they have?’ And I know that those are the types of players that are hardworking, and have a work ethic and are unselfish.

But yeah, I mean, it was when I was 1-9, I was hitting my head on the wall being like, ‘What did I get myself into? Can I do this?’ And I think that's normal to question yourself and push your abilities. But I just said, ‘You know what, I'm just going to chip away every day, I'm going to try my best, and we're going to build a program the right way.’

And that's really exciting to sit here and see all of my staff who's been with me, committed, loyal, that we've done this kind of growth together, this climb to the top together. And to see the view from the top is really beautiful, but knowing that it doesn't matter what you've done in the
past, you continue to make new memories, so we got to be eager and hungry to keep growing and getting better.

CH: Speaking of the past, and the present and the future, New Hampshire was your home of sorts as a college player. Now you’re at a rival, UAlbany, and that’s your home of sorts as a college coach. How does that make you feel?

CM: It’s really fun to play against them twice a year. A great experience for me to especially go back to that gym and relive my memories, have my friends, and my family, my old teammates there. And it's just really nice because to be able to recruit to a school like UAlbany that's a state school like I went to, in the league that I played in, with similar teams, when I played, it’s just a good fit for me.

And that's why when you're a coach, picking the right school to work at, that's a good fit for you that you feel like you can be successful at. That's why I'm able to sell the school so well, because I believe in the balance of being a student and an athlete and a college student. So the social, the athletic and the academic experience was similar to what I experienced in New Hampshire. And it's special to be able to work at a place so similar to where I went.

CH: No bitterness, no feeling of treachery or anything?

CM: [Laughs] Only when we go head-to-head, but any other time, I think back to my experience with such respect and appreciation, especially having gone to Rhode Island and not having a great experience, and having that second chance at my career in New Hampshire. I am always going to root for New Hampshire, and I loved my experience. I loved being a student there. I loved my teammates. But when we go head-to-head, I'm not a Wildcat fan.

CH: So you were a guard in college, you coached primarily guards at Army, is there a different language or a different approach when you’re working with forwards or centers?

CM: Well, I always wanted to be a center or a forward, but I wasn't blessed with being taller than 5-2. So unfortunately, I was kind of pigeonholed to one position. But I think basketball is basketball. And luckily, I have Yvonne Hawkins who works with our posts, and she's worked with posts for over 25 years, 30 years almost. She really has a good understanding of post play, and also how I like to play post play. And that's been learning for many different coaches.

I worked for David Magarity who was a men's player and a post player, and the way he teaches post really helped me learn a little bit more of the post game. Even though he's giant, he really likes focusing on footwork, facing up in the post, rather than people mostly thinking that you have to play with your back to the basket. More on the face-up game and how to attack off a reverse pivot from the elbow from the short corners, where you can really exploit the defense. I love post play, and I love to recruit post players, and I have a certain type that I like, and you can certainly see that in Helene Haegerstrand, and Kayla Cooper and Freja Werth.
CH: So upon being a head coach, do you feel like you had to teach yourself to sort of ask for help or rely on assistance?

CM: Yeah, I think the most important thing that you do when you get hired as a head coach is filling your staff, and is hiring really great people and hiring people that you feel like No. 1, balance you off. No. 2, have more skills in certain areas than you do, so where you have weaknesses, they have strengths. You want to be surrounded around smarter people than you that are bringing diverse ideas. You don't want people that are yessing you to death that are agreeable.

You want people that are bringing ideas to the table and having different thoughts and perspectives and being innovative and thinking outside the box, because that's what helps you learn and grow. And I think as a head coach, it's a humbling experience because you learn quickly that you don't have all the answers, and you're counting on trusting your staff watched the film and knows this play and knows that play because you can't do it all.

There are too many things that head coaches have to do in terms of interviews, meetings, being in the community, having speaking engagements, working with the media, so you're pulled in different directions and you count on those people to help you be successful. So I think having a great staff, having amazing people around you, understanding that you have so much to learn and being a life learner is the most valuable thing as a coach.

I'm constantly stealing plays from our opponents, taking a great play here and there. I think that's something that I'm confident in, is that I know I don't know everything and I want to learn more. So when you empty your cup, and you're vulnerable, and you're willing to show that you don't know everything, I think that makes a strong leader because that's authentically who I am. And I just try to be a genuine, authentic leader for my players and for the staff.

CH: How closely are coaching and parenting intertwined?

CM: Very close. I mean, it's crazy, because when I became a mom, I became a much different coach. I didn't become a better coach, I just became a different coach, because I truly looked at my players, and I'm like, ‘Wow, you are somebody's baby girl.’

I have a baby girl, and she's my most prized possession. And I adore her, and I think about if my daughter was on my team playing, or on any team with a coach, how would I want her to be led and mentored and developed in critical formative years of her life? And I take that really personally, and it's a huge responsibility, but it's a great opportunity.

