

PACIFIC

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MO[▲]MENTUM





PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Momentum fits Fresno Pacific this spring. In math and physics, momentum = mass × velocity: movement with substance and direction. Our momentum grows as a Christ-centered mission moves with focus toward a clear vision.

Looking back on 2025, the signs were unmistakable. We received the largest gifts in FPU history: the \$21.9 million King Richter scholarship endowment and a \$10 million Lilly grant for the seminary. Enrollment exceeded goals. We completed a clean audit and several successful program accreditations. Athletics advanced by beginning the transition to the CCAA and launching STUNT. Donors helped upgrade our nursing simulation lab. Across campus we renewed learning spaces, gathering places and fields, while our digital and media presence expanded. Taken together, these are more than headlines; they signal a hopeful future for FPU and the Central Valley we serve.

You'll see that trajectory in four features in this issue:

Future Impact. The seminary's Lilly Endowment grant will strengthen pastoral formation and theological innovation for years to come. You'll meet a student whose calling was shaped by a previous grant.

Reach. Momentum looks like Mary Sierras, whom I met at the degree-completion orientation. Her social media feed received an FPU post at just the right moment. She said "yes" to finishing her degree and is evidence that smarter outreach must always point to real relationships.

Student Experience. We believe students deserve the very best and we want them to feel care in the details. Read about how one student's idea led to Valley-favorite coffee shop Kuppa Joy finding a home at FPU.

Athletics. Our women's volleyball team is winning on the court and living the right way off of it—cohesive, resilient and rooted in spiritual formation. That's momentum that multiplies.

Momentum grows when prayer, generosity and discipline work in the same direction. Scripture reminds us, "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus" (Hebrews 12:1-2). Thank you for praying, giving, supporting and cheering. Together we move with purpose, carrying a mission of Christ-centered learning into the lives of students and the future of the Valley and beyond. 🏠



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "André Stephens".

André Stephens, Ph.D.

President

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Pacific is sent to alumni and friends of Fresno Pacific University.

Degree Programs Coming to Coalinga College-Firebaugh Center

By Michael Hammond, Editor-in-Chief

Local community college graduates can earn bachelor's degrees right in their own backyard thanks to an academic partnership between Fresno Pacific University and West Hills College/Coalinga College-Firebaugh Center.

Classes are scheduled to begin in the fall of 2026 and will take place in the beautiful West Hills College/Coalinga College-Firebaugh Center which features high ceilings and glass walls. The three-year-old building currently serves 350-400 students, ranging in age from eighth grade to adults in their 40s.


Students who complete their associate degree with West Hills College/Coalinga College-Firebaugh Center will be able to continue to attend the center as they pursue one of two FPU bachelor's degrees: the BA in Liberal Arts, which prepares graduates to become elementary school teachers, or the BA in Early Childhood Development.

Both programs are taught in a degree completion format that helps adult students achieve their educational goals while balancing work and family responsibilities. Students meet one night a week in groups known as "cohorts" that stay together throughout an accelerated program for mutual learning and support. Blended and online offerings are also part of the curriculum.

A growing presence in regional education, FPU already has partnerships with Reedley College for its BA in Early Childhood Development and BA in Liberal Arts, and with California Health Sciences University for its Future Doctor Program leading to a Doctor of Osteopathic (DO) Medicine. The university also offers pathway programs with area K-12 school districts such as Visalia Unified, Chawanakee Unified in Madera County and Chaffey Joint Union in Ontario, CA.

FPU is the Central Valley's only accredited Christian university, offering undergraduate, graduate and seminary programs to more than 2,900 students on the main campus in southeast Fresno; regional campuses in North Fresno and Visalia; partner sites in Bakersfield, Merced, Reedley and now Firebaugh; as well as online. A multi-ethnic and multi-generational institution, FPU ranks highly as a "Best Value" and for improving graduates' social mobility in rankings by *The Wall Street Journal*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Washington Monthly* and *Money*.

West Hills Community College District has been serving the Central San Joaquin Valley since 1932. The district covers more than 3,300 square miles and enrolls about 10,000 students from locations in Coalinga and Lemoore as well as Firebaugh.

FPU is currently offering a 10% tuition discount for students who enroll in the new program. More information is available at fpu.edu/ccfirebaugh 

FPU Receives \$250,000 Gift from CalViva Health

By Michael Hammond, Editor-in-Chief

CalViva Health has generously donated \$250,000 to Fresno Pacific University to upgrade and expand the university's healthcare simulation facilities.

The investment will support the creation of the CalViva Simulation Lab, located at the North Fresno campus. This will provide students the opportunity to train in settings that mirror the high-stakes realities of hospitals, clinics and community practices.


The new equipment will include an adult simulator, a birthing simulator and a baby simulator. Additional funds will be used to update two existing simulators, as well as purchase laptops and software. Combined, these upgrades will allow students to experience the full spectrum of patient care, from wellness to emergency, without leaving the Central Valley.

"CalViva Health is proud to partner with Fresno Pacific University on this important investment in the future of our region's healthcare workforce," said Jeff Nkansah, CEO of CalViva Health. "The new simulation lab will give students the hands-on training and real-world experience they need to deliver compassionate and high-quality care in our communities. This partnership reflects our ongoing commitment to strengthen local healthcare pathways and support the next generation of providers who will care for the families we serve."

Fresno Pacific's nursing and health sciences programs are designed to address the Central Valley's persistent shortage of healthcare professionals. Graduates often remain in the Valley, with many students coming from the very communities they will then serve.

"This generous gift from CalViva Health directly impacts our efforts to train and equip more healthcare workers in the Central Valley," said FPU President André Stephens, Ph.D. "This investment strengthens our ability to prepare students for meaningful service in the communities where they live and work. We are grateful for CalViva's trust and support."

About CalViva Health

CalViva Health is the Local Initiative Plan for Fresno, Kings and Madera counties and operates under the Medi-Cal Managed Care Program. It is sponsored by the Regional Health Authority, which prioritizes local access, local control and locally responsive healthcare. CalViva Health works to improve access to care and provide quality healthcare to families throughout the region by offering the right care at the right place and the right time. Under Medi-Cal Managed Care, CalViva Health connects members with doctors, pharmacies and health education programs within a coordinated network designed to help individuals and families stay healthy. 

\$10 Million Grant from Lilly Endowment to FPU

By Michael Hammond, Editor-in-Chief

A \$9,998,251 grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. will strengthen the work of Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary to equip, train and resource current and future church leaders for faithful service in local communities and around the world. The grant will feature collaboration with the Center for Community Transformation, U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Vineyard USA, Lead from Transformation (coaching organization), the Bridge to Ministry Program at Fresno Pacific University and Messiah University.

