

STATE

WINTER 2021

THE MAGAZINE OF THE COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Landmark tuition
program has helped
21,000 Colorado
students seize
their dreams

HEAT WAVE

Firing up Pueblo chile
from seed to supper

FROM ALL ANGLES

A new president's view
of online education



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[EDITOR'S NOTE]

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, scholars have noted that William Shakespeare rarely wrote about the bubonic plague. Yet pestilence repeatedly surged through England during the great playwright's lifetime, with devastating results.

Instead of an explicit presence, infectious disease is a subtext in much of Shakespeare's writing.

As destructive as it has been, COVID-19 often lurks in ways that recall Shakespeare: not always discussed, not always the top concern at a given moment; but there, shadowing our lives and livelihoods.

Last summer, *STATE* magazine published three special issues focused on CSU System and campus responses to the pandemic. Now, we return to issues highlighting a wide range of System programs and people.

And yet, COVID-19 is a through line. It is seen in the pressing need for tuition aid among financially stressed Colorado students. It is seen in demand for Pueblo chile as a comfort food. Seen in an intensified interest on online higher education. Seen in CSU donation gardens that blossomed to improve food security.

A note about these stories: The photography you'll see was planned and executed with close attention to COVID-19 health protocols in the times and places subjects are pictured. We were careful about outdoor locations, distancing, and masking as required. (In some cases, masks aren't in the frame but are prevalent behind the camera.)

As we anticipate congratulating a new cohort of graduates this spring, we also eagerly anticipate the 2021-2022 academic year. We will welcome it for rewarding, in-person learning at our physical campuses – out of the shadows, to the degree possible.

– Coleman Cornelius, executive editor

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ON THE COVER: Leah Young is among thousands of low-income Colorado students who have received CSU Tuition Assistance Grants to attain their degrees at the System's flagship campus in Fort Collins. Photo: Mary Neiberg

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TOPIC: **ENGAGEMENT**
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TOPIC: **CHANGE THROUGH PHILANTHROPY**
GUESTS: CSU System Chancellor Emeritus **JOE BLAKE**,
MERRY GEBRETSADIK (B.A., '22),
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DATE: **COMING APRIL 19, 2021**
TOPIC: **SUSTAINABILITY**
GUEST: **DIANA WALL**
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Director, School of Global Environmental Sustainability



COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

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Photographs, from left: Students at Colorado State University’s Morgan Library, by Joe A. Mendoza; tuition grant recipient Brayan Trejo, by Mary Neiberg; harvesting green chile near Pueblo, by Ben P. Ward; CSU Global President Pamela Toney, by Mary Neiberg.

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SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Land-grant mission marries past and future education needs

Chancellor Tony Frank describes connections among educational access, research-based innovations, community development, and economic vibrancy – ideals that are baked into the land-grant mission and remain critical today.

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OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Landmark program has helped 21,000 students attend CSU

A life-changing tuition assistance program is marking its 10th anniversary at Colorado State University, having disbursed nearly \$180 million to low-income Colorado students who needed financial aid to attain their college degrees.

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HEAT WAVE

Firing up Pueblo chile from seed to supper

In southern Colorado, green chile is a cultural touchstone and a longtime source of pride. Now, community members are joining to broadly market Pueblo chile; it’s a hot take on economic development, led by many with CSU System ties.

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FROM ALL ANGLES

President shares her view of online education

Pamela Toney, the new president of CSU Global, sees a critical role for online higher education. Its importance is heightened as the COVID-19 pandemic pushes employees to improve and retool their skills to meet changing workplace demands.

[PERSPECTIVE]

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Land-grant mission marries past and future education needs



Photo: Joe A. Mendoza / Colorado State University

BY TONY FRANK, CHANCELLOR, CSU SYSTEM

This nation's history began with one of the greatest human experiments: to see if individuals could self-govern. We're still testing the limits on that one, but so far, we have a couple hundred years of evidence that it's possible. About a hundred years into that first experiment with democracy, we embarked on another: public higher education. It was a radical concept at the time to consider making a college education available to anyone, regardless of economic status, who had the commitment and ability to earn a degree.

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PERSPECTIVE *Continued from Page 6*

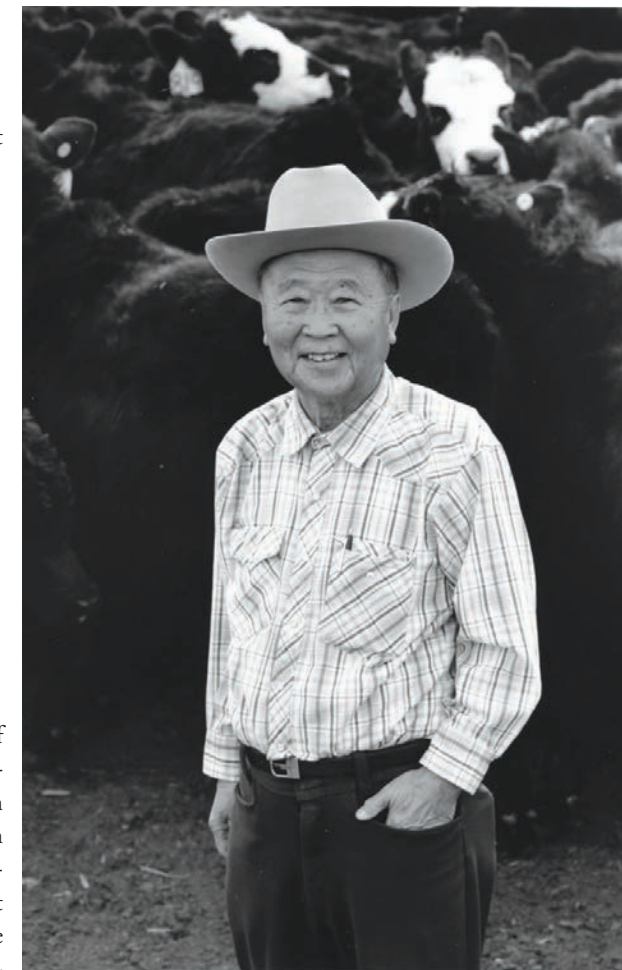
Instrumental in launching this second experiment were Senator Justin Morrill and President Abraham Lincoln. Standing in a teetering economy, with the echoes of war barely faded from their ears, they made the following suppositions:

- That democracy would succeed only with educated citizens.
- That a successful economy, spread out across the vast physical space of America and adaptable to future changes, needed an educated workforce at all levels.
- That the fabric of society would be strengthened by inclusion of teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and other professionals in all of our communities.
- And that the best way to attain this was for everyone to contribute to helping finance the cost of these educations, because what is returned to us by these soon-to-be graduates will be far more than what we have invested.

Their vision led to the creation of land-grant universities, like Colorado State, that have a specific mission to serve society as a whole through accessible education, basic and applied research, and outreach that puts this research and knowledge to work for people and communities. In Colorado, that experiment launched Feb. 11, 1870, with the creation of CSU – now a System of three universities all bound by their commitment to access, scholarship, and innovation.

Every February, we celebrate these events with Founders Day, and our flagship campus awards the Founders Day Medal to someone who has had a transformative impact on CSU and higher education. This year, the medal went to a man who embodies the land-grant mission, Professor Emeritus John Matsushima.

Johnny – the founder of Ag Day, 2013 Citizen of the West, longtime CSU professor – grew up one of seven children on a family farm in Platteville, with no indoor plumbing and often not enough food to go around. He worked hard in 4-H and then as a student



John Matsushima is pictured when he was named 2013 Citizen of the West; he recently celebrated his 100th birthday. Photo: National Western Stock Show

“I’ve always used the model that food plus water equals life. Those three words are very powerful. Those three things encouraged my research in order to improve the life span of human beings.”
– Professor Emeritus John Matsushima

at CSU, obtaining his degrees in 1943 and 1945 – not an easy time for someone of Japanese ancestry in America. Over the years, his research into cattle feeds went on to transform global agriculture and the global cattle industry. In December, he celebrated his 100th birthday. (Happy birthday, my friend!)

Every year, 60,000 students attend classes at our CSU campuses. And among them are countless people who, like Johnny, will seize the education they’re offered and use it to improve the lives and well-being of people worldwide.

Our first CSU Systemwide economic impact study, released just a few weeks ago, revealed that one in 25 people in Colorado’s workforce is a CSU alumnus, and our graduates are using their talents to strengthen state industries and communities. What’s more, our campuses multiply the funding they receive from the state in ways that add significant value to Colorado – in taxes paid by our graduates, student spending in local businesses, innovation that fuels competitiveness, and thousands of public- and private-sector jobs.

This issue of *STATE* magazine tells some of those stories, and how we are continuing to invest in students in ways that keep our access mission strong and competitive. That’s particularly important given the impact we know the COVID-19 pandemic is having nationwide on low-income students and their college aspirations. The CSU System is determined to prevent this pandemic from deterring those dreams.

This issue also chronicles work at our new Spur campus – less than a year away from opening – and efforts around the state that are taking our outreach, research, and access missions in new directions. As we celebrated CSU’s founding this spring, we really celebrated both our history and the dawn of an exciting new era of impact and innovation. ♦

To subscribe to Chancellor Tony Frank’s monthly CSU System newsletter, visit col.st/PmXSD.



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Nationally ranked as a top-ten university for COVID-19 research, CSU has long been recognized as a top-tier Carnegie R1 institution and is committed to delivering research that benefits the global community across a broad range of disciplines. Our research in agriculture has led to new ways to care for crops and enhance life-sustaining food production. CSU veterinarians are working on a vaccine to prevent cancer in dogs, which could one day help human patients. Our atmospheric science researchers have produced one of the most comprehensive investigations of wildfire smoke and air pollution to date. And our pandemic research has expanded from saving the lives of Colorado's most vulnerable residents to innovations in statewide testing through wastewater monitoring. We continue to innovate and incorporate the latest rapid-testing protocols to monitor and mitigate the spread of coronavirus among our community of students, faculty, and staff. CSU cares for our community, Colorado, and the world by proudly advancing the discovery and creation of knowledge that will make the planet a better place for all.