And it's an opportunity to help impact young people for their future, teaching them life lessons to help them understand that basketball is the perfect life's classroom to learn how to handle adversity, cooperation, fight, grit, toughness, overcoming mistakes, have growth happen when things aren't going your way, work together, have a goal. So many different things. But as a
parent, it's hard because you want to protect your kids, you want to make sure they're OK, and sometimes you cannot allow them to fail and learn on their own, and knowing when to support and help, and also when to let them fail to learn. And sometimes you got to give them tough love.

And as a kid, and as your child and as your athlete, sometimes, they don't understand the process, because you have more life experience. And it's hard to explain, like, ‘I'm telling you this because I have more life experience.’ But sometimes things are better learned on their own. So it's the balance of knowing how to help support them and encourage them, and also help let them spread their wings and discover and have that self-discovery that's so important at this age.

**CH: Let’s say your daughter is 18 and she commits to Siena. What do you do?**

**CM:** Cry. No, I mean, I'd be thrilled for her. If that was her dream, and Siena was the school for her, and if it fit her mission of academics and athletics if she decided, or dance. She’s more into dance and art. I just want my kids to be happy and I want them to have a passion, whatever it is, I'll be thrilled. I just want them to feel happy and loved and supported in whoever they are, and whatever they want to do.

**CH: I know you’ve only been a head coach for five years, but if you had to say, what would be the ultimate point where you feel like, ‘I’m done, I’m satisfied, I can hang it up now?’**

**CM:** Oh, that’s a good question, you're asking a lot of good questions. I don't know, I think when I feel like I wake up every day, and I don't love my job, because this is a lifestyle. I work a lot. I work nights, I work weekends, I miss holidays, I'm away from my kids, but I'm passionate about mentoring and helping young people. And when I feel like I don't have the energy to give it 100% of my heart and my time, then it's time to walk away.

And I don't think I'm close to that right now because I feel rewarded. I feel passionate. It's very challenging. It's hard, it's stressful. There's wins, there's losses, it's the livelihood of young people. But it's a huge opportunity to be able to have this type of impact on someone's life. And that's what I focus on trying to help them, understand that I care about them and I'll be there for them for their whole life.

**CH: This one might be tough: the job for UConn comes open, they ask you for an interview. What do you do?**

**CM:** Well, I think that that's pretty far-fetched, but thank you for your confidence. Yeah, I think I say ‘Wow, thank you, that's awesome. I really appreciate you reaching out to me and having me be even considered for a position like that with an amazing basketball school and terrific academic institution.’

And I think I'd have to think about ‘OK, is this a type of school I think I can be successful at and follow somebody like Geno Auriemma or whoever the coach would be after? Is this a place that
I love the academics and feel like I can recruit quality students to? Is it a place for my family where my kids will have great schools, my wife will feel supported? Is it an environment that my family will be accepted? And is this the next step of my career?

And I think I'd have to think long and hard about that and have conversations with my administration here about what my long-term goals are. But right now, my goal is to take UAlbany back to that 2016 game that you talked about, and to win games in the NCAA Tournament. That's my goal. I love being here. I'm close to my parents.

It's a great school system for my kids. Both of my sons are on the autism spectrum, so I want them to be in an environment where they feel included, and they feel welcomed, and they can live a fulfilled life, and that they can do that here. So that's the bigger picture for me, it’s why I do this, and it has to be all of those things put together, not just the basketball.

CH: If I could get a rapid-fire answer to one question, how has being a parent of kids on the autism spectrum taught you to approach daily situations?

CM: It's amazing. It's hard. Because I don't want to see my kids suffer, I don't want my kids to have people look at them, say things about them, I don't want things to be difficult. But I love them, they're amazing, they're a joy. And they also give you perspective. That what's important in life, is that everybody feels included.

Everybody's different. Not even just people on the autism spectrum, but everybody has a different perspective. Everybody has a different story. Everybody comes from diverse backgrounds, and when we can relate to people from diverse backgrounds, with diverse thinking with diverse experiences, we're stronger for it, and it's a better world to live in.
Workforce and Supply Chain Issues Impede UAlbany Dining Through First Month of Fall Semester

Albany Student Press | October 18, 2021

Long lines. Meals which can’t be made. Online orders which leave hungry students waiting. These are all symptoms of pandemic-related staffing shortages and supply chain issues in the University at Albany’s dining services, as they struggle to serve a campus at full capacity.

“When we talk about our frontline health -- that is pretty much one service every day -- we are short around 50 positions,” said Kevin D’Onofrio, resident district manager for Sodexo, the leading food service provider at UAlbany. These vacancies include jobs across the two residential dining halls, the Campus Center, and with catering.

Hospitality services usually employ about 350 people total in a non-pandemic school year, he said.

