From Bogotá to Statesboro, a graduate designs his future at Georgia Southern

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When Daniel Castro’s daily routine shifted from Bogotá, Colombia, a sprawling, capital city surrounded by the Andes Mountains, to the plains of Statesboro, Georgia, he was excited for new opportunities as an international student at Georgia Southern University.

Castro long wanted to attend college in the U.S. and worked with an agency in Bogotá to explore various institutions with solid graphic design degree programs.

“Georgia Southern was one of the one options and the one I liked best,” said Castro. “I liked the location and the graphic design program was really interesting. I was also looking at pictures of the campus and things around here.”

He earned an International Student Diversity Scholarship from Georgia Southern, and in August 2017 eagerly arrived at the Statesboro Campus with his parents to settle into a residence hall in Eagle Village. Yet soon after they left, Castro, an adventurous traveler who loves to discover new places and people, found himself unsteady in new surroundings.

“One of the experiences I remember the most is how homesick I got,” said Castro. “In Colombia, we stay home until we graduate from university. Being on my own was kind of shocking.”

The language barrier was also tough.

“It was hard for me to communicate with my roommates, who were all American,” he said. “I was shy at first. I was scared to use English, so I tried to hang out with Colombian friends.”

A former junior soccer player in Bogotá, Castro quickly dove into almost nightly games of soccer on Georgia Southern’s intramural fields with a group of Colombian students, who connected over social media before moving to the U.S.

From there, mastering English in college classrooms became a focal point.

“It was completely different than what I learned before,” said Castro, who attended a bilingual school in Colombia. “I always try to do things on my own, but I was really having a hard time.”

Castro joined a student leadership and volunteer group with his American peers and reached out to professors for help.

“They were really nice and helpful,” he said. “They suggested I read material twice, take notes, read different books and especially read things that were graphic design-related.”

Two years in, Castro was a high-achieving student included on the Dean’s List and the President’s List and was inducted into the National Society of Collegiate Scholars and the national honor society Phi Eta Sigma. He jumped into his major classes inspired.
“I really liked it,” Castro said. “It was better than I expected, working on different programs on the computer, getting to know about branding and typography. I also got to take photography, and I did some animation too. It was interesting to learn about different fields I can go into with graphic design.”

His primary interest is marketing-related branding, and he naturally segued into a student assistant position for the Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art (BFSDA) creating marketing posters and social media graphics for the art gallery. His design for a vehicle wrap was selected to be displayed on the art and design bus that shuttles students to events around the southeast.

Castro’s time with BFSDA led to a semester of shooting action photography and creating social media graphics and short videos for Georgia Southern’s women’s soccer team.

“My classes and working in the art department helped me understand design principles,” he said. “My photography classes helped me with the soccer team. I was improving photography skills. It was also a lot of fun.”

In his final semester, Castro was an intern with the Division of Continuing Education, designing social media graphics and layout design for various conferences.

“They have helped me a lot to work with deadlines and meet the client’s requirements,” he said. “Rather than just doing projects, I got to understand what the ads are made for. It goes beyond doing what I want to. It’s more about doing work for clients.”

This week, Castro graduates cum laude and has accepted a job offer from the marketing firm Ocozzio, located in Augusta. He’ll also continue to provide video editing and graphics for social media for the Savannah Bananas baseball team, which he began during his time at Georgia Southern. A master’s in marketing is also in his future, he said.

Admittedly, his emotions are mixed before taking off on his next adventure.

“I’m excited but also a little nervous about getting out there and being in a more professional environment,” he said. “It’s great to take a new step in my life but also sad to leave my friends from here. I’ve made some strong friendships.”

He’s proud to have overcome difficulties and looks forward to sharing his personal takeaways with the world.

“I had the opportunity to come to Georgia Southern and get my degree as a graphic designer,” said Castro. “I enjoy the feeling of being able to achieve something after trying a lot. Some of the things that I believe make me different from the others is the commitment, adaptability and hard work that I put into everything I do. I like to develop a friendship with my clients and my team. I want people, companies, agencies, institutions and organizations to succeed so I can be a successful designer as well. I like to be able to help others with the knowledge that my family, my teachers and traveling have given to me.”