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[STATE WIDE]



It's one thing to be located in a community, another entirely to be part of it. To know its attributes, its successes, and its challenges. To be a dedicated partner in seeking solutions that position communities and their citizens for the future.

- The Colorado State University System and its three campuses are just such partners for the state of Colorado. Our programs and our alumni are ingrained in communities across the state, joining every day with fellow citizens, policymakers, businesses, and organizations to spark innovation, hone ideas, and improve economic vibrancy and quality of life for the people of Colorado.

At the heart of our work is a profound mission: providing access to educational excellence and opportunities that arise from it. Together, we make Colorado our home – and our state. ♦

Photographer Gavin Wadleigh used a drone to capture the effects of a winter storm in this image taken in Lyons, Colorado. Wadleigh is pursuing a bachelor's degree in computer science through CSU Global.

The team leading efforts to plan and build CSU Spur includes, from left, Rachel Quinn with CAA ICON; Ashley Stiles, CEO of Tribe Development; Mariah Shrake, field engineer with JE Dunn Construction; Tiana Kennedy, assistant vice chancellor for external relations, CSU System; Martha Weidmann, CEO of NINE dot Arts; Amy Parsons, former executive vice chancellor, CSU System; Jennifer Cordes, project principal, Hord Coplan Macht; and Jocelyn Hittle, senior director of sustainability and Denver programs, CSU System. They are pictured on the site of the forthcoming Hydro Building. Photo: Vance Jacobs



NEW CAMPUS RISING

CSU Spur will open next year with a focus on food, water, and health

When Jocelyn Hittle imagines the forthcoming CSU Spur campus, she pictures kids. A youngster who learns about growing crops in a futuristic greenhouse and then foresees a career in urban farming. A kid visiting the South Platte River, whose gaze turns west as he considers studying the high-mountain origins of irrigation and drinking water. A student who observes a puppy's veterinary checkup and discovers a new interest in medicine.

"CSU Spur, since it's located in Denver and at the National Western Center, really offers us a chance to expand on the land-grant mission of connecting with people in the state to collaborate on the latest research and to inspire kids to pursue careers in food, water, and health," Hittle said. "I'm excited about connecting young people with science and scientists at work, and to encourage them to tackle the big challenges facing our world."

Hittle is responsible for developing CSU Spur programs to make all that a reality. As a key part of the CSU System leadership team, she is immersed in planning the unique urban campus whose construction officially began in May 2020. As the CSU System's largest building initiative, CSU Spur will encompass 300,000 square feet, with a construction budget of \$200 million. Its phased opening is expected to start in early 2022.

The new campus will be unlike any other in Colorado, with three new buildings focused on lifelong learning about food, water, and health. The topics – critical and interdependent in the West and around the globe – are areas of core System expertise. CSU Spur programs will explore them through collaborative research, community outreach, and public education; this work will tie to academic programming on the CSU System's three main campuses, the flagship university in Fort Collins, CSU Pueblo, and CSU Global.

Spur is rising within the ambitious redevelopment of the historic National Western Stock Show complex, near the interchange of I-25 and I-70 in north Denver. The CSU System is one of five key partners remaking the aging complex into the National Western Center, which, among other goals, will allow the storied Stock Show to flourish on its original grounds. CSU Spur will be a vital part of carrying the site's deep Western heritage into the future, Hittle said.

Continued on Page 14

LET'S TALK

Initiative promotes civic engagement



Photo: Colorado State University Libraries, Archives & Special Collections

During one of the most contentious national elections in history, the Colorado State University System launched an initiative to encourage civic engagement, voting, and informed discourse. The effort – called “Your Voice. Your Vote. Your Rights.” – highlights the role the role higher education plays in preparing educated citizens and leading difficult conversations around critical issues.

“Most Americans don’t like the way we talk to each other these days, but no one seems to know how to fix it,” Chancellor Tony Frank wrote in an essay announcing the initiative last year. “The CSU System proposes we start at the most obvious point: Let’s talk about it.”

“Your Voice. Your Vote. Your Rights.” launched in September 2020 with a new website, csusystem.edu/free-speech, followed by a series of special editions of the chancellor’s monthly newsletter that focused on free speech, voting, and elections.

The project includes a robust toolkit for use by faculty and students on the three CSU System campuses, with social media graphics and guidelines, classroom resources, and information about voting, peaceful assembly, and ways to engage in civic life.

In October, the System hosted a webinar in conjunction with the initiative, “CSU Grads on the Political Frontlines,” featuring CSU alumni working in the political arena as journalists and lobbyists in Washington, D.C. Panelists were from *The War Horse*, *Politico*, *ProPublica*, CropLife America, Fox 5 DC, the McCain Institute for International Leadership, and the U.S. House of Representatives. The webinar is available for viewing in the toolkit section of the initiative website.

Additional webinars and resources will roll out in the months ahead because, even after election season, people still need to understand their rights and responsibilities under the First Amendment.

“Free speech is the heart of higher education, and universities have a unique and important role to play in leading tough conversations around critical issues,” Frank said. “That’s the nature of what we do – we argue about ideas, we debate theories, we recognize that truth can be malleable, evolving along with the research and knowledge we exist to conduct. We sometimes fail in actuality; we don’t always function as a model of civil and respectful discourse. But no institution in our society is as suited to attempt to repair our broken discourse as a university.” ♦

NEW CAMPUS RISING *Continued from Page 13*

She is among a group of professional women with notable roles in the project; their work ranges from educational programming to architecture, exhibit design, and public art curation. For years, Amy Parsons, former executive vice chancellor of the CSU System, was a primary figure in developing the new campus as a milestone of System growth in Denver and beyond. She worked closely with National Western Center partners to get the entire redevelopment rolling. Parsons recently left the CSU System to become chief executive officer of Mozzafiato LLC, an American company that represents a collection of Italian heritage beauty brands coming to the U.S. market.

Rising professionals likewise have significant roles. For instance, Mariah Shrake, who graduated from CSU in 2019 with a bachelor’s degree in construction management, works on site as a project engineer for JE Dunn Construction, the group building CSU Spur’s three facilities. “It’s pretty awesome to be part of the university’s plans to branch out,” said Shrake, who spends her days coordinating construction crews. “It’s nice to have work that has such tangible results, and I love that every day is different, with different problems to solve.”

Tiana Kennedy, in charge of external relations for the CSU System, is another familiar leader. She develops community partnerships central to CSU Spur’s missions in education and engagement – and has kicked off many programs well before the appearance of bricks and mortar. In her role, Kennedy is helping to establish CSU Spur as an anchor institution, or one that interacts closely with neighboring communities to offer meaningful connections and educational opportunities.

For instance, the System has partnered with Bruce Randolph School to spark projects tailored to the needs and interests of its students, who live near the forthcoming Spur campus. Other connections already have established the annual Focus on Health Community Clinic, which provides veterinary care for pets and health resources for families in the nearby Globeville and Elyria-Swansea neighborhoods.

“We’ve been thinking of Spur as having very fluid walls,” Kennedy explained. “Whenever possible, we’re supporting our local communities, whether it’s through economic development or educational access for local K-12 students. These partnerships are such a two-way street, and they really enhance what we’ll do at CSU Spur.” ♦

MILLION-DOLLAR QUESTION

CSU System generates talent, jobs, and revenue for Colorado

How do the CSU System and its campuses contribute to the Colorado economy?

The three Colorado State University System campuses – and the out-of-state students they attract – fuel nearly 23,000 Colorado jobs and more than \$237.74 million in state income and sales tax revenue annually.

In a first-time economic impact study, researchers quantified the CSU System’s significance to the Colorado economy in terms of jobs, research, and the contributions of more than 112,250 alumni now working in Colorado. Highlights and a full report are available at csusystem.edu/economic-impact.

Among the report’s key findings: The CSU System is an important factor in Colorado’s workforce talent retention. About 50 percent of the students who moved to Colorado to attend a CSU campus since 2005 have stayed here after graduating. And 86 percent of Colorado residents who attended CSU institutions are still in the state.

Nearly one in 25 Colorado workers has a degree from a CSU System campus, and their alumni income translates into more than \$209 million in state income tax revenue and \$128 million in sales, use, and excise tax revenue each year. In other words, about 3 percent of the state’s total collections can be attributed to CSU graduates.

The three CSU System campuses – the flagship research university in Fort Collins; CSU Pueblo, a regionally focused Hispanic-Serving Institution; and the fully online CSU Global – together enroll more than 60,000 new and returning students each year. The CSU System has nearly 300,000 living alumni worldwide.

“Clearly, CSU plays a critical role in our state’s future productivity and ability to remain an innovation hub in economically important industries,” CSU System Chancellor Tony Frank said. “We’re not manufacturing a product; we’re educating people



Illustration by Dave Cutler

who contribute to society in all the ways educated people do – as teachers, scientists, doctors and nurses, business leaders, manufacturers, technologists, artists, engineers, and the countless other roles that are typically filled by people with higher education.”

The study was conducted by CSU Fort Collins faculty, Rebecca Hill of agricultural and resource economics and Harvey Cutler

and Martin Shields of economics. They were supported by graduate research assistants Lauren Mangus and Kevin Crofton.

“The CSU System’s economic impact is felt statewide by bringing in money from federal agencies, out-of-state students, and by transferring knowledge to businesses and industries across Colorado,” the authors wrote in the report. ♦

GROWING FOOD SECURITY

Donation gardens blossom to fill urgent needs

Graduate students Hugo Pantigoso and Savannah Hobbs have regularly relied on the Colorado State University food pantry to fill gaps in their grocery needs.

Last summer, they gave back just as the COVID-19 pandemic was fueling hunger and food insecurity nationwide: The students grew more than 2,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables for others who depend on the campus food bank.