These shortages come after a pandemic-ridden school year where Sodexo was focused on reducing staff. After UAlbany moved all food services to the Campus Center and closed down the dining halls at State and Indigenous Quad (then Indian Quad) in late Sept. 2020, 126 Sodexo employees were furloughed.

While Sodexo found that many of these workers came back to UAlbany, a significant portion of this group was still missing as the Fall 2021 semester began. “As we started calling them back to work, we probably saw somewhere around 80% of them return,” D’Onofrio said.

Compounding this shortage of labor is the high occurrence of workers taking days off due to personal issues. “When you already have vacancies, and now you have callouts due to illnesses, it now creates a bigger problem for us which is hard to overcome on a daily basis,” he said.

On top of the Sodexo employee turnover from last year, school dining is also in short supply with its other major labor force: students. “Prior to COVID, we had over 200, and now we are hovering around 80,” D’Onofrio said. “We always had about 150 students returning, but because of COVID we went from having students in a pool that we would draw from that over COVID went down to zero.”

This dive in scholar employment has been a burden to Zaya Koegel, a sophomore who works at the Halal Shack. The popular location founded by UAlbany graduate Jamal Rasouly is one of five restaurants on campus which employs students who aren’t in college under a federal work-study arrangement. “Staff shortages have really been affecting us, especially when it comes to availability and needing to take days off,” Koegel said. “We have very busy schedules, a lot of us have a lot to do.”
All of this leads to dissatisfaction from student consumers, who often find getting food to be time-consuming and frustrating. CBORD, UAlbany’s online ordering service gives students an estimate of 15 minutes for most orders. The wait is often longer, however. Sophomore Billie Swindler said that once after ordering from Baba’s Pizza, she “stood there waiting for two regular slices for 28 minutes.”

Swindler isn’t the only one who’s had to wait longer than expected for food. “It took me maybe 30 minutes to get my food,” Jordan Schroeder said, talking about a recent meal from the Halal Shack. “Baba’s Pizza completely ignored my order one time,” he added. “I didn’t get my food for an hour so I just got up and left.”

To solve staffing issues, the university is implementing continued efforts to advertise among the student body to find more employees, using signs across campus and other means. During summer orientation, new students were given box lunches that marketed job openings in areas such as the Campus Center. “Student employment tends to grow exponentially just through word of mouth,” said Lauren Mancuso, director of marketing at Sodexo. “One student has two or three friends, those friends come along with that student to apply, and now you’ve got four people instead of one.”

UAlbany has also incentivized current employees across the college to recruit others through a system of earnable bonuses across the semester. A similar concept has been implemented for those working overtime, some of whom worked every day for the first three weeks on 12–14-hour shifts. “If you work an additional three hours you get extra pay, if you work an extra six hours you get additional pay,” D’Onofrio said.

Coupled with the shortage of staff, school dining has also been troubled by a strained supply chain. UAlbany’s food stock sits at no more than 80%, enough to constrain what meals can and cannot be made. While items in especially tight supply include chicken breasts and bacon, scarcities can be found in various areas. “It could be olive oil or whatever, and if the recipe calls for it, what could you do?” said Stephen Pearse, head of University Auxiliary Services (UAS).

In addition, the lack of drivers to make food shipments causes even more difficulty in handling the supply chain. “The first four weeks we were making multiple drives to pick up product because we were either short or running out,” said D’Onofrio. This has also caused a drastic change in delivery schedule. “We would always receive our deliveries somewhere between 6 and 8, 9 in the morning,” he added. “Now they could come as late as 10 o’clock in the night.”

Because of shipment timing that fails to line up with the times students usually eat, those in hospitality services have resorted to using the freezer in Colonial Quad’s defunct dining hall for storage. “It’s like ‘OK I can get a pound of whatever, I can store it now so I can draw from it so I’m not at the mercy of the distributor,” Pearse said.
These shortages become apparent in residential dining. “If you come to late-night dining there’s not really a lot of food,” said Riley Bean, a freshman who lives on State Quad. This is especially an inconvenience for Bean, who regularly attends nighttime dinner due to having classes later in the day.

On top of popular food items such as bacon and chicken which can run on empty, D’Onofrio also mentions the lean availability of paper and plastic products. This scarcity was likely apparent in one experience of Sam Nutig, another freshman who regularly uses State Quad’s dining hall. “One time there was no plates, there were no silverware,” she mentioned.

Despite widespread shortcomings in both manpower and resources in UAlbany dining services, D’Onofrio is cautiously optimistic. “We are hiring more each week,” he said. “It is getting a little bit better, but it is small steps of better.”
RPI looking to reinvent learning with Mercer XLab

WAMC Northeast Public Radio | By Christian Hince

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the classroom and laid bare the differences in learning styles of students, with many college-age learners struggling to connect with traditional teaching methods. Investments at one upstate New York university are intended to reach students in new ways.