Posted in Press Releases
Police officer to middle grades teacher: A graduate helps children from the ground up

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Statesboro born-and-raised, Jason Long is a name that locals might recognize from his 23 years of experience in local law enforcement.

When plans to enter the military didn’t pan out after high school, Long attempted college for a few years at Georgia Southern University, but his heart and mind weren’t in it, and he quit. He worked in the University’s Department of Parking and Transportation before realizing a desire to work with public safety.

Long attended the Georgia Police Academy and started his law enforcement service with the University’s Police Department before moving to the Bulloch County Sheriff’s Department where he spent more than 20 years serving Statesboro and Bulloch County.

“My last eight to nine years, I was in criminal investigations,” Long said. “I had special training in crime scene and fingerprint identification, and also in forensic interviewing of children. It just got to the point that I couldn’t do it any more. Every day I came into the office, I saw children on their worst day. It can make you feel real negative real quick.”

However, law enforcement was all Long knew. It wasn’t until a media specialist at a local school, Joni Aycock, asked a simple question that he realized there might be another option for him.

“With my background in crime scene investigation, I would go every year to Mill Creek Elementary and do a weeklong project with the kids called Mystery Week,” he said. “We would teach them about crime scene work and looking for fingerprints. During a conversation with Joni one day, she said ‘Why don’t you teach?’ and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the weeks I spent at the school were some of the best weeks I had in law enforcement.”

Long returned to Georgia Southern at the age of 45 to earn a bachelor’s degree in middle grades education with concentrations in history and science.

“I walked into class, and everyone thought I was the professor,” Long said.

But once he started his education classes with the middle grades class of 2021, Long fit right in.

“It might have been a lot harder if I had not had the group of students I was with,” he said. “We’ve been real close the last two years. We all talk to each other regularly. If someone has a problem, if someone is upset, if someone needs something as simple as a ride or a meal, we’ve taken care of each other.”

That’s not to say, however, that the group doesn’t give Long a ribbing from time to time.

“They get their jokes in,” he said, laughing. “They have had their dad jokes, and they get their jabs in. But for the most part they treated me like everyone else. Some of my classmates would come over and eat with me, my daughter and wife. It gave them a family here while they were away from their homes.”
For Long’s final teaching placement, he served as an 8th grade social studies teacher at Southeast Bulloch Middle School in Brooklet, Georgia, where he has accepted a full-time position starting this fall. Looking back, Long says he has no doubt he made the right decision.

“During the last part of my career, I dealt a lot with high schoolers who, by the time they reached me, had already made choices that were going to negatively impact their lives forever,” he said. “I felt that with middle schoolers, I could start helping earlier to catch them at an age where I could help the ones who needed to be helped.”

As Long graduates this week, he also hopes to explore coaching during his teaching career.

“With teaching and coaching, I am still serving the community like I was during my career with law enforcement,” said Long. “But now, I get to interact with children to create a positive atmosphere, and it’s so rewarding.”

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**Georgia Southern graduate earns degree online while working on cruise ship**

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Online learners at Georgia Southern University can earn their degree anywhere in the world, and the middle of the ocean is no exception. Amy Levesque, who graduates this May with a Bachelor of Arts in Modern Languages with a concentration in French, completed most of her degree while at sea working on a cruise ship.

“I would not say that it was the easiest thing I have ever done, which I think makes the accomplishment all the more meaningful,” Levesque said. “I was onboard roughly two to three weeks a month and worked an average of 65 to 70 hours per week while onboard. At that time I was also registered for five full-credit classes at Georgia Southern.”

Levesque decided to pursue a degree in French after putting aside her goal of attending college years ago to raise her children. As an adult learner with a full-time job on a cruise ship, her classes would have to be all online, and she said Georgia Southern offered the most comprehensive online French program she could find.

“The program was not just a study of the language but also of the history, uniqueness and culture of France,” she said. “It is as close to immersion as you
can have without living in France. It takes self-discipline, dedication, organization and communication to do any online degree successfully and if it means a lot to you to achieve it, you make the necessary sacrifices to do it.”