“It’s amazing to harvest that much produce,” Pantigoso said, as he checked ripening tomatoes at the tail end of the growing season in late September. “It’s great to be able to give back. It feels good.”

Pantigoso and Hobbs led a pilot project at CSU’s Agricultural Research, Development, and Education Center to ease food shortages, which have starkly worsened during the pandemic. With just a few other volunteers, the two planted cucumbers, peppers, squash, tomatoes, and watermelon in four 300-foot rows, covering one-fifth of an acre at the research farm just east of Fort Collins. They tended the plot through the growing season, harvested produce on the weekends, and donated it to the Rams Against Hunger food pantry for distribution to CSU students, faculty, and staff in need.

“I saw the importance of Rams Against Hunger because I have relied on the food bank and have seen the good it’s done in my life,” said Hobbs, a doctoral student in food science and human nutrition. “It’s very powerful to think of helping other students in that way. We’re excited to make creative use of existing university resources and to keep this project moving and growing.”

By late summer, the fresh fruits and vegetables from ARDEC South – grown in an open corner of the research farm – had helped hundreds of other low-income students. Rams Against Hunger distributed the produce along with nonperishable staples.

“It’s rewarding to see a small piece of land producing this much nutritious food,” Pantigoso marveled, scanning rows at the CSU farm.

An agronomist from Peru, he came to CSU to pursue a Ph.D. in horticulture and to conduct research into the interactions of crop roots and soil organisms, which could lead to new biological technologies that reduce the need for synthetic fertilizers. In the process, Pantigoso helped launch the first-time food project to support other students struggling to buy groceries with minimal income. At the same time, the budding project is designed to teach the basics of farming to student volunteers without agricultural backgrounds, thus increasing food literacy along with food security.

The ARDEC South Food Security Project sprouted when a small group of students, faculty, and staff connected the dots between campus food needs and university resources. The CSU farm has previously donated produce grown in the course of conducting research; for instance, while studying the hardiness of crop varieties or the effectiveness of irrigation techniques. This time, the fruits and vegetables were planted just for donation, with volunteer time dedicated to harvesting and distribution – laborious tasks that often take a back seat at a university research farm because of limited staffing.

The ARDEC South project is one of several CSU farm-to-food bank efforts that have harnessed the land-grant university’s collective ingenuity, community networks, and agricultural resources to help solve the longstanding problem of food insecurity, which has dramatically mounted during the pandemic. Together, the programs illustrate how even small-scale coordinated efforts, powered by volunteerism, can put a dent in significant local problems.

The COVID-19 crisis has compounded hunger and food insecurity among low-income individuals and families nationwide, a dire ripple effect of economic upheaval, unemployment, and market disruptions. More than 50 million people, including an estimated 17 million children, faced food insecurity in 2020, according to a recent report from Feeding America, the nation’s largest hunger relief organization. That was a spike of 35 percent in the U.S. pop-



Hugo Pantigoso is a CSU graduate student in horticulture who helped start a donation garden at a university research farm east of Fort Collins. Last summer, the student-led project grew 2,000 pounds of produce for distribution to CSU students through the Rams Against Hunger food pantry on campus. Photo: Mary Neiberg

BY COLEMAN CORNELIUS



ulation overall and of 50 percent among the nation's children, compared to rates before the pandemic. It means nearly one in four children hasn't had enough nutritious food for good health during the pandemic, and their families have been unable to buy it.

Two principal branches of the state's land-grant university – the Colorado Agricultural Experiment Station and CSU Extension – have taken a lead in tackling food insecurity. With research centers and outreach offices in communities across Colorado, the two university agencies are uniquely equipped to help.

For instance, the Colorado Master Gardener Program, a well-known Extension offering, launched Grow & Give, a statewide project motivated by the pandemic and modeled on backyard victory gardens

that boosted food supplies and morale during the bleak years of World War I and World War II.

Grow & Give struck a chord: Nearly 600 gardeners volunteered last summer; they raised and donated almost 50,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables to charitable food programs that serve people in need from the Western Slope to the Eastern Plains. That's 25 tons of fresh produce, from beets to beans and leafy greens.

"Many of our volunteers were asking, 'What can we do that will really make a difference?'" said Katie Dunker, statewide coordinator for the Colorado Master Gardener Program, who helped lead Grow & Give. "Instead of opting out of programming in such a strange and difficult year, we said, 'Grow with us.'



Food insecurity has spiked among financially stressed students, prompting the Rams Against Hunger food pantry to expand significantly: Before the pandemic, it operated once a month on the Fort Collins campus; now, it is open three days a week. Those who visit the pantry receive boxes filled with staples and fresh vegetables. Photography: Ben P. Ward / Colorado State University

Below left: Graduate student Hugo Pantigo-so and farm manager William Folsom survey a vegetable plot at the Agricultural Research, Development, and Education Center east of Fort Collins. **Below right:** Michael Buttram picks up produce for distribution through the Rams Against Hunger food pantry. **Photography:** Mary Neiberg

This is where CSU Extension can make such a big difference connecting people to solve real needs in their communities. It took a pandemic for us to see all this capacity, but we're going to continue this work. It hits all the marks for a land-grant university."

Other CSU programs, both well rooted and newly bloomed, have joined in. For instance, the San Luis Valley Research Center, part of the Agricultural Experiment Station in southern Colorado, donated 48,000 pounds of potatoes grown while testing varieties and farming methods. The Southwestern Colorado Research Center milled grain from a portion of its wheat crop and donated 525 pounds of baking flour to food banks in the Four Corners; an Extension team in the region provided

truckloads of apples from a CSU orchard.

"The silver lining that came out of the pandemic is we now have connections to all our local food banks and food distribution agencies," said Greg Felsen, Montezuma County Extension director, who led the apple contribution.

The Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief, a program begun in 2017 at the Western Colorado Research Center near Grand Junction, is a model that has offered information and inspiration for other university efforts. The Community Alliance involves CSU staff, local schools, nonprofits, dozens of volunteers, and college students. Together, they grow, harvest, and distribute fresh nutritious produce from the research center to people in need, while si-



multaneously providing public education about food insecurity and healthy eating.

During the 2020 growing season, the program donated 76,000 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables to charitable food outlets on the Western Slope. The bounty included apples, peppers, squash, tomatoes, and more – the kind of nutritious produce that's often scarce at food banks. During four years, the Community Alliance has grown and donated a grand total of almost 350,000 pounds of produce, Amanda McQuade, program coordinator, said. That's 175 tons of fresh food.

"I love seeing other projects around the state gaining traction," said McQuade, who has been a guiding force for university food security projects. "We're directing site-specific CSU resources at community problems. The success of these programs tells me there is a lot of latent energy within the staff, students, and volunteers at CSU to respond to food insecurity."

Just as it has surged in society broadly, food insecurity

likewise has intensified in campus communities. At Colorado State in Fort Collins, demand is so significant that Rams Against Hunger expanded its food pantry from a monthly offering to three days a week. During fall semester, the campus food bank served more than 300 students, faculty, and staff each week, or nearly 1,500 people per month. That's double the number helped before the pandemic, said Michael Buttram, who coordinates Rams Against Hunger. At CSU Pueblo, the Pack Pantry meets similar needs.

Buttram has worked closely with the ARDEC South Food Security Project to ensure its harvest reaches students, faculty, and staff. "This has been such a gift for the food pantry," he said, while picking up several crates of late-season produce from the Fort Collins research farm. "Food insecurity was always a prevalent issue, but it's become exacerbated during the pandemic. We have a sense of pride knowing we're helping to meet that need with food grown at CSU for our campus community." ♦

Savannah Hobbs, a doctoral student in food science and human nutrition, helped lead the pilot project to grow produce for CSU students facing food insecurity. **Photo:** Mary Neiberg



Joe Blake, chancellor emeritus of the CSU System, recently donated \$5 million to Colorado State University's College of Liberal Arts to support its faculty and academic programs. Blake describes the liberal arts as a fount of creativity, innovation, and ethics. At age 85, he is a U.S. history buff who acts in community theater and ascribes his career success to a foundation in the liberal arts. Photo: Colorado State University

THE LIBERATING ARTS

Former chancellor helps cap highly successful campaign

Joe Blake's prominent career in Colorado business and higher education began with a degree in English literature from Dartmouth College. So it's no surprise that Blake refers to the liberal arts as "the liberating arts," a phrase he picked up from the president of his Ivy League alma mater during the 1950s.

Now, Blake has significantly invested in those "liberating arts" to benefit Colorado State University and its students – hoping to boost scholars into leadership in business, politics, and civic life. He recently donated \$5 million to CSU's College of Liberal Arts to recognize and elevate its faculty and academic excellence. It was the largest gift in college history.

"The liberal arts have no boundaries and make life just so much more interesting," said Blake, chancellor emeritus of the CSU System. In fact, former CSU President William Morgan also espoused the "liberating arts" as he led creation of academic programs in sciences, arts, and humanities on the Fort Collins campus in the 1950s and '60s.

"Your perspectives are broader and more diverse when you study these subjects," Blake said. "It's all about curiosity and interest, and I do believe those elements find their wellspring in the liberal arts."

A high-profile son of Denver, Blake graduated from East High School and returned to his home state after earning his bachelor's degree; he attended law school at the University of Colorado.

Later, he was part of the executive management team that led development of Highlands Ranch south of Denver. He then worked for nearly a decade as president and chief executive officer of the influential Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce, striving to diversify the regional economy and strengthen ties between business and civic leadership.

Along the way, Blake helped bring Major League Baseball to Colorado and has served on the boards of many philanthropic organizations. For his tireless work and community advocacy, Blake was inducted into the Colorado Business Hall of Fame in 2017. It is one of his many honors.

Blake became an enthusiastic advocate for the CSU System and its campuses when former Gov.

Bill Owens appointed him to serve on the Board of Governors in 2006. Blake then became the System's first full-time chancellor; he filled the post from 2009 until 2011. He continues to work for the System as chancellor emeritus and as a highly successful fundraiser for campus programs and scholarships.