Last November, the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute launched the Mercer XLab, a new way of promoting non-traditional teaching methods at the school. The original Mercer Lab, unveiled in 2012, is located within RPI’s J. Erik Jonsson Engineering Center. A small classroom space filled with electrical devices and machines, it was developed thanks to a half-million-dollar gift from 1977 graduate and RPI Fellow Emeritus Doug Mercer. A pioneer in analog-to-digital technology with a career that spans more than four decades, Mercer saw a need for change in the institute’s academic ecosystem.

“One of the things that I had noticed is that the students were really struggling when we would ask questions about courses that they had taken last semester,” Mercer said. “We would say, ‘OK, tell me about what you did in this class or what you thought was interesting,’ and then we dive into some more detail.”

With a new $2 million gift from Mercer, the funds will have an impact beyond the lab space.

RPI hopes the XLab will bring students and faculty together to share ideas and tinker in fields like robotics and electrical engineering. It currently includes the existing physical classroom and a planned online portal, which would give staff and students individualized levels of access to resources.

XLab’s director, Shayla Sawyer, a professor of electrical, computer and systems engineering at RPI, envisions the new concept will make the space, as well as online resources and services available for everyone on campus and beyond.

“The XLab is looking to cross-pollinate ideas across schools and departments, and potentially across universities, so I'm really excited about this idea of extending knowledge. The X in X Lab partly represents multiplication. As people come together, how do we multiply great ideas?” Sawyer said. “It's about that interconnection between schools between pedagogical ideas and across departments.”

Student leader Cait Bennett, an RPI MBA candidate and 156th Grand Marshal, has been a proponent of the university’s embrace of new teaching methods.
“There are all types of thinkers, all types of learners. The part that went into the Mercer laboratory is this idea of exploratory education and developing slowly but surely a classroom where everybody is set up for success,” Bennett said. “Lectures are easy, right? People who learn by listening to information? Easy, we have that in lectures. What's harder is the piece where you've got a bunch of students who don't learn from lectures, and who learn from tinkering and playing with something, seeing what happens.”

For Daegen Fuss, a senior majoring in electrical engineering and applied mathematics, the shift from by-the-book learning to a hands-on, collaborative approach has been especially helpful.

“I was diagnosed when I was younger as dyslexic so my learning style has always been avoiding words at all costs,” said Fuss.

Fuss thinks the methods encouraged with the Mercer XLab allow him to solve engineering problems in a way that simply following a lab manual does not.

“Because you learn the material, you have a set number of restrictions, but still enough flexibility to do what you want,” he said.

With the online portal still under construction, RPI is also seeking to add new physical equipment, software, and more physical space with expansions to continue over the summer. It’s these developments which school president Marty Schmidt believes mark a turning point university.

“Indeed, the Capital Region is fast becoming a hub of the most innovative and necessary technology of our time, so the timing for the launch of the Mercer XLab could not be better,” Schmidt said. “It will foster a learning ecosystem that actively engages faculty, students and staff in an educational experiment to amplify the learning experience of RPI students.”
Chris Pellnat Forges His Own Path On “Go”

NYS Music | Published December 14, 2022

When Hudson’s Chris Pellnat released his fifth solo album Go in September, it was yet another mark of a folk musician who can’t stick to just folk. While Pellnat’s songwriting is standard, his playful lyrics and eclectic instrumentation give him a signature mark.

With plenty of solo material, Pellnat’s collaborative resume has its marks as well. He’s one half of Brooklyn folk pop duo Teeniest. He’s the lead guitarist of Poughkeepsie group The Warp/The Weft, with whom he shows off his straightforward but technical approach through infectious lead riffs on albums such as 2019’s Dead Reckoning.

While the grunge and prog-rock tones of The Warp/The Weft and the upbeat folksy approach of Teeniest are relatively consistent, Pellnat’s solo work is a little eclectic. His 2021 record Crossing bounces from odd displays of vibraphone and clarinet to bright jangle pop to garage rock on a track-by-track basis, something which remains the same on Go, a 10-track, 30-minute exploration.

The opening titular track sets this tone from the get-go, with its wistful melody driven by vibraphone and gurgling synths setting the scene for Pellnat’s personal lyrics. “In my own way, trying to be better, braver wiser. And someday, I leave my burden down at the horizon,” he sings in an untrained tenor.

Pellnat created music videos for the record’s first three songs, each of which are amateurish yet endearing. “Go” is accompanied by a crude assembly of footage, including time-lapses of his rural Hudson Valley home, shots of him performing outdoors, and a frog.

Next is the adventurous and political “What Are We?” with its muted guitar riff and pulsating synth line that set the scene for Pellnat’s barrage of philosophical questions. “What if we are sick of the crazy, endless lies that will not die,” he sings on the final verse. “What if we are still trying to fight the evil power still inside?” It has an upbeat tension that reminisces of a storm chase or UFO search.

