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Stampede: E-newsletter for students

Western Michigan University

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Stampede April 24, 2020

Western Michigan University

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April 24, 2020



Caps off to the grads! 🎓

After years of studying and putting learned skills into practice, Western Michigan University graduates are heading out into the world—but they aren't alone or unequipped. Career and Student Employment Services is helping Broncos position themselves for professional success. [Learn about virtual appointments](#)



[Kordell Smith \(Business\)](#)



[Alaa Sleymann \(Biological Sciences\)](#)



[Kobe Brown \(Theatre\)](#)



WMU nursing program students, faculty are pandemic prepared

They're ready for anything—including a pandemic. WMU's Bronson School of Nursing students are preparing to join the workforce as COVID-19 continues to spread throughout Michigan, straining hospitals and medical personnel.

[Preparing for the pandemic](#)



Student social media campaign helps WMU community #staypositive



Amid major changes and the uncertainty of COVID-19, Eta Sigma Gamma members are spreading their message of health, hope and happiness. The public health students have launched a social media campaign focused on mental and physical well-being.

[Be well WMU](#)



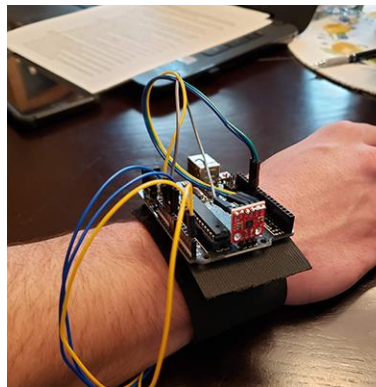
Campus community pitching in to provide WMU students with essentials

A group of WMU faculty, staff, alumni, parents and community members are collecting and delivering food and household products to students still living on or near campus.

[Get assistance](#)



[Aviation alum delivers critical supplies, personnel for pandemic response](#)



[WMU senior engineering students solve problems facing business, industry and people](#)



[Future Broncos use talents to help frontline health care workers](#)

Broncos at home



Music challenge aims to build harmony, community from a distance

A WMU alumnus is going to “fight on, fight on for Western” amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Blake Morgan and Dr. David Loberg Code have issued the #wmuMakesMusic challenge to bring student voices together from afar. [Join the challenge](#)



For the birds: Avian adventures bring comfort while social distancing

A symphonic feast awaits you in the great outdoors! A WMU doctoral student shares how you can experience the free, soothing and educational adventures of birdwatching while social distancing on and off campus. [Enjoy the sights and sounds of nature](#)

(269) 387-8400
marcom@wmich.edu

Western Michigan University
1903 W Michigan Ave
Kalamazoo MI 49008 USA

Career and Student Employment Services ready to help WMU students, recent alumni navigate uncertain job market

Contact: [Erin Flynn](#)

April 22, 2020

Graduating seniors are entering a unique job market. Follow the links under the photos in this article to read about how some outstanding WMU graduates are confidently heading into the future.



Business graduate Kordell Smith lined up an inside sales job weeks before graduation.
[Read about his WMU journey.](#)

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—College graduates are entering a new world in the midst of a global pandemic. Many companies are consolidating operations and changing the way they do business—both internally and externally. Western Michigan University’s [Career and Student Employment Services](#) is available to help students and recent alumni position themselves for professional success.

“It’s more important than ever for graduates to be able to articulate their experiences, strengths and competencies through resumes, cover letters and answers to interview questions,” says **Dr. Ewa Urban**, interim director for career and post-graduation success.



Biomedical sciences graduate Alaa Sleymann is applying to dental programs.
[Read about her WMU journey.](#)

The office, as well as the [Zhang Career Center](#), is open virtually for students every day of the week, offering services such as resume critiques and career advising to create customized job search plans. Advisors are tailoring appointments to the unique reality students are facing right now, taking stock of their mental, physical and emotional health at the beginning of each appointment.

“All students are dealing with anxiety, confusion, and fear, and we want to assure them that we are here for them with all of their needs, not just job-related concerns,” says **Sarah Hagen**, career development specialist.

“Some students are reporting a job or internship offer being rescinded, which means they need to quickly pivot to a new search and secure new opportunities,” she says. “I’ve been very impressed with the resiliency and positivity that most students are displaying.”



Music theatre performance graduate Kobe Brown is ready for the spotlight at Tokyo Disneyland. [Read about his WMU journey.](#)

There’s also a [new webpage](#) created specifically for navigating the job search during the pandemic, which includes links to a number of helpful resources, including:

- Handshake, a job search platform;
- Big Interview, interview preparation software; and
- Career Resources Elearning.



Exercise science graduate Kassidy Davis is ready to pursue a doctoral degree in physical therapy. [Read about her WMU journey.](#)

A number of virtual job fairs are being planned to connect students with employers. The first, [for education students and alumni](#), is a collaboration with other Michigan universities planned for **May 11**. Other opportunities will follow later in the spring and summer, and many employers are posting their own virtual events in Handshake.

“Now, more than ever, networking is going to be very important to students,” says Urban. “Students should stay connected with their mentors, professors, WMU staff and other professionals, and ask for recommendations as to how they can improve their skills, their resumes and who else they should be connecting with for potential job leads.”

Urban also says now is the time to take stock of their skills and make sure they’re able to effectively articulate them. This includes career readiness competencies and transferable skills, such as leadership, teamwork, intercultural fluency, technical skills and problem solving—all necessary to be able to adapt in the changing job market.

“Being able to absorb new information and news, make adjustments or changes, and continue to move forward is critical,” Hagen adds. “Employers will be asking about their coping skills in interviews, including giving concrete examples of these strategies, and students must be able to describe their grit and resilience.”

For more WMU news, arts and events, visit [WMU News](#) online.

Standout business graduate enters workforce armed with grit, resilience

Contact: [Erin Flynn](#)

April 20, 2020

[Read a special message from President Edward Montgomery](#) for Western Michigan University's 2020 graduates.



Kordell Smith (Photo credit Elizabeth Heinz)

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Leaders are forged in crisis. It comes as no surprise then that **Kordell Smith** emerged as a standout leader in Western Michigan University’s sales and business marketing program. The graduating senior started his college career with a last-minute decision.

“It was actually a blessing how I chose WMU during such a stressful time for me. It was already April and my back was against the wall,” he says. “I kind of began to lose the excitement of what was a big life decision.”

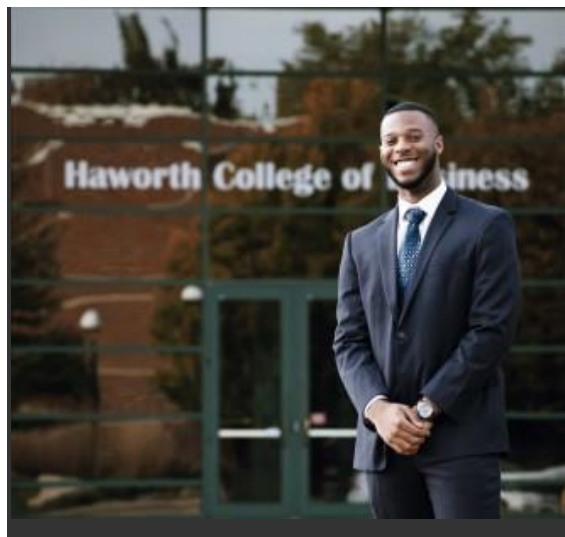
Smith, who grew up in Southfield, Michigan, had visited three schools. None seemed to fit, and he’d have to choose between sales and marketing if he went to any of them. He’d all but given up when he heard his two best friends raving about their choice: WMU. To his surprise, the school also boasted the top sales program in the nation in the Haworth College of Business and offered a combined major of sales and business marketing.