In his System leadership roles, Blake helped shape policies that allowed the CSU System to successfully weather the Great Recession. Today, that groundwork is helping the System's campuses get through financial challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. He also developed a critical strategic plan for the System and supported the successful launch of CSU Global. The former chancellor remains a champion of CSU's land-grant missions in Colorado community engagement, economic development, and higher-education access and opportunities for students.

"Joe's passion for Colorado State is just remarkable," President Joyce McConnell said. "His belief in the transformative power of education becomes apparent to anyone within moments of meeting him. We are a better institution because of Joe and his vision for CSU."

Blake's legacy gift to the College of Liberal Arts is among many significant donations that helped conclude the university's landmark State Your Purpose fundraising campaign in Summer 2020.

The fundraising campaign generated \$1.28 billion, surpassing its \$1 billion goal, even during the pandemic. Donations have helped to build and transform campus facilities and have contributed to all aspects of CSU teaching, research, and outreach.

Also during the fundraising campaign, the former chancellor founded the Blake Leadership Scholars Program. The merit-based scholarship helps recruit high-achieving students to CSU by offering unique leadership training and other special opportunities to augment curriculum.

"If you're going to send students to the political arena or the civic arena or the business arena, you've got to have balanced people who are critical thinkers," Blake said. "Colorado State University is creating phenomenal citizens for a world that's in desperate need of phenomenal citizens." ♦

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

Massive wildfire burns across treasured campus but avoids buildings

The Cameron Peak Fire, the largest wildfire in recorded Colorado history, scorched more than one-third of the CSU Mountain Campus in October.

- It charred hundreds of forested acres but avoided buildings at the beloved site that sits below the Mummy Range in the mountains west of Fort Collins and annually hosts nearly 6,500 students and other visitors.

The campus spans 1,600 acres, and most of this forestland remains unscathed. Yet, fire crossed an estimated 600 acres on the property's west side, with mixed severity. Many patches of forest were visibly unaffected; others, including aspen groves and stands of lodgepole pine, were reduced to blackened moonscape and the matchsticks of burned trees.

Intrepid firefighting spared all 76 structures at the Mountain Campus, including classrooms, cabins, the main dining hall, conference center, and a cluster of historic buildings. A residue of smoke and soot will require intensive cleanup in many structures. But a full reopening is expected in the months ahead.

A firefighting helicopter flies over the CSU Mountain Campus west of Fort Collins as the Cameron Peak Fire burns through the forest. The campus ropes course, in foreground, was among the many structures spared. Photo: William A. Cotton / Colorado State University



“We had a lot of anxious moments as the fire burned for more than 90 days. It was exhausting,” said Seth Webb, director of the Mountain Campus. “Our campus is nearly surrounded by the fire perimeter, yet we remain intact, with no structural damage to speak of, because of firefighting operations. We are overwhelmed with gratitude for firefighting efforts because this is such a special, powerful place for people who have studied and learned here.”

The Mountain Campus was established in 1914

and has provided generations of CSU students with unmatched discoveries. Each year, the campus hosts about 1,000 students for immersive field courses, orientations, and more. Thousands of additional guests visit for research, conferences, and getaways. That includes more than 2,000 fifth-graders who annually arrive from Northern Colorado elementary schools for an introduction to ecosystem science during eagerly awaited Eco Week trips.

The COVID-19 pandemic prevented campus vis-

Top left: Officials with the U.S. Forest Service and CSU consult a map as they discuss firefighting strategies in October. **Center left:** The Cameron Peak Fire burned across one-third of the CSU Mountain Campus, leaving some forestland nearly unscathed and other acreage entirely scorched. Firefighting saved all 76 structures on the beloved campus. **Bottom left:** A portable water tank was filled and ready to protect conference center buildings. Photography: William A. Cotton / Colorado State University. **Above:** Drops of fire retardant from air tankers helped protect buildings at the CSU Mountain Campus from the largest wildfire in recorded Colorado history. Photo: U.S. Forest Service / NM Engine 964 Crew

its during most of 2020; that averted the evacuation of guests during the Cameron Peak Fire. It also allowed firefighters to prepare as the blaze bore down: They cleared flammable material, set up water tanks, laid hose, drenched buildings with sprinklers, and conducted backburning operations. Earlier wildfire mitigation gave these efforts a boost.

“It was a real nail-biter for a while,” said John Hayes, dean of CSU’s Warner College of Natural Resources, which leads research and education programming at the Mountain Campus. “If it weren’t for the incredible dedication and hard work of the firefighters up there, we’d be having a very different conversation now.”

The Cameron Peak Fire started Aug. 13 near Chambers Lake in the upper Poudre Canyon. It burned an estimated 209,000 acres before fire officials finally declared it contained in early December. Patches of forest continued to smolder even after early snowstorms. The fearsome blaze forced hundreds of evacuations and destroyed 225 residential structures, including more than 40 primary homes, officials said. As the fire ripped through forests with dry understories and beetle-killed timber, it produced dramatic smoke plumes and spewed ash across the Front Range.

It was one of Colorado’s three largest wildfires on record – all starting in Summer 2020, all in a year of statewide drought, all adding to the scientifically founded understanding that climate change is extending typical fire seasons and ratcheting up the magnitude and intensity of many wildfires.

Against this backdrop, the aftermath of the Cameron Peak Fire opens doors to expanded CSU research and education at the Mountain Campus, Hayes said. The university is even better positioned to examine questions about wildfire impacts on forest restoration, wildlife habitat, watershed function, and water quality, among other critical issues.

Hayes said he hopes the Cameron Peak Fire will be the catalyst for a new era at the Mountain Campus. The concept already is moving ahead with rising research activity and plans for construction of a new, donor-funded academic building.

“I see it becoming a unique spot to use as a mountain ecological observatory to study climate change and the dynamics of alpine and high-elevation environments broadly,” he said. “This is a pivotal point for the campus. We’re trying to build the type of facility that can be used for globally important, cutting-edge research and education.” ♦



Firefighters with the Larimer County Sheriff's Office assessed the burn scar above CSU Mountain Campus as snow fell this winter. Photo: William A. Cotton / Colorado State University

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

LANDMARK PROGRAM HAS HELPED 21,000 STUDENTS ATTEND COLLEGE

A decade ago, many low-income families were still reeling from the Great Recession when Colorado State University launched a landmark tuition assistance program for Colorado students who needed support to earn their degrees.

This academic year – as the COVID-19 pandemic inflicts new financial woes – the CSU Tuition Assistance Grant program marked its 10th anniversary by aiding more than 4,000 financially stressed CSU students.

In all, the program has disbursed nearly \$180 million to about 21,000 Colorado students enrolled at the CSU System's flagship campus in Fort Collins.

The grant program has helped secure a path to opportunity for thousands of students each year and has balanced the scales for low-income students and families who often are acutely impacted by economic crisis. Since it began in 2011, the program has become a fundamental way that CSU delivers on its land-grant promise to provide qualified students from all backgrounds with access to excellent education and the expanded opportunities that arise from it.

"As someone who didn't have the means to pay for college, the Tuition Assistance Grant and other scholarships definitely helped me. It meant I didn't have to work 40 hours a week while

going to school, and that allowed me to focus on my studies," said Violeta Flores, of Colorado Springs, who graduated in May 2020 with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering.

The pandemic scuttled traditional commencement for Flores and others in the Class of 2020. But, with her financial aid, Flores had the degree she needed to land a job as an engineer at Lockheed Martin in Englewood. She designs and supports electrical systems for hypersonic missiles.

Through the CSU Tuition Assistance Grant program, the university's lowest-income Colorado students automatically receive financial support totaling \$16,500 per academic year. The aid is derived from university, state, and federal funds. For students with greatest need, this aid covers 100 percent of tuition and fees; in this way, the university's lowest-income students have been shielded from the impacts of tuition increases since the grant program launched. In fact, for students in this category, the support goes beyond tuition and fees to cover about 60 percent of the total cost of attendance – including books, supplies, and room and board.

Most grant recipients earn other need-based and merit-based scholarship support, which further limits debt and offers a jumpstart on life after graduation.

The CSU grant program, designed to aid disadvantaged in-state students, was among the first of its kind among land-grant universities nationwide and stands out for its duration, the level of support offered, and the number of students served.

"We are so excited to offer the Tuition Assistance Grant for Colorado students who dream of coming to CSU and pursuing fulfilling careers after graduation but need financial help to get there," CSU President Joyce McConnell said. "This program is a tangible example of our land-grant commitment to access and student success, and it demonstrates the educational value we deliver for individual students, families, and the state of Colorado."

The financial aid program was conceived in 2009 and began in 2011 under former CSU President Tony Frank, who is now CSU System chancellor. At the time, university leaders and members of the CSU System Board of Governors saw that the Great

Recession was throwing up obstacles to degree attainment for students from financially struggling families. They sought a solution that would help Colorado students then – and into the future.

Compounding those recessionary forces, leaders – and students – were already grappling with a notable long-term trend in declining state investment in public higher education. Over time, this gradual defunding has shifted the lion's share of tuition costs from the state to students and their families, resulting in climbing tuition costs. Colorado now ranks No. 47 in the nation based on state allocations to public higher education, according to the state Department of Higher Education.

For those with scarce resources, economic shocks worsen the impact of the disinvestment trend, and the CSU Tuition Assistance Grant program has been one important way to hold open a door to higher education for in-state students attending CSU. Low-income and middle-income students qualify for varying levels of support.

"It is such a privilege to be part of an institution that so fully embraces the land-grant mission," said Leslie Taylor, vice president for enrollment and access. "CSU does that through persistent effort, active planning, allocation of resources, and a growing accountability of outcomes."