The video features odd, color-imbalanced shots of his face, images from an MRI scan sewed together with iMovie-adjacent transitions that uphold the song’s mysterious energy, even in this DIY presentation.

Track three, “Existential Dread,” returns to the personal. It’s an upbeat and melodic dulcimer tune that follows the trope of cheery songwriting contrasted by dejected lyrics, as Pellnat talks about the difficulty existential dread. “Drinking won’t do it, weed won’t cut through it, I always knew it,” he sings on the chorus.
Its music video is easily the most absurd of the three, where Pellnat fights both caffeine and alcohol addiction alongside a vigorous quest to prove he’s not a robot through an endless series of CAPTCHA quizzes and corporate security questions.

Pellnat describes *Go* as “a rather positive statement overall” but also “colored by darkness,” with “Existential Dread” serving as an early example on the record. There’s also the sad accordion bluegrass of the following song “What I Want You To Want,” which mires itself in depressed romanticism. “No starry-eyed romantic, I’m talking about overcoming the darkness all around us,” Pellnat sings on the opening verse.

Later on is “Are We Going To Fly?” the darkest point of the album sonically with its uncanny guitar melody and echoing clarinet. “Are we going to find our way?” he sings. “Thought you said we had all day.” Backed by a skittering drum machine, this song shows Pellnat at his most off-kilter.

Bright moments which reminisce of his work on Teeniest include self-described “jangle-fest” Earth Shaker. It’s an endearing love song with summery guitars, making for a songwriting highlight. “Tumbling down the walls we made up, everything we will do it’ll last forever,” Pellnat sings on the chorus.

There’s penultimate track “Water Wings,” an acoustic/woodblock tune about climate change. “Typhoons in winter, tornado splinter, now you begin to taste the ocean breeze, it’s how it’s going to be,” he sings on the second verse.

Closer “Suburbs of Paradise” sees Pellnat’s commentary shift towards criticizing the mundanity of suburbia over a dusty slide guitar riff. He talks about how “the roads they’re all the same, they all just beat around the bush,” and talks about being trapped “in an endless cul de sac” in a short but sweet 1:52.

*Go* is very personal album from Pellnat. Not in the sense that it’s constantly serious or sappy, but because it’s genuine. It’s vulnerable, it’s goofy, it’s political, and it’s eclectic. Chris Pellnat made a record about succeeding personal in his own way, and here he absolutely did.
Women’s Basketball Knocked Out in America East Second Round by Vermont

Albany Student Press | Published March 16, 2024

The University at Albany’s final game in the Broadview Center on Monday (3/11) was a heartbreaking one, with them losing 50-46 to third-seeded Vermont in the second round of the America East tournament.

“This one really hurts on your home floor,” head coach Colleen Mullen said. “I felt like we really controlled the game.”

The second-seeded Great Danes led for over 27 minutes of game time and were up by as much as 10, but always left the Catamounts within reach. Both teams traded leads across the game’s final three minutes before an Emma Utterback three off a pass from Delaney Richason made it 48-46 with 14.1 seconds left. After UAlbany advanced the ball past halfcourt and called a timeout, Kayla Cooper dribbled from the top of the key to the hoop but couldn’t make a game-tying layup over Vermont forward Anna Olson. The game was over following a brief series of desperation fouls.

It was Vermont’s third win over UAlbany this season and their fifth in a row dating back to last season where they defeated the Great Danes 38-36 in the America East title game. Catamounts coach Alisa Kresge has plenty of respect for Mullen’s program. “This was a hard-fought win, and it's not because UAlbany is not good. They're really, really good,” she said.

Despite shooting just 39.6 percent as a team, Vermont had four double-digit scorers. Keira Hanson led with 13 points on 5-11 shooting which included three 3-pointers. Utterback’s 2-3 from beyond the arc propelled her to 12 points despite a 5-13 overall mark. Olson scored 11 points on 4-10 shooting, and Bella Vito scored 10 on 4-8 from the field.

The Great Danes had one of their better shooting nights at 47.7 percent as the team’s senior-most players led the way, as Kayla Cooper notched a team-high 16 points on 7-13 shooting. Polishing off her fourth year on the team, Cooper doesn’t plan for this to be her last as a Great Dane.

“Albany’s my home, I’m not going anywhere,” she said.

Cooper, who easily led the team in scoring in 2023-24 with 15.7 points-per-game, will be the most tenured member of UAlbany’s roster next year, something which only delights her coach.