“I visited the following week, and when I arrived here everything just felt right. I had fallen in love with the atmosphere of Kalamazoo and campus,” says Smith. “I couldn’t have fallen into a better place.”

His tour guide, **Lauren Toppen**, also played a pivotal role in his Western experience. A member of the Sales and Business Marketing Association, she told him about the networking and learning opportunities the group could open up for him.

“Right away I got involved, and it became one of the best decisions I ever made,” says Smith, who became a board member in his second semester of freshman year. “The resources that SBMA gives us are immense. With employers coming in every week, workshops, company trips and resume-building experiences, it was crucial.”

IMPACTFUL EXPERIENCES



Since he was a kid, Smith has loved business. He had a knack for negotiating and loved to haggle for bargains at garage sales with his friends. That love has only grown during his time at WMU.

“WMU has deepened my passions by giving me hands-on learning experience,” Smith says. “Role-playing using real products, with real companies, gets us prepared to sell anything at the next level.”

Along with multiple internships, Smith says the leadership and business strategy program—where he picked up a second major—had a profound impact on his success. In particular, he says his leadership management strategy course was more than a class; it was a journey of teamwork, commitment, impact and growth.

“We have to adapt to demand. We use our critical thinking to evaluate our clients’ business, their market, the industry and use our problem-solving to find the root cause of issues, then find a solution,” he says. “If I’m called to lead, I know without hesitation I’m ready and able.”

It’s that spirit that earned him the Sales and Business Marketing Outstanding Service Award and also helped him land his first job, weeks ahead of graduation, as an inside sales representative at VMware in Austin, Texas. While his training may be modified because of the COVID-19 pandemic, he’s confident his education has set him up for career success—whatever life brings.

“The WMU culture embodies a sense of resiliency,” says Smith. “Losing our graduation to this virus was absolutely devastating. I’m not sure what the future holds for us, but I know that we’ve been instilled with a skill set that will keep us competitive in a market where things will be tight.”

Above all, he’ll emerge from college with pride in the larger WMU community.

“Broncos love and support one another. We’re not just a number, we’re a team here,” he says. “The people that I’ve met, the lessons learned, the memories made, the experiences and opportunities that Western has provided me will forever be ingrained in me.”

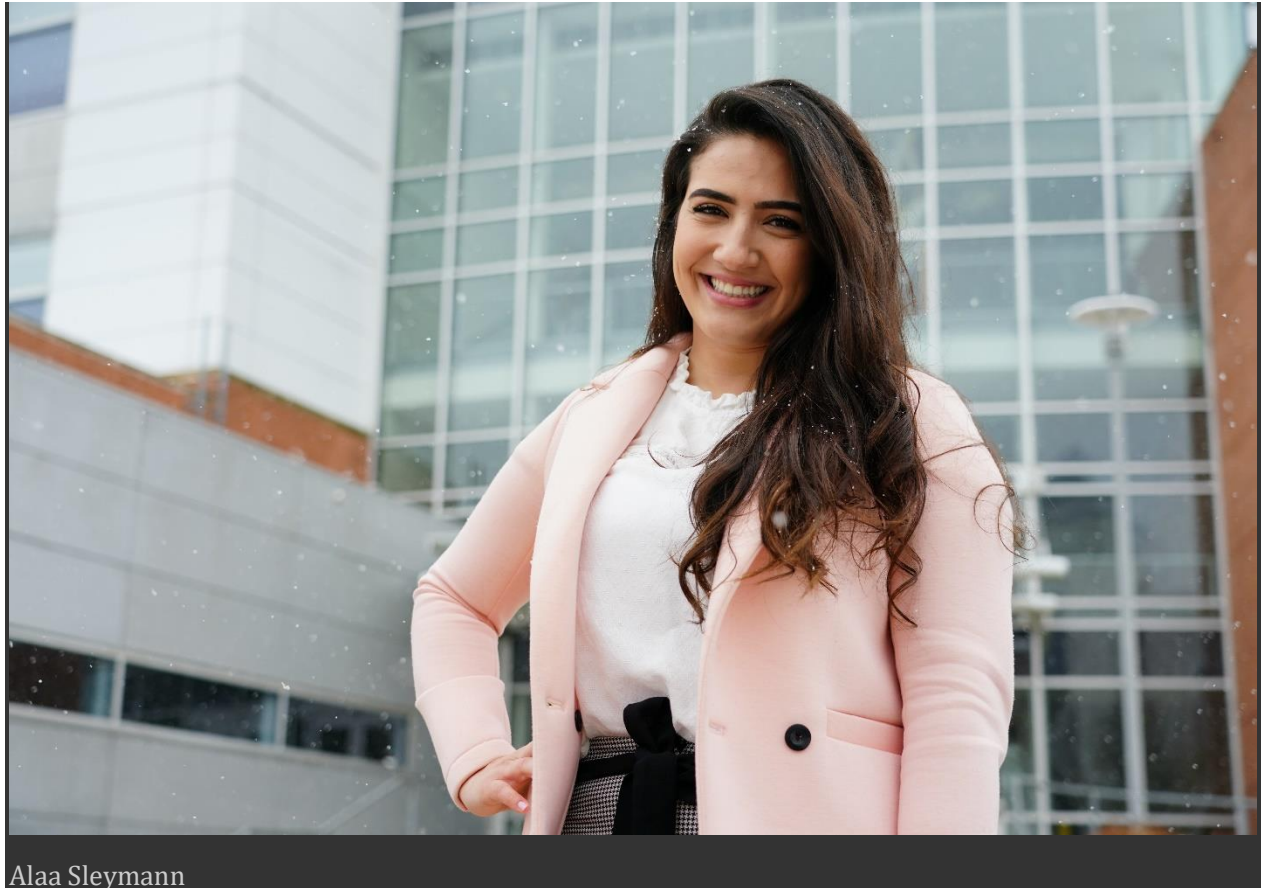
For more WMU news, arts and events, visit [WMU News](#) online.

Biomedical sciences graduate continues family legacy at WMU

Contact: [Erin Flynn](#)

April 20, 2020

[Read a special message from President Edward Montgomery](#) for Western Michigan University's 2020 graduates.



KALAMAZOO, Mich.—**Alaa Sleymann** has dreamed of becoming a Western Michigan University alumna since she was a little girl. Originally from Lebanon, she watched her father, **Alee Sleymann**, excel in his field after moving to Kalamazoo in 1999. After obtaining his MBA from WMU in 2001, the civil engineer pursued a doctoral degree in public administration and in 2006 became the first Bronco to defend his dissertation via teleconference—connecting to Walwood Hall from Bahrain, where he was helping set up a business.

“I’m grateful to be a Bronco because I am continuing our family legacy,” says Sleymann—a tradition she hopes will continue for generations to come.

PASSIONATE ABOUT HELPING OTHERS

Sleymann graduates this semester with a bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences. She plans to apply to dental school. The journey to that goal, however, will likely look a little different because of the COVID-19 pandemic, as medical offices scale back services deemed nonessential.

"I was looking forward to graduating and starting a new chapter in my life," she says. "It is somewhat worrying not being able to see an end to this pandemic and resuming a somewhat normal life."

Still, Sleymann feels prepared to handle the professional curveball life has thrown, confident in the base skills she's developed through her major.

"These past four years of studying different diseases and anatomy, as well as physiology, have helped me with critical thinking and problem-solving," says Sleymann. "I was taught to learn how things are tied together and where these issues are taking place in the human body. As a prospective health care professional, I will be using all of these skills in the workforce—they are crucial for success."

Having shadowed various health care professionals for hundreds of hours during her time at WMU, Sleymann says she knows her passion for helping others, combined with the practical knowledge she's developed, will make her a qualified applicant in a number of medical settings.