BY COLEMAN CORNELIUS

REPORTING CONTRIBUTED BY TONY PHIFER AND JOE GIORDANO

PORTRAITS BY MARY NEIBERG

Students walk through Morgan Library at CSU in Fort Collins.
Photo: Joe A. Mendoza / Colorado State University



MEET THREE STUDENTS

PURSUING THEIR DREAMS

WITH GRANT SUPPORT

T

“The idea of working
in the aerospace
industry excites me
and makes me curious
about all the things
I could potentially do.”

– *Brayan Trejo*

BRAYAN TREJO

he clock was ticking past 9 a.m., and the CSU Rams Rocketry Team was sweltering at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico.

Brayan Trejo and his teammates had been struggling for hours to launch their device at the Intercollegiate Rocket Engineering Competition. Among dozens of entries, their rocket stood out for its use of liquid propellants – ethanol and liquid nitrous oxide – instead of solid fuel.

Trejo was sweating. The team had failed to launch their rocket on three previous days, and he had designed the control system. It had to function perfectly with volatile fuels, temperature and pressure variables, and complex engine technology. The team’s chance was evaporating as the temperature climbed during a fourth attempt.

Then, when the moment seemed right, a teammate pushed the launch button. Trejo saw combustion and rocket fire. In a flash, the CSU team became the only one at the 2019 engineering contest to successfully launch a liquid rocket; it soared to 9,500 feet.

“I almost blacked out,” Trejo recalled. “It was our last chance, and it was so amazing to see it work.”

Just a month before, Trejo had graduated from CSU with a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering – the first in his family to earn a college degree. It was possible only with financial support from the CSU Tuition Assistance Grant and other scholarships, he said.

With success at the rocket competition, Trejo was sure of his ambition to work in the U.S. aerospace industry as an embedded hardware engineer. To get there, he is now pursuing a master’s degree in computer engineering at CSU; he’s paying his way as a graduate teaching assistant, co-instructing a digital circuitry lab.

His opportunities and achievements are all the more meaningful, Trejo said, because he is an undocumented student protected from deportation under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, known as DACA. Trejo was born in Mexico and came to the United States with his family as an infant; he grew up in Fort Collins.

Despite uncertainties about his citizenship, Trejo said he is motivated to work in and for the only nation he has ever called home. He shared the elation of NASA scientists and engineers when the Perseverance rover recently landed on Mars.

“I get really excited about the thought of being able to design and implement and test something as great as the Mars rover and work with a whole team in the aerospace ecosystem,” Trejo said. “When I watch something like that, the most exciting piece for me is when the camera pans into the control room, and you can see everyone jumping up out of their seats and showing pure excitement and joy. That’s what drives me – to someday be part of that.”

THE

**“I really couldn’t
be more thankful.
Graduating with this
degree is the most
far-reaching goal
I could have had.”**

– Michael Daghita

MICHAEL DAGHITA

e admits he was a miserable student in high school. At one point, Michael Daghita had a 1.6 grade point average – on track to repeat his final year as a “super senior.” When he made it to graduation, Daghita dusted off his hands: “There you go. Done!”

Then he started full-time work at a call center in Greeley, his hometown. Daghita sat in a sea of desks, in front of a computer monitor, wearing a headset. He took nonstop calls from people agitated about pharmacy coupons, cellphone service, and bankcard use. He had co-workers who’d been at it for decades.

“College sounds pretty good,” he thought.

Daghita first enrolled at Aims Community College in Greeley. He was impressed by his older brother, who works in information technology, so Daghita took a class in computer programming. He struggled through tears of frustration, but soon began to shine. Before long, he had a 3.9 GPA and an associate of science degree.

Feeling empowered for the first time, Daghita set his sights higher – to a bachelor’s degree.

Having been inspired by his older brother, he wanted to pay it forward as an academic model for his younger brother. “I want him to be able to look up to someone else,” said Daghita, who grew up as the middle of three sons raised by a single mom.

Daghita will graduate from Colorado State University in May as a first-generation student with a B.S. in computer science.

Even more, he will graduate with a full-time job. While at CSU, Daghita has worked as a student intern for Hewlett-Packard in Fort Collins; right after commencement, he will transition to a permanent job developing and testing firmware, a class of computer software specific to devices and core their function.

The CSU Tuition Assistance Grant program made his studies and his degree possible. His financial aid provided him “a completely different future,” Daghita said.

“I couldn’t have painted a picture like this,” he said. “I have hope for years down the line, and I want to contribute, to look at something and say, ‘I had a hand in that.’ Maybe I will have influence years beyond me in some way.”



LEAH YOUNG

hen she was 7 years old, Leah Young took the microphone to sing at a music festival before an audience of 2,000 people. She looked at her grandmother, the treasured Colorado blues and jazz vocalist Hazel Miller, a featured concert act who had beckoned her granddaughter to the stage.

Then the little girl glanced at the band and said, “I’m ready, boys.”

Young carried that confidence with her through graduation from Manual High School in Denver, as she developed a passion for health sciences and became a talented musician in her own right.

Yet, having grown up in a low-income blended family with four kids, Young did not have the financial means to attend college without significant support. She found it with the CSU Tuition Assistance Grant and other scholarships.

This spring, Young will graduate as a first-generation student with a bachelor’s degree in human development and family studies. She plans to pursue a graduate degree in multicultural counseling and hopes to work with children in underserved communities of color, much like her own childhood setting.

Young is well on her way. She is a student in the Honors Program, with experience gained during college as a family programs coordinator; in the role, she assists CSU international students and their children. For these and other efforts, Young was recently awarded by the College of Health and Human Sciences as a student leader who has enhanced diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus.

“I know I’ll get to a point that every dollar contributed to my education was worth it. That’s what I tell myself every day,” Young said. “I now have the knowledge, and will continue to gain the knowledge, to help kids of color better their lives. I want to help kids who look like me.”

“I realized, having gone to high school in a less-fortunate area, that there are so many kids with so much potential. I looked at myself as a woman of color and said, ‘I have to love these kids who need someone.’”

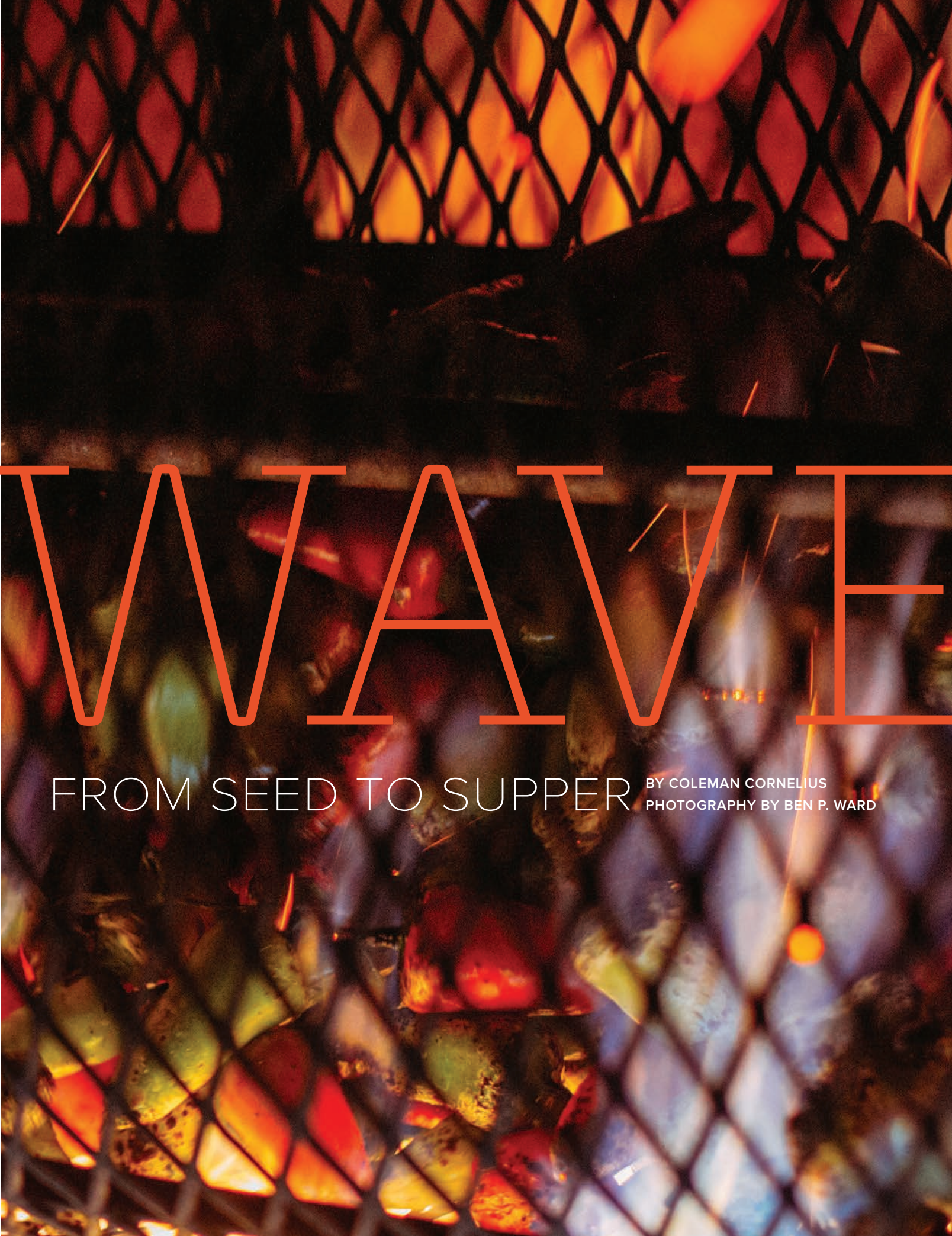
– Leah Young





THE AT

FIRING UP PUEBLO CHILE



TWAVE

FROM SEED TO SUPPER

BY COLEMAN CORNELIUS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN P. WARD



POP QUIZ: What kind of hamburger do you eat with a spoon?

ANSWER: A Pueblo Slopper, of course.