The work will focus on five key areas:

1. A new online hybrid M.A. degree designed for training co-vocational pastors.
2. Hiring of a generalist Bible and Theology faculty member who will serve both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking communities. This shared faculty role will span the collaborating organizations, teaching within the seminary and creating training resources that strengthen and equip leaders across all partner ministries.
3. Developing training materials and programs to train co-vocational pastors with the partnering organizations.
4. Enabling the U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches and Vineyard USA to make strategic hires that will strengthen their capacity for ministry formation, leadership development and support of co-vocational pastors as part of the collaborative grant initiatives.
5. Most importantly, launching an endowment to offer significant scholarships for seminary ministry students.

The overall purpose of the grant is to strengthen the development of congregational ministers and church leaders, especially where co-vocational ministry is essential.

The Facilitating Spiritual Transformation & Economic Empowerment for Under-Resourced Ministry Leaders program is funded through Lilly Endowment's Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative. This initiative is designed to help theological schools across the United States and Canada prioritize and respond to the most pressing challenges they face in preparing pastoral leaders for Christian congregations. The grant is one of 45 that was approved in this competitive round of funding to support theological schools as they lead large-scale collaborations with other seminaries, colleges and universities, and other church-related organizations.

The grant process was led by Associate Professor of Pastoral Ministries Brian A. Ross, D.Min. "This grant allows us to equip ministry leaders for the realities of today's church," Ross said. "We are thrilled to have the opportunity to work even closer with two denominations, other university-based programs and two other organizations serving ministry leaders. Our hope is to provide more thorough training, coaching and spiritual formation, and to make education even more accessible to those who are already serving in church leadership."

Join this Historic Moment for FPU

“We stand in the shade of trees we did not plant.”

This is a phrase often repeated by Fresno Pacific University President André Stephens, Ph.D. The point he is making: we benefit from those who went before us. The inhabitants of previous generations had little idea of the lasting impact their decisions would make. This reminds us that what we do today can benefit others long after we are gone.

With the \$10 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., Fresno Pacific has been presented with an opportunity to plant a seed that will provide shade for generations to come. This grant will strengthen the already rich legacy of Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary.

To realize the full impact of this grant, FPU needs the help of supporters who see the value of this historic investment.

As part of the grant, Lilly has offered a matching challenge. **Every \$1 you give is matched with \$3, up to \$5 million. To unlock the full match, Fresno Pacific must raise \$1.65 million.** The goal is to raise the full \$1.65 million by June 30, 2026.

Meeting this goal will allow FPU to provide substantial scholarships, strengthen faculty resources and expand access to biblical seminary education for future generations.

Every gift, no matter the size, makes a difference.

You are invited to join in this effort. Your gift today can help FPU meet the match and impact generations to come.

Learn more by visiting

fpu.edu/lilly-endowment-match



FPU President André Stephens recognizes the significant impact this grant will bring to the seminary, as well as to the Central Valley. “This grant represents an extraordinary opportunity to strengthen the work of the church in the Central Valley,” Stephens said. “We are grateful for the trust the Lilly Endowment has placed in us and our partners, and we look forward to seeing the effect this will have on present and future ministry leaders and the communities they serve.”

Lilly Endowment launched the Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative in 2021. Since then, it has provided grants totaling more than \$700 million to support 163 theological schools in efforts to strengthen their own educational and financial capacities and to assist 61 schools in developing large-scale collaborative endeavors.

About Lilly Endowment Inc.

Lilly Endowment Inc. is a private foundation created in 1937 by J.K. Lilly Sr. and his sons Eli and J.K. Jr. through gifts of stock in their pharmaceutical business, Eli Lilly and Company. While those gifts remain the financial bedrock of the endowment, it is a separate entity from the company, with a distinct governing board, staff and location. In keeping with the founders’ wishes, the endowment supports the causes of community development, education and religion and maintains a special commitment to its hometown, Indianapolis, and home state, Indiana. A principal aim of the endowment’s religion grantmaking is to deepen and enrich the lives of Christians in the United States, primarily by seeking out and supporting efforts that enhance the vitality of congregations and strengthen the pastoral and lay leadership of Christian communities. The endowment also seeks to improve public understanding about religion and lift up in fair, accurate and balanced ways the roles that people of all faiths and various religious communities play in the United States and around the globe. 🏠

Re-Launching RN to BSN Program


By Michael Hammond, Editor-in-Chief

Starting August 2026, a program for registered nurses is coming back to Fresno Pacific University.

The RN to BSN program is designed with working nurses in mind, allowing them to advance their credentials without having to pause their career. The hybrid format offers classes online with in-person lab and clinical hours on-site at the FPU North Campus, local clinics, school districts and public health departments. Students will engage with experienced faculty with real-life clinical nursing experience and progress through coursework in a cohort format.

The program is accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (<http://www.ccnaccreditation.org>) and approved by the California Board of Registered Nursing (<http://www.rn.ca.gov>). Graduates of this program will meet California BRN requirements to apply for Public Health Nurse certification.

“This program opens up opportunities for RNs to advance their practice, strengthen their leadership and deepen their impact in healthcare,” said Esther Igboerika, DNP, APRN, CPNP, chief nursing officer and BSN program director. “We’re committed to seeing our nursing graduates equipped and prepared for the next level of their career.”

For more information or to apply, visit fpu.edu/RNtoBSN or contact the Office of Degree Completion Admissions at 559-453-3690 or degree.completion@fresno.edu. 



Social Media Highlights


Check out a couple of posts from the last few months. Catch all the latest—just hit follow!



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110,000+ VIEWS!

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Fresno for College



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The TENTH Alumni and Friends Tour!

Croatia and Slovenia

June 2027

Join us for a tour through the beautiful sea, land and cityscapes of Croatia and Slovenia. We will visit together ancient and contemporary Adriatic cities and ports, caves, beaches, grottos, national parks and scenic sunsets across the waters, inland old towns and squares.