A SOLID FOUNDATION

While she's excited about what the future holds, Sleymann says her path to graduation hasn't always been easy. But, she made it to the finish line thanks to the guidance of her professors.

"I found my passion at WMU because of many dedicated professors," says Sleymann, who admits she struggled with doubt early on as classes became more challenging. "As I found trusted professors to turn to during difficult times, I realized this field was more than right for me, and I was excited to begin my journey as a healthcare professional."

Professors, says Sleymann, allowed her to envision what a future career could look like.

"They made me realize that I loved this field because of their passion for their careers. I am so grateful for the help my professors provided me with along this journey."

In addition to faculty, Sleymann says she owes her success to the entire WMU community.

“I am very thankful for every moment and for all the help I have received from professors, advisors, friends and family,” says Sleymann. “You made my journey that much greater, and for that, I say thank you. I am very excited to start the next chapter of my life.”

For the latest WMU News, arts and events, visit [WMU News](#) online.

Music theatre performance graduate ready for next act

Contact: [Erin Flynn](#)

April 21, 2020

[Read a special message from President Edward Montgomery](#) for Western Michigan University's 2020 graduates.



Kobe Brown

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—The world’s a stage, and soon **Kobe Brown** will be in the spotlight. The Western Michigan University graduating senior is looking forward to his first industry job, beginning a nine-month contract in August as a vocalist in “Big Band Beat” at Disneyland Tokyo.

He earned the opportunity to audition after a representative from the A1 Audition Conference in New York came to campus in fall 2019—one of many networking and professional experiences provided regularly to WMU theatre students. Brown was successful, he says, because of the skills he’s honed at Western.

“My training in musical theatre performance has prepared me to be competitive and unique in the field, while also preparing me to be a well-rounded adult that can advocate for and carry myself as a professional in the business,” says Brown, who grew up in Grand Rapids. “The individuality in a lot of Western grads is what sets alum apart from other schools. Everyone is encouraged to embrace what makes them different, as opposed to what makes them ‘right,’ and that serves us well as we train.”

From participating in a number of WMU theatre productions, to performing in front of a packed room of industry professionals during the annual [Music Theatre Showcase](#) in New York featuring senior performance majors, Brown has relished the world-class training and opportunities he’s been given. But now, amid the COVID-19 health crisis, he appreciates his broader education even more.

“These are really uncertain times, and it is scary to think about the future as we near graduation. My time at WMU has included a wide range of classes and subjects that allowed me to develop new skills that could prove necessary now,” Brown says. It’s given him the ability to enter the job market with confidence in his ability to adapt to whatever situation he’s presented with.

The diverse connections Brown made at WMU have him excited to start his career halfway around the world in Japan.

“I have met lifelong friends within my major, as well as friends who aren’t in my major or even from this country. Forming relationships with people from different cultures and backgrounds has impacted the way I see and navigate the world.”

While he won’t get the traditional graduation he’d hoped for—the Department of Theatre will host a virtual ceremony as the pandemic has postponed commencement—Brown still has much to celebrate. A first generation college graduate, he’s set the stage for the rest of his family to pursue higher education.

“It feels so good to know that I can be a role model for my niece and start the tradition for her as she grows up.”

For more WMU news, arts and events, visit [WMU News](#) online.

WMU nursing program students, faculty are pandemic prepared

Contact: [Joy Brown](#)

April 16, 2020

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—If Western Michigan University nursing student **Aubrey Reynolds-Erspamer** is given the opportunity to enter the workforce early to become a frontline COVID-19 health care fighter, she says she's taking it.

"One hundred percent, I will join to help," says Reynolds-Erspamer, adding that "2020 is the year of the nurse, and I chose this profession specifically to help others. I am ready to do my part in any way I can."

Senior **Rebecca Stierley** has accepted a nurse intern position at a Kalamazoo-area hospital.



Aubrey Reynolds-Erspamer, nursing student at Western Michigan University

"It is heartbreaking to see what is happening in the world," says WMU student and U.S. Army Reserve Officer Training Corps member **Katie Sypniewski**, who intends to serve as an Army nurse after she graduates. "As a soon-to-be nurse, it is hard to watch what is going on..."

"The unpredictability and the unknown are the scariest parts," says Stierley.

Reynolds-Erspamer, Sypniewski and Stierley all emphasize they're aware of the pandemic-related risks, but their passion for nursing and preparation they're receiving through WMU are equipping them with the mindset and skills to perform this vital job.

As the pandemic progresses, Reynolds-Erspamer, Sypniewski, Stierley, their classmates and WMU's Bronson School of Nursing faculty and staff are facing the challenges head-on. They realize they are and will be key players in the nation's health care response to the virus.

PROGRAM PIVOT

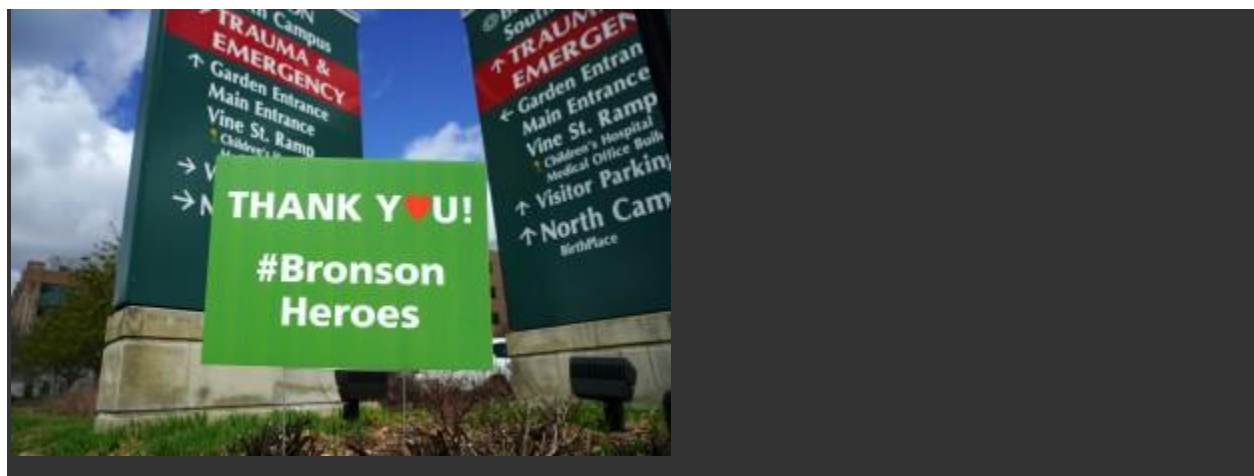
Bronson School of Nursing, which offers Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degrees in nursing, shifted entirely to distance education delivery this semester like every other University program, but is forging ahead within the College of Health and Human Services to prepare students for work during one of the most challenging times in health care.

According to school's director, **Dr. Mary Lagerwey**, hands-on learning via labs and clinicals has given way to online lessons with alternative assignments; the Michigan Board of Nursing recently eased licensing and regulations to accommodate those necessary adjustments, she says. Those receiving degrees can practice as a “graduate nurse” prior to taking the National Council Licensure Examination and receiving their Registered Nurse license, which will allow them serve patients in a limited capacity in the interim.

“This allows our graduating students to get a job and progress to the next level” without a pandemic-related delay, Lagerwey says.

Videos created by students and faculty have become essential learning tools, particularly for grasping fundamentals such as blood pressure checks, patient assessments and prioritization of care. Debriefings with students are essential.

Reynolds-Erspamer says she has been reading more in-depth from textbooks. PowerPoint presentations with voiceovers have been beneficial, and she has been taking online practice tests “to keep my brain in school mode,” too.



“I never expected to be in nursing school online, and it isn’t ideal, but my professors and the Bronson School of Nursing have been so supportive throughout this uncertain time,” Sypniewski says. “They really care for us and want us to succeed, which makes it a little bit easier.”