According to lore, the southern Colorado specialty was concocted at Johnnie's Coors Tavern in downtown Pueblo around 1950, when a regular asked pub owner Johnnie Greco for a burger smothered in chili sauce. The customer was Herb Casebeer, a nearby shop owner. He often joined the local clientele, mostly railyard workers, to order one (or all) of the tavern's three menu items. Those days, the pub served only Coors beer, burgers, and chili by the bowl. This time, Herb wanted something else: a burger-and-chili combo. Not just a dollop, you can hear him saying; really *slop* it on.

The result might have been a bit of culinary comeuppance on Johnnie's part. As in, "You *said* you wanted a lot." In fact, the burger now known as the Pueblo Slopper is delivered literally swimming in a sauce of Pueblo green chile and other ingredients. It's served topped with chopped onion and shredded cheese. In a bowl. With a spoon. The pub that originated the Slopper – now Gray's Coors Tavern, after a change in ownership – references and explains the oddball burger with its motto, "Covering our buns in chili since 1950."

Gray's Coors Tavern originated the famed Pueblo Slopper, above. The iconic tavern is co-owned and managed by Carrie Fetty, a CSU Pueblo alumna, pictured on facing page, upper left. She runs a family business that for years has touted Pueblo chile.



Many customers say the best way to enjoy a slopper is with an ice-cold schooner of beer, as seen here on the bar at Gray's Coors Tavern in downtown Pueblo.



The subjects of our weekly Classic Pueblo stories are as varied as our city: longtime businesses and restaurants and interesting people and places that long have been a part of the Pueblo scene. Classic Pueblo stories run on Mondays. If you have an idea for such a story, send information to Classic Pueblo, The Pueblo Chieftain, P.O. Box 4040, Pueblo, CO 81003.

And on the seventh day, Pueblo gave the world THE SLOPPER

By JUAN ESPINOSA
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Apparently, something called the "slopper" could be the bomb in New Haven, as in Connecticut. Being the bomb is a good thing and the slopper is a good thing. It's also reportedly quite popular on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, where Pueblo native John Greco offers a slopper for \$4.75 on the menu at his Bubba Burgers outlets. A slopper?, you ask. Ah, we're talking about the hamburger submerged in a bowl of red or green chile and topped with diced onions and cheese that originated in Pueblo in the early 1950s.

Indeed, this week's Pueblo Classic is none other than the slopper born at Johnnie's Coors Tavern in the heart of Pueblo on Fourth Street. Several generations of sloppers later, the tasty burger-chile combo has made its way onto dozens of tavern and restaurant menus in Pueblo and Pueblo West and now New Haven and Kauai.

Donnie Gray inherited the ori-

SLOPPERS
Here are some of the Pueblo restaurants that offer their versions of a slopper:

Gray's Coors Tavern	515 W. Fourth St.
Star Bar	300 Spring
Sunset Inn	2808 Thatcher Ave.
Showtime	1007 W. Sixth St.
Andy McCarthy's	2149 Jerry Murphy
Two And Nine Bar	2912 N. Elizabeth

A guy named Herb always wanted an open-faced hamburger with lots of red chile over it," he remembered. "So we put it in a bowl."

According to Gray, the slopper began its travel around town when Bennie Palumbo, a cook at Coors Tavern for 25 years, left to open his own tavern.

"He gave them two weeks notice," Gray said. "He (Palumbo) said he

Cheese

Green Chile





The Walter Brewing Company makes three chile lagers and is among many Pueblo businesses selling products made with locally grown peppers. Proprietors Mia and Andy Sanchez, facing page, are graduates of CSU and CSU Pueblo, respectively.

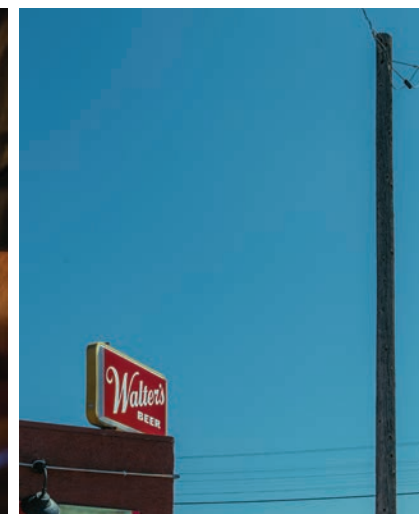
When you visit Pueblo for the first time, count on being asked: “Have you tried a Slopper?” (Truly, it would be hard not to, since versions are found across the city.) And if you’re a first-timer at Gray’s Coors Tavern, the staff will celebrate your rite of passage, as tavern co-owner Carrie Fetty did when a Colorado State University photographer took his inaugural chomp last fall. “Ladies and gentlemen!” Fetty called out to tavern patrons, while loudly clanging a bell bolted over the bar. “We’ve got Ben from Lakewood here, and he is no longer a Slopper virgin!”

The ruckus is more than a gimmick: It’s an initiation into the world of Pueblo chile. Here in Pueblo, green chile is a cultural touchstone and a source of deep community pride. It symbolizes the community’s history, its diverse cultural heritage, and its agricultural foundation, carried forward by Italians and other immigrants who started arriving in the late 1800s to work in Pueblo’s mighty steel and railroad industries and then began farming in the irrigated Arkansas River Valley.

“Chile brings people together around the dinner table, but on a macro level it brings the community together. It shows who we are as a people, who we are as a culture. It’s part of our identity,” said Steven Trujillo, a CSU Pueblo graduate honored as the university’s 2019 Distinguished Young Alumnus. Born and raised in Pueblo, he is president and CEO of the city’s Latino Chamber of Commerce.

During the past five years, the crop’s visibility has flared, as scientists, farmers, food purveyors, and community leaders have joined forces to more broadly market distinctive, locally developed pepper varieties branded as “Pueblo chile.” It’s a hot take on economic development – connecting a small but potent crop to surging interest in locally grown food and the power of place in its marketing. The formula has fueled other Colorado favorites, including Olathe sweet corn, Palisade peaches, and Rocky Ford cantaloupe, another mainstay of the Arkansas Valley.

Many of the tastemakers touting Pueblo chile are alumni and employees of Colorado State University and CSU Pueblo. Their work is firing up the Pueblo chile industry from seed to supper. Sure, there’s a certain state just to the south (*ahem*, New Mexico) that dominates the chile market (i.e., “Chile Capital of the World”).



Since the 1500s, chile has been cultivated in what we now know as the Southwestern United States; it has been a staple crop in the Arkansas Valley east of Pueblo for decades, if not centuries. Although its start in southern Colorado is murky, chile was well-established at Pueblo truck farms by the mid-1900s. Chile is a small part of Colorado's agricultural industry, but holds potential as a high-value specialty crop rooted in community culture.





Bryan Crites, who attended CSU Pueblo, owns Crites Produce in Avondale, east of Pueblo. He harvests and processes chile with a crew of seasonal farmworkers, eight employees, and his family.

Yet, advocates see plenty of room in the marketplace, especially given the area’s seemingly insatiable appetite for Pueblo chile. Around here, chile is served at breakfast, lunch, and dinner; in eggs, on burgers, in margaritas, on pizza. By the cup and by the bowl. Ladled generously over every beef and bean burrito.

“There’s no place that has green chile like the chile from Pueblo, Colorado. I don’t care what anyone says,” said Carolyn Gray, who co-owns Gray’s Coors Tavern with her husband and children.

“Amen,” Fetty, her daughter, agreed.

Fetty was a kid when her family took over the iconic tavern; she waitressed as a teenager, slinging Slopplers up and down the 57-foot bar and adjacent shotgun dining room. She graduated from CSU Pueblo in 1994 with a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a teaching certificate, then taught first grade in her hometown for 23 years. Instead of retiring, she started a second career: Fetty and her two brothers bought into the family business in 2018, and Fetty, as tavern manager, replaced her cousin Donny Gray as the face of the place that originated the Pueblo Slopper.

Now, the tavern serves about 400 Slopplers a day – typically 200 by

2 o’clock on a busy Friday. Demand has been steady during much of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some Denver residents have even driven more than 100 miles in their motorhomes for takeout Slopplers, eaten in the socially distanced safety of their RVs. “We’re happy they could come get that comfort food,” Fetty said.

In September 2010, her pub helped plant the seed for today’s Pueblo chile marketing campaign. That’s when Discovery’s Travel Channel aired an episode of *Food Wars*, pitting Slopplers from Gray’s Coors Tavern against those from crosstown competitor Sunset Inn. The show staged a blind taste test amid a crowd of placard-waving Slopper fanatics; adding local flair, Miss Rodeo Colorado was among the blindfolded judges, wearing her perfectly shaped cowboy hat, turquoise jewelry, and sash. With breathless onlookers, Sunset Inn won the battle in a final tie-breaking vote, prompting inn owner, Chuck Chavez, to declare: “I never dreamed something like this would happen.”

Indeed, the show stoked a craving for Slopplers and Pueblo chile: Customers arrived at both restaurants in droves, from across the country and even abroad. Although the *Food Wars* host called the two joints “sworn Slopper enemies,” their owners are actually friends. Even as Fetty described the TV segment’s impact on her business, Chavez sat at her bar with a couple of buddies.

“We love Chuck. He comes to our place, and we go to his. Every-



thing here is about supporting our community,” Fetty said. “Pueblo chile is part of that. We’re proud that we can support Pueblo farmers, and they support us.”

After *Food Wars*, local chile got another bump in the ratings when former President Barack Obama stopped at Romero’s Café and Catering during a campaign swing through Colorado in 2012. The café is another fixture on the Pueblo chile scene, and the former president made a politic choice with his breakfast order – enchiladas *tejanas* with chorizo and green chile. He was impressed: “I’m going to work with the White House chefs to see if we can figure out some of the secrets here,” Obama said. The praise was widely reportedly in news media, again boosting the stature of Pueblo chile.