Levesque chose French because she enjoyed learning it in high school. She also will be able to use her new skills in her current job in sales in the hospitality and cruise industry where she often services French-speaking guests. However, her new degree has provided her with more career options, and Levesque said she may decide to become a teacher.

While she has never stepped foot on any of Georgia Southern’s three campuses, Levesque said she will remember Georgia Southern for the passion and commitment of her professors.

“I could not be happier with the education I have received here,” she said. “The professors are engaging and passionate about their profession and truly want students to succeed. They always made sure that if I needed anything they were there.”

If Levesque could offer advice to nontraditional students thinking about returning to college to get the degree they’ve always wanted, it would be to let go of any doubts and do it.

“If I can obtain my degree while working on a cruise ship roughly 26 weeks of the year and more than 50 hours a week, in time zones all over the world and often with spotty internet, you can too,” Levesque said. “Do not let your obstacles be your excuses. If it’s important to you, find a way.”

Posted in Awards and Recognition

Tags: College of Arts and Humanities, World Languages and Cultures
Collegiate 100 chapter of Georgia Southern Armstrong Campus in Savannah named 2021 chapter of the year

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The Collegiate 100 Armstrong Campus Chapter has been named one of two national chapters of the year.

The Collegiate 100 chapter of Georgia Southern University’s Armstrong Campus in Savannah has been selected as chapter of the year by national parent organization 100 Black Men of America. The Armstrong chapter is one of two collegiate chapters to receive the selection out of the 70 collegiate chapters nationwide.

Chapter president Justin Cosby said the award is a representation of the service mindset the chapter has.

“This award is just proof of where hard work and faith can get you,” Cosby said. “While it has been phenomenal to receive this recognition, a lot of the members and myself would agree that Collegiate 100 is bigger than awards and accolades. It is centered around mentorship and service, so if we don’t keep that focus then we have failed the mission of the 100.”
The Armstrong chapter’s advisor is Fernando Foster, Director of Enterprise Networking for IT Services. Foster has served as a liaison between the collegiate chapter and the 100 Black Men of Savannah for 10 years. He said that the resiliency of the Armstrong chapter during the COVID-19 pandemic sets them apart as leaders.

“I’m extremely proud of Justin and the rest of our membership,” Foster said. “Despite dealing with the limitations imposed by the pandemic, leaders of the Collegiate 100, like Justin, exemplified creativity and resilience in continuing to do the work of the 100. Events like the Winter Ball that have normally been held in person were held virtually. In-person mentoring sessions were replaced by mentoring sessions through Zoom. I’m encouraged by how seamlessly this organization adapted to this new environment and the challenges associated with it.”

The national organization’s values include transparency and accountability, as well as respect for family, spirituality, justice and integrity. 100 Black Men of Savannah president Harold Oglesby said in a letter to the Armstrong chapter that the group exhibits all of these qualities.

“Every chapter dreams of supporting a collegiate chapter that excels in upholding the standard of the pillars of our national organization,” Oglesby wrote. “Under the leadership of President Justin Cosby and the guidance of Mr. Fernando Foster, you have excelled to excellence, and now you have national recognition. You all should be proud of the work that you have done.”

The Armstrong chapter will be presented with an award during a virtual ceremony at the 100 Black Men of America’s annual conference on June 17. For more information about the Armstrong Chapter, visit https://www.facebook.com/ArmstrongC100/.

Posted in Awards and Recognition
First-generation college graduate, U.S. citizen ready to leave a legacy

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Born into a family of immigrant farm workers who settled down in Claxton, Georgia, Jasmine Guerra knew her options for a college education were limited. She also knew she’d face additional obstacles as a first-generation college student and first-generation U.S. citizen, but her desire to create a legacy for her family burned brightly.

Needless to say, crossing the stage in Allen E. Paulson Stadium as a magna cum laude graduate with two undergraduate degrees in finance and business management and a corporate business job lined up means a little bit more for the graduate from Georgia Southern’s Parker College of Business graduate.