Sypniewski, from Ottawa, Illinois, was disappointed when her clinicals were cut short this spring; she was enrolled in a 12-hour clinical rotation at Bronson Methodist Hospital's Neuro Critical Care Unit. But she says she learned from and was inspired by the nurses' exemplary work.

"Although I was unable to finish my semester with them, the [Bronson] nurses on this unit really showed me what it meant to be a nurse. They went above and beyond to care for their patients and be there for them every step of the way. Being in critical care, they demonstrated selfless service and positivity every day. The nurses on this unit inspired me to want to work in critical care after I graduate," Sypniewski says.

Since switching to distance learning, professors "have simulated clinicals well and put in a lot of work to make sure our assignments are real as they can be," says Sypniewski.

Summer nursing courses, which primarily serve the master's program, will continue to be offered online as they traditionally have been, Lagerwey says.

If traditional classes can resume in the fall, Lagerwey says faculty will provide more lab work and other hands-on learning to make sure students have acquired the necessary skills with distance education.

"Our faculty and staff have both just been amazing and have gone the extra mile" to teach students, Lagerwey points out, and have done the same to assist each other. **Dr. Ron Cisler**, dean of the College of Health and Human Services, has a virtual faculty and staff check-in two days each week, and those with online teaching experience have stepped up to assist those seeking more experience, she says.

Lagerwey says the nursing program has been approached by local agencies eager to recruit volunteers to help treat COVID-19 patients, which means undergraduates, recent graduates and seasoned faculty may be courted. Faculty members are committed to teaching through spring semester, she says.

"But some have volunteered part time, and when we wrap up the semester, I think many of the faculty and students will be volunteering to help," says Lagerwey.

Lagerwey pointed out the nursing program is viewing the pandemic, though concerning for many reasons, also is a learning experience imparting valuable lessons about patient care and public health issues.

'DOING THE RIGHT THING'

Reynolds-Erspamer, who is from Marquette in the Upper Peninsula, knows the risks when it comes to COVID-19.

“Of course, there is a chance that working in health care right now could expose me to the COVID-19 virus, but it’s the chance we take to help others that are suffering,” Reynolds-Erspamer says. “I definitely try to be extra safe by washing my hands more frequently and not touching my face, but my main goal is helping others while I can.”



Rebecca Stierley, nursing student at Western Michigan University

This semester, even amid distance learning, Reynolds-Erspamer has been working at Bronson Methodist Hospital as a patient safety assistant.

“I thrive on human connection on a day-to-day basis, so personally, this pandemic is hitting me really hard. My family is about seven hours away, and I am choosing to stay in Kalamazoo to work at the hospital to help. It can get lonely, but I feel like I am doing the right thing,” she explains.

Stierley says that, “some may think I am crazy for running into the fire, so to speak, while everyone else is running away, but my family knows caring for people is my passion and that is what I need to do.”

Reynolds-Erspamer’s reasons for wanting to enter the nursing profession are simple.

“To me, becoming a nurse means I get the joy of going to work every day and get the chance to make someone’s days a little better. Whether that means getting to hold someone’s hand in the tough times, keeping a patient stable, smiling as a patient recovers or taking time to listen to a worried family member, I have learned it can be the little things that make the biggest impact,” Reynolds-Erspamer says.



Katie Sypniewski, nursing student at Western Michigan University

Sypniewski expressed similar thoughts about the career field.

“Nursing is amazing. The career has always interested me since I was a little kid. It is such a selfless job that takes a special person. The people in this career have big hearts,” Sypniewski explains. “I want to become a nurse to be a part of something bigger than myself. I am very committed to being there to care and support someone when they are most vulnerable. I want to be that nurse who makes a difference in someone’s life by treating them like a human being when they need love and support in their toughest moments.”

“I want to make a difference, and if I can positively impact just one person in this world, I have done that. So, getting the opportunity to impact the lives of others on a daily basis is the most rewarding thing I could ever dream of,” says Stierley, a Jackson native.

All three students said they’ve already learned a great deal personally and professionally from the pandemic.

Communicating and staying connected with others are essential, Sypniewski has discovered.

“My family does a Zoom call every Sunday with about 25 of us. Technology is a blessing right now,” Sypniewski says.

She is also taking advantage of her reorganized schedule.

“I am learning that maybe this time is a moment for the world to slow down and refresh on the simple things in life. I know personally, I am lucky enough to be able to focus on my health more than ever,” Sypniewski says.

“The biggest takeaway from what has been happening is it is critical to be adaptable,” says Reynolds-Erspamer. Change comes whether you are ready or not, but how you carry yourself through it is what matters. Control the things you can control and don’t get too caught up in the things you can’t.”

Stierley agrees, saying that “nursing is a constantly evolving profession, and the ability to adapt to change is essential to succeed.”

“Personally, I have a strong faith to lean on and I’m proud of that,” Reynolds-Erspamer says. “I am also so proud to be going into nursing and potentially having the chance to help out sooner than expected when the world needs us nurses most.”

For the latest WMU News, arts and events, visit [WMU News](#) online.

WMU public health students’ social media campaign: #Bewellwmu during pandemic

Contact: [Joy Brown](#)

April 8, 2020



Western Michigan University public health students Jessica Graber, left, and Kimi Rook, right, and professor Robert Bensley, middle, meeting to discuss their COVID-19 social media campaign.

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Remember to “keep the social in social distancing,” “be a source of light and love for someone who may be alone during this time” and “focus on what you can control,” urge social media posts from Western Michigan University’s Eta Sigma Gamma, a public health chapter.

While transitioning to distance learning and facing uncertainty amid the COVID-19 pandemic, some public health undergraduates are also embracing the experience as an educational opportunity for themselves and others. With their Society for Public Health Education and national Eta Sigma Gamma health education honorary conferences canceled, they instead launched a social media campaign.

“As a senior in the public health program, there could not have been a better opportunity to close out my time at WMU,” says ESG Co-Chair Kimi Rook, who will be concurrently pursuing a Master of Public Health in global epidemiology and disease control and a Master of Arts in international science and technology policies at George Washington University. “I am honored to be leading all student-focused public health efforts during such a crucial time.”

Designed for college students, the messaging focuses on practical and positive information for mental and physical wellbeing. Working in partnership with the University’s COVID-19 Task Force, and with Dr. Robert Bensley, WMU’s public health program coordinator, as their advisor, eight honors society members have crafted daily posts for social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

“As bad as COVID-19 is, it is the ultimate experiential activity” for public health students seeking to use skills they’ve learned in their courses,” says Bensley.

Primary campaign goals include sharing factual knowledge of COVID-19 and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations; helping students remain healthy, productive and social; and encouraging grace in this time of crisis. The students hope their efforts will help to mitigate negative effects the pandemic is having on the student body so individuals can still succeed.

Look for ESG messages using the hashtags #Bewellwmu, #Stayactivewmu and #Staypositivewmu.

Dr. Jennifer Bott, provost and vice president of academic affairs and co-chair of the COVID-19 Task Force, says she is thrilled with the students’ voluntary work.

“The students’ drive in developing this initiative and the passion by which they approach service to their fellow students is incredible,” Bott says. “Their efforts in shaping the many positive and inclusive messages and effectively leveraging delivery channels are having a positive impact every day.”

Campaign concepts were based on inclusivity and compassion amid the unknown, says ESG member Jessica Graber, who hopes to become a public health educator unafraid of addressing difficult and stigmatized subjects pertaining to issues such as mental and sexual health.