The notoriety might be fairly new, but the crop is not. By most estimates, chile arrived in the region 400 to 500 years ago, after Spanish conquerors discovered varieties of *Capsicum annuum* skillfully cultivated by the Aztec people of present-day Mexico. The Spanish conquest – along with trade and seed-dispersing birds – carried chile cultivars north, where they took root with indigenous people and colonizers alike, according to *The Chile Chronicles: Tales of a New Mexico Harvest*, by Carmella Padilla. It wasn’t long before chile was

Crites Produce grows many crops. Yet, its chile operation is distinctive for the variety of processing options offered after harvest – not only roasting, but peeling, bagging, chopping, and freezing.

an essential crop across the Southwest, where it thrives in hot days and cool nights.

Now, green chile is commercially harvested by the ton and often is sold fresh, then roasted for complex flavor, and peeled and de-seeded for cooking. When frozen, canned, or otherwise processed, it’s ready for year-round use. Some plant varieties produce red fruit, often slightly sweeter, earthy, and dried – traditionally collected in gorgeous, hanging *ristras*.

From these basics come all manner of uses and regionally idiosyncratic recipes. In Pueblo, for instance, order green chile at a restaurant, and you might get a dish made with roasted and chopped green chile, crushed tomatoes, onion, garlic, pork, and broth. By contrast, green chile served in northern New Mexico, just a couple hundred miles away, is often closer to a single-ingredient preparation – mostly roasted chile. Adding confusion, either rendition might be an entrée or a sauce, as is the green chile covering Pueblo Sloppers. Even the





spelling varies: “chile” among botanically inclined purists and “chili” among those influenced by Texas and its trademark stew, which just happens to contain ... dried red chile. (In this story, we use spellings preferred by the people and businesses highlighted.)

Spell it as you wish, but find chile everywhere around Pueblo – even in craft beer. The Walter Brewing Company, operating in a historic brewery near Pueblo’s downtown river walk, makes three specialty lagers using locally grown green and red chile. Its use echoes the early days of brewing, when spices, herbs, and fruit were commonly used in beer making. Walter’s Pueblo Chile Beer is the best known of the brewery’s zesty lagers and is sold in more than 300 retail outlets across Colorado, in cans emblazoned with green chile graphics.

“Walter’s Beer is an excellent ambassador for Pueblo chile, to help take it to the level the community would like to see,” said Mia Sanchez, a brewery co-owner and manager, as she poured piquant tasters in the taproom. She graduated from Colorado State University in 2000 with a bachelor’s degree in apparel and merchandising.

Several years ago, Sanchez and her husband, Andy, joined a group of investors to buy the historic brewery, refurbish the old building, and reignite Walter’s Beer, which dates to 1889 in Pueblo and languished when the brewery closed in 1975. The couple are native Puebloans, and they have forebears who farmed and worked at the brewery. So making beer with Pueblo chile is a way to reach a market niche while honoring both personal and city history, said Andy Sanchez, who studied art and business at CSU Pueblo and graduated with a bachelor’s degree 1998.

“A brewery is a mirror of the local flavor of the community,” Sanchez observed. He earlier worked in product branding and as development director for the CSU Pueblo Foundation; he became a prominent community booster as board chair of the Greater Pueblo Chamber of Commerce. The brewery brings it all together. “We’ve got beer that encapsulates many aspects of our lives and of Pueblo, and that makes it exciting,” Sanchez said.

Fittingly, Walter’s Pueblo Chile Beer debuted at the preeminent

showcase for locally grown peppers: the Pueblo Chile & Frijoles Festival.

A project of the Greater Pueblo Chamber of Commerce, the harvest festival started in 1994 as a downtown farmers market, an early effort to promote Pueblo chile. It has blossomed into an annual community celebration and an economically vital event – awarded as an outstanding community initiative during the 2019 Colorado Governor’s Tourism Conference.

The festival was downsized last year because of the pandemic. But it typically attracts 150,000 people each September for roasted green chile, pinto beans, and fresh produce from local farmers. There are cooking demonstrations, entertainers, salsa showdowns, jalapeño-eating contests, and vendors offering the centerpiece crop in every conceivable form, including green chile milkshakes. CSU Pueblo has been among the festival sponsors as it works to strengthen community ties.

The Pueblo Chile Growers Association, an arm of the Greater Pueblo Chamber of Commerce, has become a driving force be-

Leaders of the Pueblo chile industry include, from left, Dominic DiSanti, founding president of the Pueblo Chile Growers Association; Bryan Crites, association board member; and Kay Crites, Bryan’s mother, who, with her husband, raises chile seedlings for the area’s largest chile farmers.

hind the festival and officially leads the Pueblo chile campaign. The group’s strategies are straight out of a marketing playbook. Yet, its efforts are notable for joining people from different professional spheres to brand, elevate, and capitalize on a crop that, for years, has uniquely contributed to community identity.

In 2015, a handful of well-established chile farmers formed the association, a milestone for Pueblo chile. “The idea is that we could bring chile farmers together to collaborate for the greater good of the whole by clearly establishing the brand and marketing our product,” said Donielle Kitzman, who attended CSU Pueblo in the 1990s to study political science and communication. Kitzman provides administrative



muscle for the Pueblo Chile Growers Association as its executive director; she connects the group to the broader business community in her related role as a vice president for the chamber of commerce.

“This can uplift the whole community – chile is the flag we can carry,” said Mike Bartolo, a widely admired CSU horticulturist who helped form the Pueblo Chile Growers Association. For years, Bartolo has managed the university’s Arkansas Valley Research Center in Rocky Ford, east of Pueblo, and he developed the distinctive chile varieties grown and sold as Pueblo chile. “We’ve got real potential to run with this,” he said of the marketing push. “All these different vectors with Pueblo chile are coming together, and it has some great energy.”

In the five years since it formed, the growers association has focused on propelling sales in Metro Denver and across Colorado, using existing resources and an array of new communication efforts. The group trademarked its logo. Farmers have led harvest-season tours. And they persuaded the Colorado General Assembly to approve a vehicle license plate promoting Pueblo chile. The association also has worked with Colorado food processors – makers of cheese, hot sauce, salsa, sausage, spirits, tortillas – to use Pueblo chile.

The result is a notable uptick in fresh chile sales through the three main outlets growers rely on: restaurants and food processors, grocers, and direct-to-consumer farm stands. The association has not yet developed a mechanism to track overall sales volume. Even so, the group estimates that visitation to local farm stands has recently increased by about 30 percent as more people arrive seeking Pueblo chile, Kitzman said.

Another big step in 2015: Some Whole Foods stores in the Rocky Mountain region started seasonal sales of Pueblo chile, elbowing out chile from the area around Hatch, New Mexico. (Of course, stores in New Mexico stick with their own.)

The switch inflamed an interstate chile debate that rockets through social media and news outlets each harvest season. The governors of Colorado and New Mexico have even exchanged fiery rhetoric over the merits of green chile grown in their respective states.

Despite some orneriness, the publicity is good for business, Kitzman said. “We’ve seen a large growth in product utilization. With the chatter and the conversation, Pueblo chile has become more noticed,” she said, adding, “At the end of the day, we support farmers and the agricultural industry as a whole, even if we happen to like our chile better.”



Robert Phillips, facing page, works as the head chile roaster for Crites Produce each harvest season. As harvest was underway last September, customers, at top, waited for bushels of chile to roast at DiSanti Farm Stand outside Pueblo. Randy Vialpando, left, drove nearly 100 miles, from Gardner, Colorado, to pick up roasted chile from Crites Produce.



Mike Bartolo, facing page, is a CSU alumnus and long-time manager of the Arkansas Valley Research Center in Rocky Ford. Over 30 years, he has developed the distinctive pepper varieties branded and marketed as Pueblo chile. Bartolo started with a small bag of seed from Mirasol chile, a landrace named for its upward growth habit. That foundational seed, above, came from Bartolo's late uncle.

Setting aside preferences, the contrast is clear: In 2019, New Mexico farmers planted a total of more than 9,000 acres of chile, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Colorado farmers plant perhaps 1,000 acres, virtually all in the Arkansas Valley east of Pueblo, Bartolo said.

Even in Colorado, chile is low on the list of commercial produce, based on acreage and sales. Statewide, more than 90,000 acres are planted in fruits and vegetables, known as specialty crops, with a total of about \$485 million in sales, according to the Colorado Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association. The state's most significant specialty crops include potatoes, onions, peaches, sweet corn, lettuce, and melons; potatoes, grown chiefly in southern Colorado's San Luis Valley, lead the rest by far.

Yet, chile stands out for its market potential as a high-value crop, in part because of its community and cultural connections. That's why farmers in the Pueblo Chile Growers Association focus attention on chile when, in the scheme of things, their primary concerns more often relate to labor shortages, water availability, and food safety.

"I think we've solidified ourselves as the chile-growing region in the state. Now, when you think chile in Colorado, you think Pueblo chile," said Dominic DiSanti, a founder and the first president of the Pueblo Chile Growers Association. DiSanti is a former Boettcher Scholar at Colorado State University who graduated in 2009 with degrees in both agricultural business and animal science.

He's a fourth-generation farmer whose family emigrated from Italy, and he runs DiSanti Farms with his mother, siblings, and wife, Jayme DiSanti, who attended CSU Pueblo. DiSanti Farms raises cattle, grain corn, hay, and 400 acres of vegetable crops, Pueblo chile among them. Like many Pueblo farms, it sits along U.S. 50 on a stretch of elevated plain known as St. Charles Mesa.

If water is life, then irrigation is the lifeblood of these farms. Here, crop production depends on irrigation water diverted from the Arkansas River and delivered by Bessemer Ditch. The waterway was completed in 1890 and is named for a steel-making process; it was principally financed by Colorado Coal & Iron Company, which evolved into the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company, the Pueblo steel giant that for a time was the state's largest employer.

Pueblo chile symbolizes these interwoven community threads, and its successful marketing might aid the survival of family farms on the Mesa and elsewhere in the Arkansas Valley, DiSanti said. As he spoke last September, visitors thronged the DiSanti Farm Stand for bushels of green chile roasted on the spot. "One thing about our customers – they know good chile," he said.