- ▶ Dubrovnik
- ▶ Diocletian's Palace
- ▶ Dalmatian Island catamaran cruise
- ▶ Old towns of Trogir and Sibenik
- ▶ Zadar sea organ
- ▶ Plitvice Lakes National Park
- ▶ Old towns of Zagreb and Ljubljana
- ▶ Ancient, Medieval and Baroque architecture—palaces, churches, castles, fortresses
- ▶ Local tour guides and Croatian tour director
- ▶ Optional extension to Venice

See more at fpu.edu/alumnitours



Henry W. Lohrenz Sculpture Garden 1979-1980

By Hannah Keeney, Archivist

There are pockets of nature and art all around the main campus. Some, like the more centrally located “Forest” (officially the Alumni Plaza) or the new Warkentine Culture and Arts Center, are widely known; others, like the greenhouse and garden areas, are tucked a little further off the main path.

The view from the back door of the Mennonite Brethren Archives is one very few people ever take in. Not meant for public use, this little side door is tucked away in a corner meant for staff use and emergencies only. Directly opposite this secret entrance to Hiebert Library is a little metal side gate hidden by its own ivy-covered wall. Since the 1979-1980 expansion, it has been the entryway to a garden space directly behind Hiebert Library. All are welcome to enjoy the space, though it is not, the library staff would like to note, an entrance or exit to the library building itself.

Dedicated in memory of Henry W. Lohrenz, first president of Tabor College and secretary of what was then the Board of Foreign Missions, the space has a connection to the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, now known as the Mennonite Library & Archives.*

The Lohrenz Sculpture Garden was originally designed to include a wooden sculpture, a fountain and an olive tree. Over the past decade, the fountain stopped working and the olive tree had to be removed to protect the library building. The sculpture was taken off the wall for safekeeping. The space was slowly taken over by wild weeds and disuse. Plans to restore the sculpture garden were brought up and tabled.



Then, last spring, through the efforts of a dedicated team and a generous legacy gift from the estate of faithful FPU donor Willie Vogt, the long-hoped-for renovation began. Fresh landscaping brought new plants and a new tree. The fountain was carefully restored and the sculpture once again found its place on the wall. The once hidden corner was transformed and is now an open and inviting space.

* For more about this story, see *Pacific* magazine Vol. 32, No. 1. The 75th Anniversary Edition, available at fpu.edu/pacific-magazine. 

IN CONVERSATION...



...with President Stephens

On March 18, 2026, Fresno Pacific University President André Stephens, Ph.D., sat down for a conversation with *Pacific* magazine. The topics discussed covered the momentum happening at Fresno Pacific, some standout moments from Stephens' four years as president, as well as his hopes and dreams for the future of FPU. Below is the opening segment of the conversation. **To read the full transcript—including a ten-question speed round—visit fpu.edu/conversation**

Pacific: You've defined this season at FPU as one of momentum. What do you mean by that?

Stephens: Momentum has a number of things involved. I'd start with the students. Their success is our success; their failure is our failure. As I talk to traditional undergrad students, grad students, degree completion students, there is a sense from them that there's momentum at FPU.

Pacific: In what way?

Stephens: Students repeatedly mention campus improvements and a spiritual emphasis. In the last three years, we've put nearly \$10 million into donor-funded campus improvements, from classrooms to the baseball stadium to the Special Events Center, where we now hold Chapel. On the spiritual side, we've brought back Chapel as a requirement for traditional undergrad students. We give out Bibles to every new undergrad student. We redesigned a class that every undergrad student has to take, *Jesus and the Christian Community*. Students tell me the campus just feels different.

Pacific: Any other areas where you feel like FPU is experiencing momentum?

Stephens: Oh, so many. Going back to the donor-funded campus improvements, that happened because of momentum on the fundraising side. People are giving. We're also seeing some really exciting momentum with enrollment numbers. Right now, we're looking at over 2,200 applicants for fall 2026. That's the highest number of applications the university has ever received on the traditional undergrad side. So, we have momentum in student experience, momentum in fundraising, momentum in interest and one of the things I'm most grateful for: spiritual momentum.

Pacific: Momentum denotes movement. What direction do you hope to see FPU moving in the future?

Stephens: I've said early on that we have to build the conditions for our future success...

For the rest of this answer and the full conversation, follow the link above or scan the code.



Where Opportunity Meets Calling

By Amy D. Fienen, Freelance Writer

Fresno Pacific University strives to be a place where every student can afford to receive a Christian education. Approximately 87 percent of the school's diverse student population is awarded some form of financial aid to help with tuition costs for undergraduate, degree completion, credential and graduate programs. A \$10 million grant awarded to FPU from the Lilly Endowment Inc. will allow the Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary to train up church leaders to serve both locally and worldwide.

It's easy to read about such a sizable grant and miss the direct connection those dollars have to individual students. Many students in the seminary have benefited from

grants smaller than the one given by the Lilly Endowment Inc.—students like Saul Perez.

Saul's Story

As a husband and father of four ranging in age from 2 to 16, Perez says the financial support he received from FPU was instrumental in his success. His scholarships were funded by a past grant from the Kern Family Foundation, to which he attributes his ability to complete his studies without worrying about financing. "Without the monetary assistance I received, it would have been a big burden on my household and taken away from my enjoyment of my education and my ability to complete it in a timely manner," he says.



Perez says he's been told that his life and story are proof that Jesus is alive. In spite of what he refers to as humble beginnings that included being raised by a single mom with six kids and dropping out of high school, Perez is just months away from earning his M.A. in Christian Ministry through FPU's Bridge to Ministry program.

The 37-year-old felt God calling him to a life different than the one he was born into. He accepted Christ at the age of 20 and has spent every day since in awe of God's faithfulness. "My prayer for the past 10 years has been, 'God, use me for your glory,'" he says.

At the age of 29, after selling cars and working odd jobs to support his family, Perez spent a year in adult school completing his high school equivalency. From there, he earned a substance abuse counseling degree from Fresno City College with the goal of netting enough credits to apply for FPU's Bridge to Ministry program. The Bridge to Ministry pathway allows students pursuing a career in ministry to receive a bachelor's in a ministry-related

field and a Master of Arts in Christian Ministries in five years or less. Perez is on track to graduate with his master's degree this May.

While working part-time as a church engagement coordinator at Loma Vista Community Church in Clovis, Perez is also the chaplain supervisor for a hospice company. In that role, Perez says he spends his days mourning, rejoicing and everything in between as he supports the dying and their loved ones. "I get to

wake up and get paid for what God has created me to do," he says.

“God not only called, but provided.”

– Saul Perez

New Grant— New Opportunities

The Facilitating Spiritual Transformation & Economic Empowerment for Under-Resourced Ministry Leaders

program is being funded by Lilly Endowment's Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative. The initiative seeks to help theological schools prepare the next generation of pastors.