“It is extremely important to address every aspect of our current situation, especially grace and empathy,” Graber says. “This is a time where almost everyone is learning from one another through trial and error. There aren’t many definite answers on how to overcome this issue. Many people have different ways to cope with stress and fear, but we want to make sure that people are provided with helpful tools on how to manage these feelings and understand that we are all in this together.”

Graber says the group is using Zoom to conduct video meetings and organizing multiple group chats online to keep the campaign progressing, assess response and provide their own input.

The students also are bringing their prior real-world experiences to this social media campaign, says Rebekah Bensley, ESG co-chair and COVID-19 health communication plan architect. Some of their academic activities have included securing a \$14,000 contract to assess community nutrition feeding program needs, delivering numerous health initiatives to WMU, attending professional association conferences and conducting research. Some also participated in a public health study abroad program in South Africa, and presented their research at state and national conferences.

“The key students on this project completed a health communication planning course last fall that I taught, and went through the theories models and processes for developing health communication strategies. This current event is the perfect opportunity for them to put skills into practice during a real public health pandemic crisis,” and serves as a capstone to their learning, Bensley, the professor, says.

Bensley praised campaign organizers. “They are at a point where they are ready, confident and willing to be a part of the solution.”

“This has been an incredibly informative experience that has increased my own self-efficacy concerning practicing public health in the real world,” says Rebekah Bensley, who intends to earn a Master of Public Health and a Juris Doctorate to practice legal epidemiology.

“As this experience teaches us, public health crises require professionals and experts to be ready at a moment’s notice, to jump in and solve problems,” says Bott. “This takes preparation, practice and confidence. I am so proud of our students for demonstrating these skills and for the faculty members who have mentored and taught them to shine at this very crucial moment.”

Besides Bensley, Rook and Graber, other campaign participants include ESG members Siarah Cole, Camryn Giem, Rohini Perera, Holly Young, Kylie Wiseman and Alison Yelsma.

For the latest WMU News, arts and events, visit [WMU News](#) online.

Physics professor amasses support for WMU students

Contact: [Erin Flynn](#)

April 14, 2020

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Students have plenty to contend with these days. From studying and preparing for exams, to earning paychecks and adjusting to new housing arrangements, the novel coronavirus pandemic has changed just about everything. A new organization is working to

make sure basic necessities aren't on that list of worries for Western Michigan University students.

Led by **Dr. Michael Famiano**, a professor of physics, a contingent of WMU faculty, staff, alumni, parents and community members is banding together to collect and deliver food and household products to students still living on or near campus.



Dr. Michael Famiano talks with a student picking up free groceries.

“Because our group is flexible, shamelessly idealistic and has an innate sense of urgency in just about everything we do,” he says, “we were able to mobilize pretty quickly.”

The team has made food deliveries every day since late March, announcing times and locations on its [Facebook page](#). It gives students the opportunity to limit trips out to grocery stores where they could be exposed to COVID-19. Initially assisting about two dozen students, demand has grown to more than 400.

“The students are amazing,” says Famiano. “Many are just relieved that we are able to give them one less thing to worry about. They have been living with worry and uncertainty for a while now, so sometimes it’s nice to know that people care about them—even with the little things.”

Safety is top of mind in everything WMU4Students does. Donations are [arranged through an online form](#), and donors are directed to leave groceries on their front porch for a contactless pickup. Monetary donations are used by the group’s shoppers and in many cases delivered straight to Famiano’s front porch. [A form has also been created](#) for those interested in joining the volunteer effort.

EAGER TO HELP

The response from people interested in donating and volunteering, Famiano says, has been overwhelming. In fact, the group has received enough donations that it hasn't yet had to limit what students can take with them.



“As a scientist who studies supernovae, I love it when things blow up, and this has definitely blown up!”

The group started off as a team of about ten people, and in just a couple of weeks, it has grown to more than 40.

“We’ve become so busy, we’ve differentiated our team into logistics, shoppers, drivers and donors,” Famiano says. “We also maintain contact with University administration to better support each other and figure out the best ways to help the students.”

Michael Worline, marketing specialist for the College of Arts and Sciences, is leading off-campus food delivery efforts. Others who have stepped up with financial and food donations include a number of faculty within the departments of Spanish, biological sciences, history, as well as in the College of Health and Human Services and Haworth College of Business. **Dr. Debasri Mukherjee**, professor of economics, has been communicating with local businesses to help address student financial needs.

“One of my favorite stories: **Dr. Ajay Gupta**, professor of computer science, cooked up 20 fine Indian meals and brought them out to one of our grocery sites,” says Famiano. “It smelled so good, and it lasted all of about two minutes!”

The group anticipates continuing grocery deliveries through at least Thursday, April 23—the final day of exams. At that point, it will evaluate how to move forward.

ANSWERING A NEED



Khushi Bhatt, a doctoral student studying nuclear astrophysics, was among the first students to receive assistance. She says she was happy to receive a message from her advisor, Famiano, asking if she needed any help.

“It gave me the feeling that there was someone there to care for me when I was so far away from my home country and my family,” says Bhatt, who is from Gujarat, India. Like many international students, she is struggling with the impact of pandemic restrictions on transportation and employment. “In these hard times, the help and support from WMU4students kept us going.”

Bhatt was so touched that she volunteered to join the effort.

“WMU encourages and promotes diversity and inclusivity. Even in this difficult situation, WMU’s faculty members, staff and students are working hand-in-hand to help students in all the different ways they can,” she says.

The daily check-ins and encouragement provided by the WMU4Students group make all the difference for students living in uncertain and anxious times.

“There hangs a poster outside my research guide’s office with a Martin Luther King, Jr. quote: ‘The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.’ Every WMU faculty member is justifying their stand in this difficult and challenging situation, not only by teaching the subject of their specialization but also by teaching us a way of life,” says Bhatt. “I am really proud to be a student at WMU.”

CHARITABLE INSPIRATION

This isn't Famiano's first experience launching a charity. He's also in the process of creating a nonprofit aimed at creating transitional housing for young people who age out of the foster care system. The pandemic and subsequent stay-at-home order put those plans on hold.

"While we wait to continue our work, the present situation on campus provided a great opportunity to use our talents, compassion and energy to help provide for an immediate need," he says.

The current endeavor has not only given Famiano's team an opportunity to help others, it's opened his eyes to the humanity of his students, showing him needs and concerns that he didn't know existed before.

"As devastating as the coronavirus has been for humanity and the campus, the good that has come out of this is that we realize what's most important."

For the latest WMU News, arts and events, visit [WMU News](#) online.

Aviation alum delivers critical supplies, personnel for pandemic response

Contact: [Erin Flynn](#)

April 15, 2020



Noam Morgenstern stands in front of his Alaska Airlines aircraft.

SEATTLE, Wash.—Hospitals across the country are seeing an influx of patients related to COVID-19. In order to save lives and protect vital frontline health workers, they need

supplies and professional reinforcements—and they need them now. Western Michigan University alumnus **Noam Morgenstern** is among the fleet of pilots helping to deliver.

A first officer for [Alaska Airlines](#), the fifth largest airline in the United States, Morgenstern has logged thousands of miles transporting critical people and cargo to more than 115 destinations across North America.

“The flights that I do operate carry badly-needed essential health care professionals and supplies that are critical to the communities we serve—in some cases more so than in the past,” says Morgenstern, whose routes take him everywhere from New York to Honolulu, Hawaii. “With that said, Alaska Airlines has always been an essential lifeline to many communities in the state of Alaska as well.”

The current pandemic makes the flights Morgenstern runs even more critical. With a diverse fleet of 237 Boeing and Airbus aircraft, in addition to normal passenger service, the airline has transported hundreds of thousands of masks and personal protective equipment to hospitals as well as provided miles to transport medical professionals to coronavirus response hotspots through [Angel Flight West](#). Morgenstern’s routine work also makes a huge difference in those small communities that depend on Alaska Airlines’ dedicated fleet to provide goods and essential services.