“She's somebody that has grown so much as a young woman. Watching her maturity and being a small part of her journey has truly been a privilege,” Mullen said. “We're excited to have her back and to rebuild around her again for next year.”
This year’s most tenured UAlbany player had one of her best games this season, with Helene Haegerstrand scoring 15 points on 7-10 shooting and leading the team with seven rebounds. The fifth year forward from Sweden started the year as a graduate assistant to the team due to health concerns and averaged single digit scoring for the first time since her freshman year at 9.1 points-per-game. Nevertheless, she has nothing but appreciation for her time at UAlbany.

“It's a really good program and I'm just super happy for my experience and so proud of everything we've accomplished here,” she said while fighting back tears. “It's been a great year no matter how this game ended.”

Haegerstrand, who was one of Mullen’s first recruits to UAlbany, started her career well before the program established winning ways as the Great Danes went 9-21 during her freshman season in 2019-20, something her coach appreciates.

“She's built amazing relationships and friendships with everybody here, and she's been somebody that’s seen it through since the beginning,” Mullen said.

While this is UAlbany’s first time falling short of the conference title game since 2020-21, their 25-6 record is the best in Mullen’s career and best since 2015-16 when they finished 28-5 and upset Florida in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

The Great Danes still have a chance to play again depending on how the Women’s National Invitational Tournament (WNIT) selects its 48 teams on Sunday. Regardless, Mullen is proud of her program’s efforts as they stand today.

“Our staff works tirelessly to try to win and try to build a good culture,” she said. “I wouldn't be here without their unbelievable work ethic.”
How Track and Field’s Jamaican Athletes Are Upholding a Historic Program

Albany Student Press | Published May 11, 2023

The University at Albany’s track and field team is profoundly dominant. They’ve been women’s outdoor America East champions in each of the last 14 seasons and men’s champions from 2009 to 2022 – with the women winning indoor titles nine times straight from 2014 to 2022.

Head coach Roberto Vives has led a historic program across his near 40 years at the school, building its reputation through the success of numerous Jamaican athletes.

Williams Boys, Part I

Jamaica has a renowned tradition for great sprinters, with names such as Usain Bolt, Yohan Blake, and Shelly-Ann Fraser-Price having represented the country as Olympic champions. Travis Williams hopes to be the next.

Travis’s season has been nothing short of historic for UAlbany. In year two, he’s set program records for races of 55m and 60m for indoor; and 100m, 200m, and 300m in the spring. Additionally, his time of 6.59 seconds for 60m at the Millrose Games in Feb. clocked in at 20th in the nation for outdoor this season.

For Travis’s accomplishments this year, he was awarded as UAlbany’s Breakthrough Male Athlete, Male Athlete of the Year, and for Best Male Championship Performance, in addition to Most Outstanding Track Performance & Coaches Award from the America East.

It’s a nice progression from his freshman year, where a fractured ankle during the preseason and a pulled hamstring kept Travis from reaching his true potential. “I didn't let my injuries define me. I worked on myself, then I came back stronger and better,” he said.

Despite originally being from Jamaica, culture shock wasn’t a problem when he came to Albany. During his childhood, Travis split time between family in Jamaica and the U.S., and later attended Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx from 10th to 12th grade. Vives also was an alumnus of Cardinal Hayes, which immediately made UAlbany an appealing destination. There was also assistant sprints coach Junior Burnett, a Jamaican and student athlete at UAlbany from 2004 to 2007 who’s held down his current role since graduating.

“All of them got acquainted, I got acquainted, and we started talking and then it just felt genuine at the time,” Travis said.

Having grown up with a Jamaican coach, the familiarity brought by Burnett being there was important. “I came to realize that I'm coming to an environment where I have people that have my same culture and I kind of gravitated towards it,” he said.
Along with the achievements of a winner, Travis has the demeanor of one. Travis is congenial and confident, jovially talking about anything from track to proper workout supplements to the importance of good sleep habits. His competitive spirit is clear too.

“The competition will always be there, just keep focusing on me, me executing my race,” he said. “It's just me, the gun, and the line. Once it starts, you're running to get a good time and you're running to win.”

**Williams Boys, Part II**

Shakur Williams (no relation to Travis), or “Shak” for short, was late to the game when it came to track. Starting the sport in ninth grade, he admired Yohan Blake’s gold medal performance in the 2012 London Games. While Olympian and Jamaican inspiration played a part in Shak becoming a sprinter, so did natural factors. Asthmatic since he was 2 years old, Shak found it impossible to get through training during his first couple seasons on the team.

“My third year I said ‘Alright, I know I can't run long, so I'm gonna go to the short sprints and work my butt off just to get to that line before I have any problems,’ he said.

Similarly to Travis, Junior Burnett – commonly known as Coach Junior – and the pre-established Jamaican culture at UAlbany’s program were instrumental for Shak.

“When I spoke with Coach Junior and came on a visit, it felt like it was like a homely vibe,” Shak said. “There were a lot of Jamaicans on the team so I had people I could relate to.”