Brian Ross, associate professor of pastoral ministries at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary who led the grant application process for the \$10 million grant



from the Lilly Endowment Inc., says this new grant will benefit current and future students like Perez. “Its purpose is for the training of pastoral leaders,” he says. Ross says he designed FPU’s proposal around training co-vocational pastors as the number of pastors who have a second career is growing in the Valley.

As the grant is a collaborative one, FPU’s Bridge to Ministry program will be working closely with the U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Vineyard USA, Messiah University, Lead from Transformation and FPU’s Center for Community Transformation. The grant will fund five key areas, including an online hybrid master’s degree for co-vocational pastors, the addition of a new faculty member to support bilingual English/Spanish students, the development of training materials and programs, strategic hiring and leadership development, and an endowment offering significant scholarships for seminary ministry students.

Ross says the time and effort involved in the nearly year-long application process were worth it, as the grant will allow FPU to make education more accessible to students focused on making a career of serving the church. “I believe in what we do at the seminary, and this grant will have a large impact on future students,” he says. “We’re really excited to be working with lots of church leaders and being able to serve our students and future students in this way.”

Once FPU has raised funds to fulfill its match component for the Lilly Endowment, co-vocational pastors like Perez will benefit from the grant for years to come, Ross says.

Continuing Impact

Perez says that FPU has had a huge impact on his learning, his abilities and the way he prepares for whatever the Lord has in store for him. “I am better because of FPU, and not just because I have a piece of paper that God can use to open new doors,” he says. More than anything, he says he is so blessed and so thankful.



“If there was ever any doubt about the journey I was on, every dollar that was given towards my journey was confirmation that God has my back and that He was making a way; that God not only called, but provided,” Perez says.

The Lilly Endowment grant ensures many more students like Perez will have the same opportunity in the future.

Through all this, FPU President André Stephens, Ph.D., sees God’s hand at work. “We truly believe that God is moving at FPU, and this grant is just one example,” he says. “When you consider how many individuals the Lilly grant will benefit, and how many lives those individuals will go on to impact, the ripple effects are exponential.” 🏠



Coming Full Circle

By Cyndee Fontana-Ott, Freelance Writer

The ad that dropped into her Instagram feed awakened a memory and offered an opportunity. Mary Sierras read the text: Earn your bachelor's degree at Fresno Pacific University. She remembered her love of the campus from childhood, when her family of six lived across the street in a two-bedroom apartment.

Back then, college students would collect children from the complex and bring them to campus to color and hear the words of Jesus. Sierras, now the mother of three adult children, treasured those visits and the gospel that was shared.

Now the social media ad was bringing her full circle. Within a few months, Sierras applied to Fresno Pacific, was accepted and enrolled in the current spring semester. She's finishing up some general education requirements and will enter the business administration degree completion program.

"It's been absolutely amazing, I can't believe how easy this has all been," says Sierras, who works full-time as a supervisor at Fresno Superior Court. "God is great."



“

God really puts us in places as He guides us and hears our prayers.” – *Mary Sierras*

Reaching Out

Sierras’ journey back to Fresno Pacific helps illustrate the evolving importance and reach of the university’s virtual advertising and presence on social media. While those efforts have always been part of Fresno Pacific’s strategy, the growing emphasis on online storytelling is helping generate more awareness, attention and interest.

In fact, information and content related to the university is sprinkled across the social media landscape in seemingly infinite ways. Fresno Pacific reaches out through platforms that include Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and Spotify, for example, with both original content and paid advertising.

Campus social media specialists watch impressions (the total number of times content/ads are displayed), reach (the number of unique users), new followers and other numbers to help measure success.

Recent statistics are impressive. For example,

the 7.9 million impressions last year on Instagram reflected a nearly 400 percent increase over the previous year. The 8.9 million impressions on Facebook represented a nearly 80 percent increase.

“The numbers that we’re putting up are just insane,” said **Bradley Kennedy (BA ‘24)**, an alumnus, who is essentially the captain of this virtual ship. He graduated with a business administration degree and began working on campus shortly after that.

He started in the business department, then shifted to the marketing department and part-time social media duties. From there, Kennedy saw that Fresno Pacific could leverage more opportunities in the online space—especially to drive up enrollment. As the university recognized this potential, Kennedy became the integrated media manager.

“This is what I do every day, I come in and I do social media,” said Kennedy, who is typically found somewhere on campus with a camera in hand. The

goal is always to tell the story of the university—its many aspects, departments, faith and initiatives—in dynamic, memorable and creative ways.

The main target audience is prospective students. As a recent graduate, Kennedy may have an edge on insight because he understands how transformative and life-changing Fresno Pacific can be for students.

“I want to tell that story to someone else on social media to show them what our community is like, to show them how beautiful the campus is, to share with them how you can grow in your faith and also learn and study what you love,” Kennedy said.

Some content is serious, some isn't. Last year's Christmas series, for example, captured the heartfelt atmosphere and “reason for the season” at Fresno Pacific. But the most viral element showed campus mascot Sunny the Sunbird masquerading as Buddy in scenes from the movie *Elf*.

Another popular comedic video for a Sunbird Sneak Peek Preview Day—featuring Kennedy being clobbered by an empty cardboard box—may have helped drive enrollment from 20 to 200 students for the event.

The social media team constantly analyzes trends across platforms and finds a way to capitalize on them with a Fresno Pacific spin. Using Sked Social, an analytics and social media management tool, Kennedy and his colleagues track the numbers and reach of individual campaigns and content while also engaging with the audience. They also know the best times to publish on each platform in order to reach the biggest audience.

“We have really been able to build and level up by pushing out more creative, viral and entertaining content,” he said. Looking to increase the university's online footprint, the social media team also recently added a YouTube Shorts page.

“We're just continuing to grow and grow and grow and try to push the boundaries so that we can get FPU out there and in the best light that we possibly can,” Kennedy said.

Coming Home

That social media outreach brought Sierras back to her old neighborhood. However, she was nervous about returning to college after battling personal challenges and spending years in the workforce.

The nerves followed Sierras as she attended an on-campus orientation, where her choice of seats placed her next to a kind man who listened to her story. She later learned that the man who put her at ease, and invited her to stay in touch, was FPU President André Stephens, Ph.D.

Today, Sierras knows that the social media ad steered her to making the best choice for her future: “God really puts us in places as He guides us and hears our prayers.”

In the best way, social media can lead to human connection. Still, it is often difficult to draw a straight line between a social media offering or advertisement and a student's enrollment. Sierras' journey is tangible evidence of some success.