Crews pack a plane with essential equipment. (Ingrid Barrentine/Alaska Airlines)

“My role as a pilot supporting the communities I fly to has been my childhood dream, and I am extremely lucky to be able to live it and help entire communities in the process,” says Morgenstern, who graduated from WMU in 2002 with a degree in aviation flight science.

While essential employees do face risks reporting to work in a pandemic, Morgenstern says he feels more comfortable in the airport right now than he does in his home community.

“Airports and aircraft are much emptier than normal. So, socially distancing is actually easier at the airport than it is at home if I have to go to the store,” he says. “Yes, there’s still a risk that I take into account, but Alaska Airlines helps me mitigate that risk.”

Morgenstern says his airline accomplishes that through enhanced cleaning programs and supplying employees with essential equipment like masks and cleansing wipes to keep them safe, as well as speaking with infectious disease experts to guide response.

PREPARED FOR TURBULENCE

While the impact of the COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented, Morgenstern has navigated adversity before. His experiences during the Great Recession—when he was furloughed twice by two different airlines—and after 9/11 have helped him to remain optimistic that he and his fellow pilots will continue to be essential in the future, despite the nosedive in airline travel due to coronavirus concerns.



“The skills WMU taught me—in addition to the technical skills to fly an aircraft at a high level—included how the pilot fits into the global aviation industry, how to be an effective part of a team and how to think beyond my role as a pilot to see the big picture,” he says. “Having many business classes built into the curriculum helped me understand the economics of the company I work for as well as the overall industry—skills that continue to serve me every day in my professional life.”

Those skills are what will propel WMU aviation graduates to the top of the industry through the turbulence created by the pandemic.

“The school is extremely forward thinking, with Dean **Dave Powell** and his leadership team understanding the future needs of the industry very well,” says Morgenstern, who has been visiting WMU and offering guidance to students for the past 12 years.

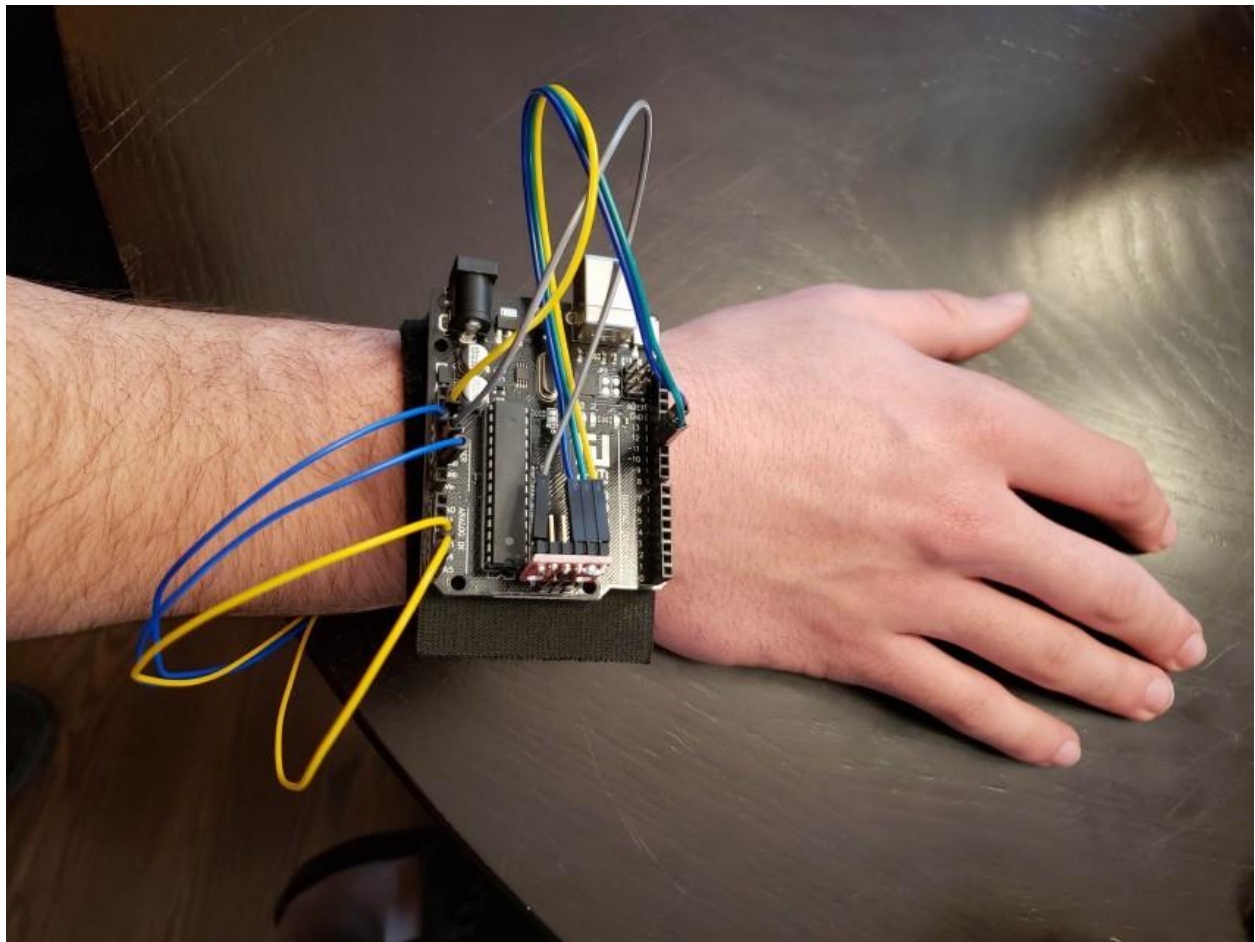
"I am extremely proud of the support the school offers its students through the [Academic Advising Office](#) and hiring industry veterans to teach up-to-date curriculum that will help students navigate this ever-changing airline industry."

For more WMU news, arts and events, visit [WMU News](#) online.

WMU senior engineering students solve problems facing business, industry and people

Contact: [Joy Brown](#)

April 15, 2020



KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Studies pertaining to innovative exterior residential lighting design, herb garden monitoring, helmet-to-helmet impact reduction, therapeutic virtual reality, moonwalking and much more were showcased in live online presentations by senior engineering students at Western Michigan University's 66th Conference on Senior Engineering and Design.

Students had intended to present their research in person at this annual spring conference,

but with the COVID-19 pandemic forcing the cancelation of large group events, students presented their work online instead Tuesday, April 14.

About 300 students presented nearly 100 projects they have completed to solve problems facing business and industry. A list of all the projects, many of which are sponsored by southwest Michigan companies, is available at wmich.edu/engineer/news/seniors.

The conference is traditionally held twice each year at the college, in April and December, to showcase the work of graduating seniors who are required to complete a real-world capstone project. The capstone design course is an important component of the senior year and is a customary part of many engineering programs.

There are a variety of disciplines involved, including chemical and paper engineering; civil construction engineering; computer science; electrical and computer engineering; engineering design, manufacturing and management systems; industrial and entrepreneurial engineering and engineering management; and mechanical and aerospace engineering.

For their senior engineering design project, two mechanical engineering students used online collaboration to develop a device to combat a debilitating sleep disorder.



Chandler McFalls' and **Jacqueline Barreto's** "biomedical wearable for narcolepsy" is a wristband embedded with "smart" sensors that can detect when someone is about to fall asleep. Using equipment that measures biometrics such as heart rate and physical movement, the device is capable of an array of alerts that bring the wearer back to full consciousness.