Shak says his sole exposure to America pre-UAlbany was a Disneyland trip at age 13, so outside of track, he still had a bit of needed adjusting upon arrival. Specifically, the size of UAlbany’s student body gave him an initial shock.

“Every day still I see a familiar faces, but I still see different people,” Shak said.

While sprinting isn’t a niche which Shak chose, it’s one he’s made his own. In his time at UAlbany, Shak’s racked up four conference titles, winning the 4x100m the last two seasons and coming in first for both the 60m and 100m in 2022. As for the challenge of his record-setting Williams counterpart, who arrived in Albany a year after him, Shak welcomes the pressure brought upon by his friend and teammate.

“I wouldn't have it any other way,” he said. “Because if I knew that I would come to training and beat Travis without even trying, then I know that I'd have to find some external motivation to get better.”

**Dominique Clarke**
Dominique Clarke is the quietest of this group, but she doesn’t seem any less comfortable around her teammates than anyone else. She laughs along when Shak tells a story about one day at practice where she wore a wig under a tam only to have him pull both off.

“I was telling you, the wig-tam combo,” she says to Shak. “They [Williams boys] always doing something.”

Having started out track and field as a hurdler before her hurdles coach left, sprinting became Dominique’s deal. While Clarke wasn’t the most invested in sprinting initially, after the first year she truly grew into it.

“I saw my speed getting faster, I [was] becoming better at doing it, so I was like OK, this definitely is what I want,” she said.

What didn’t take Clarke very long was deciding that she had zero interest in anything distance-oriented. “I realized anything longer than a 200 wasn't for me when I was doing a lap, and I was like ‘This is not for me, this too long.’”

When it became recruiting time, Clarke found that UAlbany chose her, rather than the other way around. “I only ran 11.8 and I didn't reach the recruiting barrier that was 11.6,” Clarke said. “I did my research, I knew a friend that knew somebody here at UAlbany, and then I spoke to Coach Junior.”

UAlbany’s coaching staff has been one of the best parts of her experience with the program. “The coaching staff here is probably one of the best I've ever been around,” she said. “They're very welcoming, they will let you feel at home.”

Upon first coming to Albany, she was surprised by the diversity. “You have different cultures, different ethnicities, so it was very shocking here because in Jamaica, there was only one race dominantly,” Clarke said.

Clarke didn’t linger on this adjustment though, saying “everybody can adapt to anything.”

Just like her two teammates sitting at the table and plenty of her countrymen and women before, Clarke gives sprinting a proud name. She holds records in both the women’s outdoor 100m and 200m as well as the indoor 55m, 60m, and 200m.

Shannon Bailey

At just 8 years old, Bailey stood at 5-10. A student at Vaz Preparatory School in Kingston, she describes track and field having been competitive from “a very young age.” While this piqued her interest as a child, Bailey met stubborn resistance.

“I had been begging my mom to do it [let her compete]” Bailey said. “She said no every single time.”
However, Bailey’s mother soon became acquainted with a “track parent” who saw the potential and interest of her very tall daughter.

“Every day after school, he [the parent] walked her down and said ‘Shannon needs to do high jump, she needs to join track,’” said Bailey.

Outnumbered, her mother gave in, and the rest was history for Bailey, an all-America East athlete and the 2022 conference high jump champion. The now 21-year-old, 6-foot-tall jumper tries to talk to her family back in Jamaica at least once a week, but communicating can be a little difficult sometimes.

“I call ‘em and ask about something that happened back home, I won't find out,” Bailey said. “I'm like, ‘Y’all can tell me still, you know?’”

Bailey doesn’t mean this as a reprimand, though. “They've been supportive, they’ve been understanding,” Bailey said. “I have zero complaints when it comes to how they’ve been.”

Fear was never a factor for Bailey when it came to adjusting to Albany. “I was more excited than afraid or anxious about coming into a new environment, but definitely having people that were from similar backgrounds as I [Jamaicans] helped,” Bailey said.

**Travis Robinson**

The 6-4, 240-pound Travis Robinson is out of commission, wearing a t-shirt, basketball shorts, and crocs. With an injured hip-groin area, the spinning needed to generate force when throwing isn’t possible for him right now, and the timetable for his return is also unclear.

“I’m not sure man, we gonna see and try to take it a day at a time and be positive and stuff like that,” he said.

Robinson doesn’t call himself a social person, saying that he “fits within a selective group of people,” but once he gets going, he’s funny and plenty personable, sporting a toothy smile.

Robinson jokes about how he could beat Shak in a 100m race given a 70m head start, admitting that he needs to get in shape first. Unlike the other athletes here, track and field was not his first choice.

“See I wanted to play basketball,” he said, describing how he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his older brother.

Aside from being the home of Knicks legend Patrick Ewing, Jamaica’s not much known for basketball, with its national team being ranked 109 of 161 in the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) World Ranking.