Kennedy sees the momentum building. “I think that social media is a great opportunity for us to be a light in this world because we know that social media can be a pretty dark place out there. Fresno Pacific University is a great place to be.” 🏠



Kuppa Joy Comes to FPU

By Michael Hammond, Editor-in-Chief





“Can I get a hallelujah?”

Fresno Pacific University President André Stephens, Ph.D., asks this question to a room full of staff and faculty at the annual Fall Kickoff.

A few answer softly while several heads nod in agreement.

“I’m serious. Can I get a hallelujah?”

His request is met with cheers, clapping and several more shouts of “hallelujah!” After the applause dies down, Vice President of Student Development Jake Gilbertson, Ed.D., stands holding a disposable coffee cup. “I have a Hallelujah for André,” he says, walking to the podium and handing the cup to Stephens.

This is no ordinary cup of coffee; it contains a “Hallelujah,” one of the signature drinks on the menu at popular Valley coffee shop Kuppa Joy. Stephens takes a sip and again addresses the audience. “Oh, and did

I mention that Kuppa Joy coffee is now going to be served at FPU?”

This time, the room erupts.

Kuppa Joy

Opening a coffee shop is not the typical next career move for a former NFL player, but for Zack Follett that was exactly the path he chose.

“Kuppa Joy really birthed from a passion of mine,” says Follett. “After tasting all that the world had to offer, I realized it wasn’t any better than the love I experienced in my relationship with Christ.”

One day while sitting at a coffee shop, Follett asked himself how he could tell as many people about Jesus as possible. In front of him was a cup of coffee and a Bible. Romans 8:1 was open: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”



Kuppa Joy

Coffee House

“It filled me with such a great joy,” Follett says. “I took a sip of the cappuccino I was drinking and thought, ‘This is a cup of joy!’” Follett looked around and saw people connecting over coffee. He felt in that moment that coffee would be the vehicle he would use to tell people about Jesus.

It Started with a Conversation

It was May of 2025, just three months before President Stephens made the announcement about Kuppa Joy coming to FPU. Commencement was taking place and current junior Madison Kennedy was talking with some FPU staff between the undergraduate and graduate ceremonies. The topic was the campus coffee shop, Charlotte’s Coffee Corner, and the possibility of finding a new coffee vendor. Kennedy had begun working at Kuppa Joy in April.

“I just spoke up and said, ‘Hey, I work at Kuppa Joy! Maybe they could provide our coffee?’” Kennedy recalls. “To me, it was bigger than just the coffee. People know Kuppa Joy is Christian.”

One of the staff members Kennedy was talking to was Jake Gilbertson, VP of student development. The coffee shop is one of the areas under his supervision.

“Madi’s connection was key,” Gilbertson says. “As soon as I heard the idea, I thought it was worth having some conversations. They’re a Christian coffee shop; we’re a Christian university. It just made sense.”

Kennedy left that day with a green light to pursue the idea with Kuppa Joy. “When I first brought it up, it felt like a shot in the dark,” she says. “I was so excited and honestly surprised that they trusted me to open the conversation.”

On her next day of work, she approached her manager with the idea. He immediately gave her Follett’s contact information. Though nervous to email Follett out of the blue, Kennedy was determined to see this through.

“When Madi emailed me, my first reaction was that I loved her boldness,” Follett says. “My second reaction was that this was such a God thing.”

Little did anyone from FPU know that God had already been at work lining up this partnership. “Someone sent me a letter about five years ago,” Follett says. “They believed Kuppa Joy would someday spread across college campuses.” He had been waiting for the right opportunity to present itself.

“I could instantly see this partnership working,” says Follett. “There was no reason Kuppa couldn’t be at FPU.”

A Partnership Made in Heaven

“We knew that Kuppa Joy being on campus would provide a great experience for our students,” Gilbertson says. “We believe our students deserve the best, and we’re always looking for ways to level things up.”

Gilbertson was also clear-eyed about the logistics. "I loved the idea, but I also knew there was every possibility it might not be able to happen."

Charlotte's is one of the many food options on campus operated by FPU's partner food service provider, named Provider.

"Provider really cares about the student experience," Gilbertson says. "They're also a faith-based company that sees its role as serving students."

The collaboration between FPU, Kuppa Joy and Provider went so well that the conversation quickly shifted from if to when.

"Before too long we started asking if we could make August happen," Gilbertson says.

Things moved fast. The deal was finalized, and changes took place right away. Follett invited Provider staff to come to Kuppa Joy to learn to make the company's signature drinks. He was also onsite at FPU throughout the first week after the revamped menu debuted at Charlotte's. The results have been positive for all involved.

"It's blessed Kuppa as much as it's blessed FPU," Follett says. "It makes it really easy when all eyes are focused on the same God."

Gilbertson agrees: "One of the beauties was that our values are so well aligned. We both care about spreading the name of Jesus, and Kuppa



really partnered with us in making the student experience better."

Follett is looking forward to the ongoing partnership with FPU. "I'm so excited to see where God takes this," he says.

In the months since Kuppa Joy arrived at Charlotte's, the buzz has continued. On the surface, it's a small change, but it's one that speaks loudly.

"The reality is that momentum is most often made up of small changes that add up to something bigger," says Gilbertson. "It's not always about what's flashiest, but what's going to have the biggest positive impact on students." 🏠



THE RISE OF SUNBIRD VOLLEYBALL

Kelsee Montagna rewrites Sunbird signature program

By Wayne Steffen, Freelance Writer

As Sunbird Athletics looks forward to joining the California Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA) this fall—as the website has relentlessly reminded viewers since June—the department might invest in a new trophy case for its signature women’s volleyball program.

A new shelf is certainly in order to hold the hardware from its 2025 PacWest swansong.

Among the honors:

- ▶ A 27-2 record (11-1 in the PacWest Conference)
- ▶ PacWest champions (first since joining the NCAA)
- ▶ NCAA Western Region final game (first in the NCAA era)
- ▶ American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) Top 10
- ▶ PacWest Team of the Week six times (three in a row)
- ▶ 23-game winning streak
- ▶ Enough individual honors to float several resumes







Sure, there is no “I” in “team.” But there certainly is in “winner,” “victory” and “champion.” The architect of this two-year turnaround from 2023’s 13-16 mark is head coach Kelsee Montagna, herself the recipient of PacWest Conference and AVCA West Region Coach of the Year honors.

High-power coaches can put out high-maintenance vibes, like a Ferrari revving at a stoplight. Montagna projects relaxed confidence chatting in Charlotte’s Coffee Corner about her journey since taking over in February 2024. Her wide smile is friendly and frequent as she talks about her ‘Birds.