Narcolepsy is a chronic sleep disorder that affects an estimated 1 in 2,000 people in the United States, according to the Narcolepsy Network. Those with the disorder often find it difficult to stay awake for long periods of time, regardless of the circumstances, the Mayo

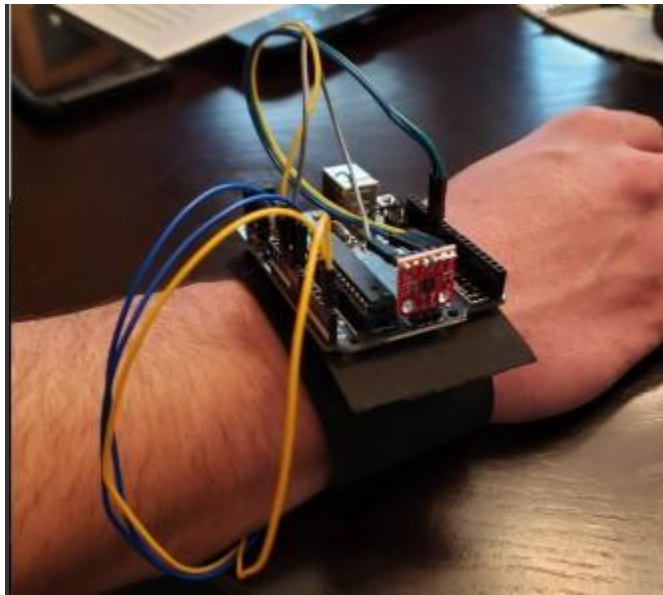
Clinic explains. The disruptions can be life-threatening. Medications and lifestyle changes can help mitigate effects of the condition, but there is no cure.

McFalls says the device idea was inspired by friends and family members of his who are narcolepsy sufferers.

"My uncle and cousin have it. My girlfriend's mom has it as well," says McFalls, a Muskegon, Mich. native. "Growing up, it's (narcolepsy) always been very impactful on their lives. Lots of people struggle with the side effects of narcolepsy medication, so going to a non-chemical option would be ideal."

If the project proves to be useful and practical, McFalls' and Barreto's device would be one of the few wearable electronics made to predict the onset of a narcoleptic event, according to Dr. Peter Gustafson, associate professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering, who, along with others in the college, has been advising McFalls and Barreto with their project.

"We're definitely looking into patenting terminology to bring it to market, and talking to biomedical companies" for manufacturing, McFalls says. "This is definitely a project I want to keep working on," despite experience with far different work: aviation design.



Neither McFalls nor Barreto have biomedical backgrounds; the two will each earn mechanical engineering degrees when they graduate. This, coupled with the emerging nature of their work, means they've delved into plenty of theoretical and applied research to create what they hope will be a useful and impactful product. They read several medical journal articles, spoke with physicians, accessed the latest mechanical engineering literature pertaining to aspects of their project (such as biomedical sensing and wearable design techniques) and developed multiple prototypes as they improved upon their design.

McFalls says some afflicted with narcolepsy were recruited to test the device along the way. Their feedback about comfort and functionality was used to refine the project.

The original prototype relied upon an electrocardiogram for biometric readings, but it proved to be too bulky and restrictive for physical comfort, McFalls says. So, the team switched to a photoplethysmogram, or PPG, which uses infrared light to penetrate the skin for blood volume change detection. Other components used include a photodiode, multiple LED lights at different wavelengths to change light intensity and penetration, and an accelerometer that measures acceleration.

McFalls led the product's design, while Barreto has been responsible for the necessary computer coding that requires complicated data analysis.

The coronavirus outbreak made it a little more difficult to work on the project, but the pair hopes to have a fully operational prototype up and working.

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Future Broncos use talents to help frontline health care workers

Contact: [Erin Flynn](#)

April 17, 2020

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Members of Western Michigan University's incoming freshman class are leading the charge to equip critical care providers battling the novel coronavirus pandemic. Using their engineering skills, they're crafting personal protective equipment for health care professionals across the country.

"My goal is to do as much as I can to help people in need," says **Ryan Barker**, a Wisconsin high school senior.

Both he and **Michael Mills**, who is set to graduate high school soon in Florida, are receiving press and praise for their efforts to give back in this time of crisis. They'll be in good company when they join the WMU community in the fall, where several departments and units are also using their equipment and skills to make essential supplies for doctors and nurses.

ENGINEERING AID



Ryan Barker sits next to dozens of masks he

As classrooms across the country sit idle, a laboratory of sorts has sprung up inside Barker's home in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. His basement is buzzing with activity around the clock as 15 3D printers crank out parts for reusable face masks.

"It makes me feel good that I can use my skill set that I have learned over the years to be able to help people and possibly save lives," says Barker, who has dedicated much of his free time the past four years to community service.

Currently, Barker can produce about 30 masks per day, using printers he's amassed from Manitowoc Lincoln High School and the Lakeshore FIRST Robotics program, as well as those he already owned or bought using donations from [his Facebook fundraising page](#). He also has volunteers working with him to sew the replaceable N95 and HEPA filters that go into the devices. When two more printers arrive, he'll be able to increase production to about 50 masks per day.

"With the COVID-19 outbreak, everything that I was used to be doing on a daily basis came to an end. I found myself with a ton of free time," Barker says. "I wanted to find something that I could do with my time that would benefit people in need ... and now I am able to do that with my skill set."

Barker found a passion for 3D modeling and printing through high school engineering programs and a youth apprenticeship program. It's allowed him to hone his skills at Jagemann Stamping Co., a full-service metal stamping operation where he's been able to gain roughly 2,000 hours of field work experience as an engineer.

"Throughout high school, my career goals shifted from a pilot to an engineer, and when I found out that WMU had aerospace engineering, I knew that it was the school for me," he says.

With dreams of working at an aerospace company after college, Barker is confident that WMU has the program he needs for his future to take flight.

"I believe my time at Western will help me achieve my dream, because WMU alum are known for finding a job after graduation in the field that they want, and they are enjoying it!"

Barker has created a fundraising page to help boost his production, and plans to continue creating and distributing reusable face masks until there's no longer a need for them. Whatever money is not used to produce masks will be donated to Lakeshore FIRST Robotics.

SELF-TAUGHT SUPPORT



Michael Mills sits near his 3D printer.

Right now, Mills should be enjoying senior trips and managing the stage for his high school's musical—something he's looked forward to for six years. Instead, he's spending his final weeks as a senior isolated from his classmates. But, he's found a new way to fill his time: creating face shields for frontline health care workers.

"My main goal with making these is to help out the people who are fighting to keep the rest of us safe and healthy," he says. "I just wanted to see what I could do for my community."

At his house in Sarasota, Florida, he's put his self-taught 3D printing skills to work, using two printers to create headbands and then attaching sheets of transparency film to create the shields. Enlisting some help from his mom, he's able to assemble about 30 pieces of equipment per day.

"The face shields are going to hospitals around the area and to people who have loved ones in the medical field," says Mills.

Mills demonstrates how his 3D printer works.

Mills says 3D printing is just a hobby. His real passion is aviation, which he'll continue at WMU in the flight management program. For now, though, he'll continue making as many face shields as he can, and sending them to professionals in need across the country. He's heard from recipients as far away as Washington, D.C., who are grateful for the support.

"I'm just happy to see people are getting good use out of the things that I am making."

For more WMU news, arts and events, visit [WMU News](#) online.

Music challenge aims to build harmony, community from a distance

Contact: [Erin Flynn](#)

April 8, 2020



KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Thousands of miles apart, a Western Michigan University faculty member and alumnus hope to bring people together—through music. **Dr. David Loberg Code**, associate director and coordinator of graduate studies in the School of Music, and **Blake Morgan**, now a member of the London-based professional ensemble [VOCES8](#), collaborated remotely to sing the University's alma mater.

"Although we cannot do it (in person), I wanted to show that we can still make music together," Code says.