“My entire life up to this point has been truly unprecedented,” Guerra said. “University was never something that was guaranteed for me. Due to socioeconomic factors, I more so had to come to Georgia Southern. It was my only option to afford an education because I would be first year exempt from living in a dorm.”

She spent her freshman year as a commuter student, during which she worked as a restaurant server to save money so she could live on campus her sophomore year.

“I got my first job at El Jalapeno, and I saved every dime I could until I could afford to move out,” she said. “My parents weren’t too happy, and they didn’t talk to me for almost a week because girls don’t move out of their house until they’re married in a Mexican household.”
With her parents’ approval and a drive to break barriers, Guerra dove into the Georgia Southern way of life. But her transition wasn’t always easy.

“As both a first-generation college student and a first-generation U.S. citizen, there have been so many additional challenges and barriers that I’ve had to face than the traditional student you would find here at Georgia southern,” she said. “I am so grateful that none of those were enough to stop me from fitting in on this campus, and that’s what makes us so special. Georgia Southern celebrates what makes us different.”

As she adapted to campus life in Statesboro, she joined numerous organizations including Southern Leaders, Association of Latin American Students, Pi Sigma Epsilon, several honor societies, Alpha Omicron Pi sorority and the Finance Association, among others.

“I did things because I wanted to enjoy them, and I chose things that would create or add value to my student experience,” she said. “I can say that I’ve had the opportunity to do so much, see so much and meet so many people. They say that your college years are the best years of your life, and all I can say is that these past five years at Georgia Southern are going to be hard to beat.”

One of Guerra’s most memorable moments as a student was being crowned the 2020 Homecoming Queen, the first Latina student to ever win the title.

“When my name was said, all I wanted was a hug from my parents because this moment was for them,” she said. “This moment was to show them that their sacrifices were worth it, they are worth it and they will continue to be worth it. My parents were incredibly proud that I won. They thought that there was no way that I would be able to win over the other women from more affluent families on the court. They were so scared that I would be heartbroken knowing that it was something I deserved but wouldn’t receive because life hasn’t always been fair to people like us. I want to serve as an example for anyone who struggles with self-doubts that anything is possible.”

Being a part of this University tradition, and many others, is what made Guerra fall in love with Georgia Southern.

“I had to make myself fall in love with Georgia Southern my freshman year because going to school so close to home wasn’t ideal,” she said. “Our spirit and traditions were a selling point for me, and I fell in love. It is such an honor to be our homecoming queen because it represents our spirit and traditions. The amount of love I received from students I have never met was truly special, and I will always carry it with me. I am so incredibly proud to represent such an incredible and diverse student body that makes this school so special and unique from others.”

Guerra found her academic home in the Parker College of Business where she participated in the Eagles on Wall Street program, in which students travel New York to visit well-known organizations and firms of the U.S. and global financial systems. She also became a Parker Business Scholar, an experience that has expanded her network and her confidence.

“Going into this program my self-confidence was weak, and it was something that I wanted to grow in throughout the course of it,” she said. “The networking in the program is surreal. It’s insane to think that you have such big cheerleaders on your side who are 100% your advocates for success. I don’t think that I would have been able to overcome my imposter syndrome if it weren’t for these individuals. Support can go a long way and in my case, it has transformed me into a confident woman who knows the value of her work and who will not minimize herself to fit in anyone’s mold. I am more confident than ever that I am capable of making it in the professional world.”

Following graduation, Guerra plans to move to Atlanta, Georgia, to work for the world’s biggest wealth management bank, UBS, as a client service associate. Her career goals include becoming a top portfolio
manager who constructs portfolios consisting of companies who do good by their employees, the communities they serve and the environment in which they operate.

“It is crazy that a girl who comes from nothing will be working with high net worth individuals who have generational wealth,” she said. “I can’t believe it sometimes. My goals and passions are fueled by this sense of purpose to make money beautiful for everyone, but the majority of the world lives in lower levels of income. I want to spread financial literacy to those who have been historically underserved so that they can begin to build their own generational wealth like I am trying to do for my family.”

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