“When I got here, I think they were pretty vulnerable,” Montagna recalls. “They wanted to be coached, loved and part of a program. The talent was there.”

Montagna knows talent. The Madera native captained, coached and won honors at Cabrillo College and the University of Providence in Great Falls, MT, where she earned her B.S. in Business Administration and M.A. in Organizational Leadership and Management. She also has an M.A. in Exercise Science and Coaching from Concordia University Irvine.

Closer to home, Montagna has directed the Valley Volleyball Club and assisted for indoor and beach volleyball at Fresno City College. She and husband Christian Brown Johnson—friends since preschool—built a house on 10 acres near Madera. When not running Johnson Farming Enterprises, he runs in ultra-endurance events. In 2025 he won the World Marathon Challenge and a Guinness World Record for completing seven marathons on seven continents in seven consecutive days. The effort also raised \$10,000 for Parkinson’s research.

Coaches Create Culture

That first season at FPU was all about creating the right culture. Crucial to that was recruiting talented assistant coaches.

One way to build a new legend was enlisting an existing one. **Kelley Winter (MA '08, TC '02, BA '01)** is a Sunbird Athletics Hall of Famer (volleyball/track) and successful former FPU volleyball coach (81-37 record in four seasons). “She was the wisdom,” says Montagna.



Catie Speas (BA '23), also the administrative assistant in sports medicine, is great at “all the small things to make them feel wanted and cared for,” Montagna says.

Kendall Featherstone coached at Clovis East High School, still coaches at Valley Volleyball Academy and works as a residence director at FPU. “We just brought this force together,” Montagna says.

Senior Cambria Waites experienced team life before Montagna arrived. “I believe coach Kelsee has rebuilt this program from the ground up,” says the senior criminology major from Lodi. “The biggest things that have changed are the team culture and sense of community.”

Bonds have been built in team activities, free-time hangouts and serving at agencies from Poverello House to Boys & Girls Clubs. “Our team is special because of every single girl,” Waites says.

Connections between student-athletes and coaches are just as strong. “We know we can go to coach Kelsee in any situation,” she says.

Family with Purpose

“We’re a family, for sure,” Montagna agrees. “They want to be pushed; they want to play at a high level.”

As for the CCAA, Montagna talks like the Sunbirds are already there. The conference may have what sportswriters call a “storied history” with schools like Cal State Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Pomona. “It doesn’t change who we are,” she says.

“We’re well-respected in the nation now,” Montagna says. “We’re in a place where if people want to stay in the Valley they think of us first.” 🏠

A Voice for Valley Students

By Amy D. Fienen, Freelance Writer

Diane Lira, Ed.D., attended more than 20 elementary schools and three high schools as the daughter of migrant parents who followed the seasonal crops across California. Though her parents had limited formal education, they attended a migrant parent program that taught them how to support their children throughout their educational journey. Lira says she and her three brothers grew up knowing how important education was to their parents.

After spending her childhood moving from place to place, Lira recalls the sense of home she felt when she visited FPU as a senior at Clovis West. “After attending so many schools, I wanted someplace where people knew me by name, where I felt supported and had a feeling of security that I wasn’t alone, and I automatically felt that when I visited Fresno Pacific University,” she says.



Shaped by her experiences as a migrant student and English learner, Lira started college knowing she wanted to be a teacher. She says she started FPU with a teaching mindset but came out with a leadership mindset. “Fresno Pacific is very Christ-centered, but its mission to develop students for leadership and service is also very impactful.”

After graduating from FPU in 2003 with a BA in Liberal Studies, she began her career at Kerman Unified School District. She spent her first 10 years with the district as an elementary school and migrant teacher before transitioning to administration. She spent the next 10 years as an assistant principal, principal, district director and assistant superintendent. “I felt connected to Kerman Unified because of my background, and my dream was to support families that were similar to mine,” she says. “I wanted to make sure I was empowering parents with some of the brave skills I learned through Fresno Pacific on how to be connected with the kiddos and also their careers.”

Two years ago, Lira’s retiring superintendent encouraged her to apply for a position with Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, telling her she should be using her voice to support those without one on a larger scale. After a nationwide search, she was named deputy superintendent at Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, where she supports instructional services for more than 206,000 students across Fresno County. Lira’s work centers on partnering with districts, educators and communities to strengthen teaching and learning, expand equitable access to quality instruction and build systems that support student success.



Last year, Fresno County Superintendent of Schools Michele Cantwell-Copher, Ed.D., nominated Lira for the 42nd Annual Marjaree Mason Top Ten Professional Women Awards. In October, Lira was named one of the honorees selected based on their achievements, leadership and commitment to making a positive impact in the Central Valley. “For someone who began as a migrant student, this recognition is a powerful reminder of what is possible when education, opportunity and community come together,” Lira says.

Lira’s parents were able to leave their days of laboring in the fields behind when they started their own small trucking company. She says she admires how hard her parents have always worked for their

family. When Lira has moved over the years, her parents have followed, never living more than a few houses away from her, her three children and husband, Bert. It’s been through the lens of her own life experiences that Lira is able to frame her career as an educator.

Lira says FPU taught her to be humble, vulnerable and ethical—all principles that continue to guide her as she works towards creating meaningful impact for students in a learning environment where each one feels seen, valued and capable. “The skills and values I developed there continue to guide my work today, especially the importance of listening, leading with integrity and remaining grounded in purpose.” 🏠

IN TOUCH WITH ALUMNI



GENERAL ANNOUNCEMENTS

2020s

Brittney Owens (MA '22, BA '17) was recognized as a 2025 Exceptional Women of Color (EWOC) Honoree in the category of Management and the Professions.

2010s

Rufino Ucelo, Jr. (BA '11) is the assistant superintendent of business services at Kingsburg Joint Union High School District.

Justin Hiebert (SEM '11) was appointed to the Mennonite Brethren Foundation as ministry representative for California's Central Valley in August 2025. He will serve from his home in Bakersfield.

Joseph Brennan (BA '14) is the director of government affairs for Delaware Association of REALTORS®.

Karen Huebert-Sanchez (MA '14, BA '89) and **Ricardo Sanchez (SEM '98, BA '93)**'s orphanage for HIV+ children in Thailand, The Abundant Life Home, is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2026! They have been missionaries in Thailand for 27 years.

On November 2, 2025, **Jordan Litz (FS '15)** ran the New York City Marathon, then later that day performed in the matinee and evening shows of *Wicked* on Broadway as Fiyero.