He is now challenging the WMU community to join in, using the hashtag #wmuMakesMusic. He [provides instructions online](#) for downloading the Acapella app and recording music virtually with multiple people. The challenge gives the School of Music community a creative outlet to stay connected and engaged with one another, while also allowing the public to check out their talent by searching the hashtag.

"It is a good example of experiential learning with new technologies, but more importantly, I hope it will be uplifting for our community to share videos with each other engaged in what we all love to do—make music."

Kennedy Dixon, a senior majoring in viola performance as well as composition, took up the challenge with her roommates Gabby Lindhurst and Becca Spurbeck, who are also music majors.

Kennedy Dixon turns to music as an escape in uncertain times.

"Taking part in this challenge was important to me to show that music can help distract us for a moment from the pain that is happening in the world during this hard time, and remind fellow Broncos that music heals," she says. "I'm a social butterfly by nature, so this time has been really difficult for me. But, I'm thankful for the technology that we have, making connecting with family and friends so easy!"

STAYING CONNECTED

Living with fellow music students, Dixon has been able to stem the loneliness that comes with self-isolation.

"We're all coping well and making sure that we are respecting each other's spaces during online classes and virtual sessions."

The transition to distance learning is challenging for music students who are used to collaborating in groups. But the skills Dixon has developed through the School of Music have also given way to new opportunities—both academic and creative.



"When words fail, music speaks. As both a performance and composition major, I'm grateful for the ability to be able to express my feelings through both platforms when I'm at a loss for words," says Dixon, who grew up in Grand Rapids. "I've been seeing so many collaborative projects in the past couple of weeks from organizations throughout Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, Chicago and beyond. So much creativity has come from this."

Code hopes the #wmuMakesMusic challenge will spur even more creativity within the WMU community. Dixon says if anyone can do it, Broncos can.

"I'm so proud to call myself a Bronco, especially in a time like this," Dixon says. "I've never felt more of a sense of community and understanding from those around me, and there's just so much support being spread."

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For the birds: Avian adventures at Asylum Lake Preserve

Contact: [Joy Brown](#)

April 7, 2020

KALAMAZOO, Mich.— Oblivious to the COVID-19 pandemic, a white sandhill crane that sailed overhead, while a male mallard meandered downstream. Within Western Michigan University's 274-acre **Asylum Lake Preserve** on a recent weekday morning, several bird species were observed building nests, flying, paddling, eating and calling to one another and even battling, in some cases.

Birdwatching at the preserve, which offers a publicly-accessible visual and symphonic feast, remains an easy, free, soothing and educational option amidst social distancing mandates and closures that have altered life as we knew it.

No birding experience? No problem. This inspiring hobby only requires a sense of adventure, a fondness for fresh air and the ability to quietly observe.



Dr. Sharon Gill, associate professor of biological sciences.

Gill and **Joanna Sblendorio**, a doctoral student studying bird behavior, recently provided basic birding lessons at the preserve, located in Oshtemo Township and bordered by Drake Road and Parkview Avenue. Here's what they shared:

WHY GO BIRDING AT ASYLUM?

Giving more consideration to bird activity reveals an expanded world that offers vital reconnection with nature, which may be more important than ever as the pandemic continues to wreak physical and emotional havoc on humans throughout the world.

"The value of coming out in nature is to get away from all of the typical things that you're worrying about in your day. What a beautiful experience to be able to hear the water babbling behind us and the birds calling," says Gill, who is originally from Canada. "It can give you an amazing sense of peace and also connectedness to something bigger than ourselves."

[Asylum Lake Preserve](#) and the adjoining property lie in the west fork of the Portage Creek Watershed. The land was ensured when WMU constructed its nearby College of Engineering Parkview Campus. An online "story map" offers a self-guided introduction to the preserve and its history.

The preserve serves as a research area for academic disciplines such as geology, hydrogeology and environmental studies, but it is a particularly wonderful place for birdwatching, Gill says.

Asylum "does offer a really nice set of features and different natural areas. So, we can go to Big Asylum Lake and Little Asylum Lake," says Gill. "We can walk through the forest and engage with the organisms here. And then there's also the prairie. We have three important types of ecosystems in the area, making it a really nice place to walk and experience nature."

ADVICE FOR NOVICES

About 450 bird species call Michigan home, according to the Michigan Bird Records Committee's January 2020 list. Right now, many species that departed for the winter are migrating back to the area, which offers birders plenty of interesting activity.

Experienced birdwatchers enjoy grabbing their binoculars, identifying as many species as they can and perhaps conducting counts, "but if you don't have that bird knowledge, you can still experience the joy of birds just by walking here and listening," says Gill. "If you're listening here, there are blackbirds calling, there's robins singing, there's woodpeckers, the red-wing blackbird. All of those things you can listen to. You don't have to name them to get the joy out of experiencing them. You could become somebody who's really active and knows their birds, but if you're not one of those people right now, certainly don't let that

stop you from enjoying birds because you have all you need to enjoy them: your ears and your eyes.”



Joanna Sblendorio, doctoral student in biological sciences.

The best times to birdwatch, according to Sblendorio, are at dawn and dusk.

“The dawn chorus is just spectacular, right when the sun comes up,” Sblendorio says.

Wearing colors that blend with the scenery are advisable, but not nearly as important as quiet observation—no sudden movements and full concentration.

“Birdwatching is an activity in mindfulness,” says Sblendorio, a New Jersey native who became captivated with birds while helping a master’s student study them on a military base. “You’ll see flashes of color, the rustle of leaves. It’s an opportunity to appreciate the world.”

Some birds, such as chickadees, are loud. Cranes are graceful. Fox sparrows “have a really cute whistle,” Sblendorio claims. She calls warblers “little forest gems” that range in hues from yellow to blue to rusty red.

Certain species are just passing through the area right now, while others will plan to stay for the duration of summer.

During their recent lake preserve visit, Gill and Sblendorio were entertained by a bluebird couple creating a nest in a box built by people for that purpose. Their task wasn’t easy. While the female deposited beakfuls of grass into the box, her mate was busy fending off swallows, which were also diving to gulp the first flying insects of the season.

CONSERVATION

Another good reason to take up birdwatching: Species throughout the world are in rapid decline, Gill points out. According to a September 2019 article in Science Magazine, the

Western Hemisphere has lost more than one in four birds during the past 50 years. Cornell University researchers calculated North America is home to nearly 3 billion fewer birds today compared to 1970. Even traditionally common species such as Baltimore orioles and barn swallows are seeing drastic population decreases.

The causes are many. Some of them include climate change, reduction in habitat due to human activity, skyscrapers, pesticide use and outdoor cats.

Gill and Sblendorio's research and field studies partly focus on the effects of human-generated noise, which can negatively affect bird migration and breeding.



A mallard couple at Asylum Lake Preserve.

Ducks and waterfowl are seeing less of a decline because of concerted conservation efforts, even those meant to support hunting, Gill says.

“When we invest in conservation, we make a difference,” says Gill. “There’s an inherent value in nature, and other organisms have a right to be here just like we do.”

RESOURCES

For those interested in buying their first set of binoculars for bird watching, Sblendorio suggests a seven or eight magnification.

Bird identification books are also there for the buying, but there are also several websites and mobile applications to use. Sblendorio and Gill suggest visiting “All About Birds” by Cornell University, and the Merlin Bird ID app that’s affiliated with Cornell.

The **National Audubon Society** is the country’s bird authority. Its site includes compelling stories, news and conservation tips.

Practical bird conservation activities are detailed at 3BillionBirds.org. The site lists ways anyone can help reduce the rate of bird decline, such as modifying windows to be less reflective, growing native plants, keeping cats indoors, drinking coffee that's cultivation-friendly to birds and reducing plastic use.

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