Instead, in seventh grade, a friend of Robinson gave him a pitch to join track and field, saying he’d “get all the girls, all the attention, so he was really selling me into it.”
Robinson described himself as unfit, making the experience highly difficult early on. “If I [ran] 30 meters, I would be short of breath, I'm not even joking,” Robinson said.

Robinson quit later on during this first season after not competing, but returned the following year, dedicating two days instead of just one per week to training. Then, in ninth grade, Robinson was approached by the team’s throwing captain with a piece of advice: “if you train seriously [for] one year and if you don't get anything from it, stop.”

Following through with this, he found results. Robinson placed fifth in shot put at the 2018 Inter-Secondary Schools Boys and Girls Championships, a nationally renowned high school age track and field meet in Jamaica. This success has translated in Albany, with him ending 2022 with the title of America East rookie of the year. This included earning titles for both indoor and outdoor shot put, with him also winning the outdoor discus championship in a school-record performance.

He finds the track and field team to be a bit under-served, lamenting the lack of an indoor facility after the collapse of “The Bubble” in 2021.

“This is not easy, because Albany is cold, I like to say, 90% of the time,” Robinson said.

The Capital Region is a far cry from the climate of Robinson’s hometown and Jamaica’s capital, Kingston, where average monthly temperatures never dip to 70°F or lower.

“A lot of athletes get hurt unnecessarily, because we don’t have facilities,” Robinson said. “When you don’t have certain facilities, you can’t really run as fast as you want in it [cold weather] because it can get shin splints.”

While Robinson is disappointed to see his team’s constant success coming without reward in this regard, in contrast from a men’s basketball team that will play in a newly renovated stadium next season despite finishing last in the American East in 2022-23. However, he acknowledges the economics around college sports, saying “I’m not the one with the millions.”

Robinson still took it somewhat personally, saying “I want to be the best version of myself, obviously.”

While injured and unsatisfied with the university, Robinson enjoyed the fact that success is something that he and athletes such as Travis and Shak Williams, Shannon Bailey, and Dominique Clarke can share.

“When you have a group with everybody shining, it makes it fun because you guys can have similar conversations,” Robinson said.
Johnson’s dagger three in Sweet Sixteen a culminating moment

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ALBANY, N.Y. – South Carolina was up just 74-72 with 53 seconds left to play against Indiana when star center Kamilla Cardoso stopped her drive and dished it behind the arc to Raven Johnson for a three that put the Gamecocks in the driver's seat for the rest of a 79-75 victory.

"I was open and all I could think was, 'Let it go,'" Johnson said of the play.

It was a fitting cap to a strong night from the third-year guard, who went 3-for-3 beyond the arc en route to a 14-point performance that was second-best on the team while leading the Gamecocks in assists with six.

But neither the pass from Cardoso for the game-securing shot or her strong overall performance have all the context which made Friday so special for Johnson.

After playing a grand total of eight minutes across two games her true freshman year in 2021-22, she came off the bench for 18.6 minutes per game the following season, scoring just 4.2 points per game on shooting numbers of 36.8 percent overall and 24.1 percent behind the arc.

Her tough year shooting was punctuated in South Carolina's Final Four loss against Iowa, in an offensive possession where Caitlin Clark waved off Johnson as she sat on the 3-point line, indicating that she wasn't worth guarding. The moment subsequently went viral online.

"People bashed me, they called me all these names, they said I wasn't this person. They didn't even know me, they were judging this book by its cover. I was so depressed."

After a summer in the gym for Johnson where she worked to improve as a shooter both mechanically and mentally, she noticed the difference instantly.

"The first game we got out there, when I shot the ball, it was just it was so fluid," she said. "Last year I was so scared to shoot the ball, but this year, I'm not scared. In my head, it don't matter if I miss it, don't matter if I make it, I'm just gonna shoot."

While scoring isn't a massive part of Johnson's game as a true point guard, all of her stats as a scorer have leapt visibly this season as a starter, with her 8.2 points per game coming off 45.9 percent shooting from the field and 35.3 percent from three.

Fast forward back to this Friday, head coach Dawn Staley knew where to look after her 21-point-lead shrank to two.
"I saw in Raven's eyes when it was coming down [to] the [final] stretch and our lead was diminishing, I knew she wasn't gonna let us lose," Staley said.

What happened next, was a career-defining moment for Johnson and a season-defining moment for the now 35-0 Gamecocks.

Even with this gravity, Johnson is modest about her role and how the play came to her.

"I'm a true point guard," she said. "I try to put people in positions where they can score, so all the options were gone, and it was just me."

Johnson and the Gamecocks will face Oregon State on Sunday in the Elite Eight round at 1 p.m. with broadcast coverage on ABC. The winner moves on to the Final Four in Cleveland.