Cierra Guerra (BA '17) is a health, PE and homeroom teacher for California Online Public Schools.

2000s

Chris Tavarez (BA '01) was selected by the Hanford City Council to be the next city manager, effective February 2, 2026.

Diane Lira (BA '03), Ed.D., deputy superintendent, instructional services for the office of the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, was named a Marjaree Mason Center Top Ten Professional Woman in 2025.

Lauren Nikkel (BA '08) is the executive director for the Kingsburg District Chamber of Commerce.

1990s

Jennifer Wizbowski (BA '96)'s debut historical fiction novel, *Poinsettia Girl* was released on October 18, 2025.

Raymond Wizbowski (BA '96) is the chief marketing officer at ECI Software Solutions in Westlake, TX.

Kimberli Carroll (BA '99), president and CEO of Ruiz Foods, was featured in the article "Meet the Dallas 500: Carroll, Ruiz Foods" on September 10 in *D* magazine, which serves Dallas, TX.

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BIRTHS



Rose Elizabeth Dale was born September 20, 2024, to **Allison (BA '19)** and **Andrew Dale**.



Lincoln Paul Dias was born November 15, 2025, to **Madison (BA '19)** and **Austin Dias**.



Leilani Mina Caraballo Smith was born April 4, 2025, to **Evelyn (Smith TC '18, BA '17)** and **Joel Caraballo**. Jasmin (2 yrs.) is excelling in her new role as big sister to baby "Lani."



Bruno (BA '14) and **Angie (FS '13) Pessoa's** second child, Melissa, was born December 28, 2025.

DEATHS

Bradly John Feyma (MA '23), 48, Madera, CA, passed away January 13, 2026. Brad was born September 15, 1977, in Santa Paula, CA, to Gary and Patty Feyma. With nearly 40 years of involvement in music, Brad was proficient in many instruments and deeply loved sharing his musical gifts with others. He was able to share this passion with students as band and choir director at Bullard High School and Edison High School. Brad attended The Well Community Church in Clovis, CA. He is survived by his mother and stepfather, Patty and John Patterson; his brother and sister-in-law, Nicholas and Krista Feyma; and his three nephews Judah, Gideon and Ezra Feyma. He is also survived by his stepbrothers and their families: Damon and Evelyn Patterson, Jack and West; Blake and Sandy Patterson, Cade and Cash.

Hanna York (Nielsen BA '04) was born January 20, 1982, and passed away November 11, 2025. She was a beloved wife, mother and friend. Survivors include husband **Daniel (BA '04)**, and their two children.

Lisa E. Allen (Tapley BA '94), 53, died November 22, 2025, after a valiant battle with a high-grade glioma of the brain. She is survived by husband **Jason (BA '94)**; their three children Nathanael (Kayana), Corban and Eliana; and one grandchild, Everett. Lisa is also survived by her parents, Lewis and **Lynda Tapley (MA '02, TC '97, BA '91)** and all of her siblings. Her greatest desire in life was for those around her to come to a saving knowledge and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

John Spencly Berwick (BA '88), 61, died August 11, 2025. Born August 7, 1964, in Downey, CA, John played basketball at FPU, serving as team captain and earning MVP, all-conference and conference player of the year honors. He served at the California Youth Authority Camarillo, the Paso Robles Youth Correctional Facility and the California Department of State Parole in a 28-year career. Survivors include wife Sherri and children J.D., Natalie, Shannon and Robert, as well as three sisters and three grandchildren.

Lowell Wallace Boldt (BA '73), 74, passed away on December 5, 2025. He was born on August 25, 1951. He attended Reedley MB Church. Lowell had a lifelong commitment to education, teaching and students. In his classes, he wove devotional reflections, Scripture and music into the curriculum, helping students grow both academically and in their faith. At the time of his death, he was an adjunct professor at FPU. Survivors include wife Gwenn, daughter Emily Huebert and son Chris Boldt.

Ruth Kroeker (PBI '51), 92, passed away on October 25, 2025, in Fresno, CA. She was born on July 28, 1933, in Reedley, CA.

George Pete Isaak (PBI '49), 98, died December 1, 2025. Born July 3, 1927, in Slavgorod, Russia, to Peter and Helen Isaak, George was the fifth of 11 children. The Isaak family left Russia in 1929 and settled in the Central Valley. George graduated from Dinuba High School in 1945, and entered the Army that same year, serving as a medic in Japan. Upon returning home, he married the love of his life, Lillian Weist, on October 10, 1947, enjoying a 71-year marriage. In 1955, he was accepted to teach in schools for U.S. military dependents on bases in Germany. Moving back to California in 1962, George worked with the Redlands Unified School District until his retirement in 1987. He spent his retirement years serving in local churches as a Sunday school teacher, as well as serving on the board of the Mexican Christian Children's Aid (MCCA). George was preceded in death by his wife Lillian Isaak; his daughter Deloris Jane Davis; his parents; and his 10 siblings. He is survived by daughter Kathleen Renner; sons Donald Isaak and Mark Isaak; nine grandchildren; 25 great-grandchildren; and one great-great-granddaughter.

SOLVE a Mystery and a Memory



Take a look at these vintage photographs from deep within the vaults of Fresno Pacific, Pacific College and Pacific Bible Institute. See anyone you know—maybe your mom or dad? Were you present for any of these adventures?



If you know anything about these photos, or if they spark a memory of Sunbirds or Vikings past, please share a comment by scanning the QR code, or follow the link fpu.edu/mystery.

We will highlight some of the responses in the next issue of *Pacific*.



RESPONSE FROM LAST ISSUE



Submitted by: Amy Lewis (Voris BA '92)

This is a faith fall in the amphitheater. Front right is my roommate of three years, **Sharla Shaver (Bartel BA '92)**, who has taken an even greater leap of faith and is serving God overseas. Faith falls often played a part in my middle school drama classes as part of our team-building activities. I'm thankful God has used the leadership training Sharla and I received at FPU (then FPC) as RCs and class senators and other roles for our good and His glory.



Submitted by: Bobby Martin (BA '12)

I'm the guy sitting in the exact middle of the photo. This is the Undergraduate Admissions team at the annual Thanksgiving lunch celebration in the Special Events Center. Our theme that year was hope, based on the verse Hebrews 6:19. We had string lights and a giant anchor centerpiece wrapped in aluminum foil. If I remember correctly, we placed in the top three for the table decorating contest.

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RETIREEE

Jay Wiebe (2020)

Clinical Instructor of Education & PPS Clinical Experience, Program Coordinator




Jay Wiebe came to FPU with nearly three decades of experience.

After 27 years as a school psychologist in the Fresno Unified School District, the idea of working with adult students, as well as helping to grow and strengthen the program, was enough to compel him to move from being an adjunct professor to coming aboard full time.

While joining the university full time during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging, Wiebe notes it was also very rewarding. "We developed great relationships with those cohorts of students and that was very encouraging." Beyond just the classroom work, Wiebe appreciated the spiritual dimension of his relationship with students. "I have really enjoyed the opportunities to pray for students, not just corporately, but also for individuals," he says. "Students have expressed gratitude for these prayers."

Though he's entering retirement, FPU won't be far away. "I plan to continue on as an adjunct professor," he says. Beyond continuing to be involved with the university, Wiebe looks forward to more time spent with grandchildren, as well as more traveling and volunteering with his wife.

Though he certainly found the work fulfilling, Wiebe notes that the friendships forged with his coworkers will be something he treasures. "One of the best parts of working at FPU has been the team of school psychologists/faculty that I worked with," he says. "We really enjoyed working together, accomplished a lot and had a lot of fun." 

A Love Story Started at FPU

By Cyndee Fontana-Ott, Freelance Writer

Nearly 50 years ago, Fresno Pacific student Mike Blesse noticed a 21-year-old redhead arriving for her first year on campus.

The redhead, Connie Buckingham, was a Santa Cruz transplant and freshman longing to experience life in a Christian community and college. He was a college athlete, outdoorsman and entrepreneur finishing up a bachelor's degree in Contemporary Christian Ministries.

Over several years—and sometimes aided by Mike's family—the couple's relationship bloomed into a forever bond. These two alums just celebrated 44 years of marriage and they still hold hands, laugh easily at each other's one-liners and genuinely remain deeply in love.

Their romance might never have blossomed without the foundation of then-Fresno Pacific College (now Fresno Pacific University). "Those years were so formative for us as individuals and later as a couple," he says during an interview conducted over the friendly din of a Fresno coffee shop.

"I think God has been so gracious about helping us to grow," Connie says. "God always continues to teach us and there's never a dull moment."

Fresno Pacific brought them together. While Connie

grew up on the coast, Mike was born and raised in Fresno, graduating from Hoover High School and then Fresno City College. "I crammed two years of junior college into three," he jokes, earning the first of many musical laughs from Connie.

At Fresno City College, Mike played on the inaugural campus soccer team and then was recruited to play at Fresno Pacific. He later branched into other college sports (including baseball and track) and balanced academics and athletics with jobs ranging from gardener to



campus security.

By the time Connie arrived on campus in fall 1977, Mike was nearing the finish line of his bachelor's degree. Although she caught his eye, Mike didn't immediately ask for a date. Fortunately, his sister, Liz, was Connie's roommate for a time and gave her brother a push.

Mike hardly needed the nudge but it did speed things along. He and Connie began dating and, after graduating in 1978, Mike continued to live on campus as an instructor for outdoor classes.

Meanwhile, Connie was earning a bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts along with a teaching credential. She completed her academic work in 1981.

They shared faith and interests such as the outdoors, music and singing/traveling with the university choir. Yet if

there was a fork in the road of their relationship, it came in summer 1980 when Mike volunteered to serve on M/V Logos, an Operation Mobilization ship.

The nonprofit brings books and Christian ministry to ports around the world, and the Blesse family had been involved with the organization since Mike was in high school.

By then, Mike knew he wanted to marry Connie and was ready to buy a ring. But he didn't know whether it was right to propose and then leave for more than a year.

Connie was sure of Mike but worried the relationship might not survive without a formal commitment. Realizing one evening that he needed to assuage her concerns, Mike proposed while wearing his baseball uniform.

During the 13 months Mike was away, moving through ports in southeast Asia, the couple wrote letters and exchanged cassette tapes. While the distance was difficult, the separation allowed Connie to focus on her academics, student teaching and night job at the IRS.

"It was God's good timing," she says. "How could I do all that and have time for him too?"

Their relationship not only survived that separation, it thrived and continued to grow over the years and decades.

Both Blesses are now retired after teaching careers. Mike primarily taught English/Language Arts at the high school level while Connie taught elementary school.

The Blesses have three children and five grandchildren and live in the dream house they built years ago in the foothills of Auberry. Through the years, they worked and traveled with church youth groups, hosted foreign exchange students and missionaries, joined the Auberry Community

Church and spent a year living and working on a Montana wheat farm.

They both agree that they not only love each other, they absolutely like each other. "It's been a wonderful ride," Mike says. "I think of how God has blessed us over and over again." 🏠



To read more stories like this, visit fpu.edu/sunnysblog.

Faith in Every Stride

By Christopher L. Scott (MA '15, BA '12), Freelance Writer

The long journey Clara Wagner made from Germany to FPU has been a testament to the supportive and faith-driven community she found here.

Clara grew up with a Catholic mother and an Evangelical father. She was baptized and had a foundational understanding of Christianity. During her high school years, however, her faith took a backseat as she focused on track and field.

Upon arriving at FPU, Clara found herself among people deeply rooted in the Christian faith. “The more I was surrounded by faith, especially by everybody around here at FPU, it’s just been a great blessing,” Clara says. This environment rekindled her spiritual journey, leading her to place a greater emphasis on that part of her life. “I’ve become more intentional about prayers and reflection in my connection to God,” she says.

While at FPU, Clara has excelled as a track and field athlete, breaking the FPU record for the heptathlon with 4,724 points. Through her involvement in various spiritual activities at FPU, she has seen her faith excel as well. She regularly attends Chapel on Wednesdays and other church services on Fridays and Sundays. “I usually go to church with my friends around here,” Clara says.

Her best friend, Shelby Folmer, and her former track and field coach **Ray Winter, Ph.D., (TC '00, BA '98)**, have been instrumental in her spiritual growth. “Shelby has taught me so many things, and she’s the one

taking me to all of the churches and trying new things,” Clara says. Winter, who often led Bible studies and prayed over the team, also had a significant impact on her spiritual life.

Clara’s time at FPU has not only deepened her faith but also helped her appreciate life more. She has seen the impact her faith has had on her perspective and outlook. “The Lord’s words have really helped me,” she says. 🏠



EDITOR'S NOTE

Do you know a student who has been transformed at FPU? Contact Michael Hammond at michael.hammond@fresno.edu

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