Several miles east, 14 barrel roasters were cranking at Crites Produce, emitting the unmistakable aroma that is a clarion call for chile fans when summer turns to fall. Last September, Bryan Crites oversaw the bustle of chile harvesting in his fields, followed by roasting, chopping, bagging, and sales to thousands of regular folk and dozens of restaurants, including Gray's Coors Tavern and Romero's Café and Catering.

"This is where I figured out I like to make things grow," said Crites, a board member of the Pueblo Chile Growers Association. He had just returned from the fields to his chile processing facility, adjacent to his boyhood home. As Crites arrived in a truck loaded with bushels of green chile, eight employees – plus his parents – were busy prepping orders for customer pickup.

Crites attended CSU Pueblo on a basketball scholarship in the mid-1990s and started farming in the community of Avondale after working for a decade as a local firefighter.



The annual Pueblo Chile & Frijoles Festival has grown from a small farmers market into a marquee event that attracts some 150,000 people to downtown Pueblo each September. It is sponsored in part by CSU Pueblo. Photography: Visit Pueblo / Greater Pueblo Chamber of Commerce

Chile is just part of the Crites Produce operation – but it gets the most attention. Earlier that week, Crites led a tour for Gov. Jared Polis and later marveled when Polis posted a photo of his lunch on social media. “That’s actually my chopped chiles on that sandwich,” Crites said with a grin, as he monitored reactions on his cellphone.

His farm, with 600 acres in crop production, began as an offshoot of his parents’ thriving greenhouse business. Along with annual flowers and vegetable starts, Kay and Gary Crites raise chile seedlings in their greenhouses; their buyers, some of the area’s largest chile farmers, rely on transplants to get a jump-start on the growing season.

During harvest, Kay Crites runs the business office, taking dozens of requests by phone each day. Most customers order their chile by the bushel, and Crites Produce offers processing that differentiates the farm from most others. Its chile comes mild, medium, hot, “XXHOT,” and roasted with or without garlic. It can be whole or de-stemmed; peeled or peeled and chopped; in big food-grade plastic bags, or vacuum-sealed in 1-pound bags; even fully processed and frozen. Prices range from \$20 to \$50 a bushel, depending on the treatment.

“Chile is a staple. It’s like flour and rice – you’ve got to have your chile,” Kay said, as she logged orders left by voicemail. Customers would later arrive from Pueblo, Metro Denver, mountain towns, and (brace yourself) northern New Mexico.

Just outside the office, Robert Phillips manned the roasters, impervious to the pungent vapor. “My lungs are cooked,” he joked.

After loading a roaster with fresh green chile, Phillips rinsed the peppers with water from a high-pressure nozzle, lit a row of propane burners with a whoosh, and started the barrel turning over flames. Soon, chile skins began to blister, crackle, darken, and spark; a few minutes more, and Phillips stopped the roaster. He again blasted the chile with water, denuding the peppers of charred skins; now the bushel was ready for next steps.

“When it’s not chile season, you miss it. People count down the days,” said Phillips, who met Bryan Crites when they competed in high school basketball around Pueblo.

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ANGLES

FROM ALL

NEW PRESIDENT OF CSU GLOBAL DESCRIBES
THE FUTURE OF ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION AND
THE FOCUS IT TAKES TO GET THERE

What makes for the best leadership – global vision or an eye for detail?

For Pamela Toney, a first-generation college student and the new president of CSU Global, the question poses a false dichotomy. Both vision *and* eye for detail are needed to lead an institution, she said.

“To help a student get financial aid or help an employee be better at their job, you have to have a system,” Toney said. “Otherwise, it just turns into chaos.”

Toney recently took charge of CSU Global – the nation’s first fully online public university with accredited degree programs – just as the COVID-19 pandemic made innovations in online higher education imperative. She was appointed president by the CSU System Board of Governors in August, having earlier served as CSU Global’s

chief operating officer. Toney succeeds Becky Takeda-Tinker, who recently became chief educational innovation officer for the CSU System.

Since Toney stepped into her new role, colleges and universities across the country have continued to wrestle with ways to safely and effectively deliver coursework during the coronavirus pandemic. At more than 70 percent of campuses nationwide, the current spring semester includes at least some online instruction, according to a survey conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In this group are Colorado State University in Fort Collins and CSU Pueblo; like 16 percent of U.S. campuses, they are delivering mostly in-person classes this spring, supplemented as needed with online instruction to follow health guidance.

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Pamela Toney was recently appointed president of CSU Global, the nation’s first fully online nonprofit university established by state law. Pictured at headquarters in Aurora, Toney is the second president to lead the 13-year-old university, which focuses on the advanced learning needs of working adults.

BY MICHAEL HUMPHREY | PHOTO BY MARY NEIBERG

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Meantime, economic upheaval during the pandemic demands new and improved skills within the U.S. workforce – so much so that “reskilling” and “upskilling” are terms used as commonly in the business sphere as “social distancing.” Self-paced online education is a critical part of preparing a future-ready workforce, according to “COVID-19: The Upskilling Imperative,” a report from Deloitte, the professional services powerhouse. The pandemic marks a turning point, when continual “digital, online, career-focused learning” will be central to success for students and employers alike, according to a recent article in *Harvard Business Review*.



TONEY STARTED WORKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION TO HELP STUDENTS NAVIGATE FINANCIAL AID, SOMETHING THAT MYSTIFIED AND INTRIGUED HER AS A STUDENT. TO DO FINANCIAL AID WELL MEANS MATCHING INDIVIDUAL STUDENT NEEDS WITH COMPLEX SYSTEMS OF PRIVATE, PHILANTHROPIC, GOVERNMENTAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL FINANCE.

In this environment, CSU Global has an edge, and Toney has established expertise, said Tony Frank, chancellor of the CSU System. “Pam Toney has a unique vantage point, having served in leadership roles with CSU Global through most of its history,” Frank said. “She understands every aspect of the operation and the Global business model, which is also unique in the higher education marketplace. And she has a special passion for the learners who rely on Global to advance their education, careers, and quality of life.”

Since it was founded in 2007, CSU Global has sought to perfect the asynchronous delivery of valuable credentials and college degree programs online. The university often collaborates with employers to tailor academic offerings that help modern learners progress in their careers, while also boosting workforce and economic development.

Demand for CSU Global programs has

exploded: The university had 208 students when its classes began; a dozen years later, it has conferred more than 21,000 degrees, and about 20,000 students are currently enrolled. Forty percent live in Colorado. CSU Global offers more than 50 certificates and bachelor's and master's degree programs, with dozens of optional specializations.

The university has accomplished all this without state funding, while paying off a startup loan early and while climbing to a No. 11 ranking among “Best Online Bachelor's Programs,” according to *U.S. News & World Report*.

Unlike many students at traditional, residential universities, most attending CSU

Global are working adults juggling job and family responsibilities; their average age is 35. Many CSU Global students earlier started toward degrees, left school, and later realized the necessity of postsecondary credentials for career advancement. To complete their degrees, these stu-

dents need affordable, high-caliber education gained with maximum flexibility; indeed, for many students, digital modalities are a key to higher-education access, credential completion, and wage growth. “They work, they have kids, they have a family,” Toney said of the typical CSU Global student. “And they generally have a purpose behind finishing their degree. By the time they get to us, our goal is that we are their last stop.”

Toney's educational path reflects those of many CSU Global students: She gained an undergraduate education on a traditional campus and topped it off with advanced credentials earned online. Toney has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, a master's in psychology from Walden University, a Master of Business Administration from Colorado Technical University, and a graduate certificate in cybersecurity from CSU

Global. As her own resume attests, the ability to choose modalities helps many students flourish. “I would not be where I am today if I had not had that on-campus experience,” she said. “But not everyone needs that.”

Toney started working in higher education to help students navigate financial aid, something that mystified and intrigued her as a student. To do financial aid well means matching individual student needs with complex systems of private, philanthropic, governmental, and institutional finance.

“Psychology just fascinates me, but it does not necessarily align with my career path,” Toney said. Then she reconsidered for a beat. “But it really does,” she added. “It helps me understand how to work with all types of people and how to drive things through.”

Toney joined CSU Global in 2013 as director of financial aid and senior director of student financial services. She was promoted six times through the university's leadership ranks before becoming president. Now, Toney is tackling some of online higher education's broadest challenges, from IT systems to teaching effectiveness.

Global thinking, it turns out, means thinking big and small, she said. All with clear purpose: “Trying to organize chaos for others and helping people be the best they can be.”

Her outlook is exactly what convinced the CSU System Board of Governors they had the right leader in Toney. “When hiring any president, the Board of Governors looks for leaders with experience and vision, but also leaders who have a deep respect for and understanding of the culture, character, and mission of our individual campuses and how they support and strengthen one another,” said Nancy Tuor, board chair. “President Toney has a deep connection to Global and the students it serves, and she's also a strong partner with Pueblo, Fort Collins, and the System in finding innovative ways to serve all of Colorado.”

So what now? The answer is both big and small. Some characteristics of the CSU Global student are changing. Students still need work experience to be admitted, but younger students who want the flexibility of a Global education are applying in greater

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"Through my participation in 4-H Livestock Projects, I found family in the agriculture community. With my degree from the College of Agricultural Sciences, my hope is to welcome others into this family and support future generations in agriculture."

LAUREN NEWMAN ('21)
Student, Animal Sciences
College of Agricultural Sciences
Colorado 4-H Alum

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ANGLES *Continued from Page 61*

numbers. For Toney, becoming president at this time means implementing what Takeda-Tinker, her predecessor, calls "CSU Global 2.0."

"Being an online institution, we are a tech company as well," Takeda-Tinker said. "That means tearing down and rebuilding. Knowing that we are always moving and adapting to the environment, we knew there was an opportunity to serve Colorado and industry and beyond."

Global focuses on adapting its technology and classes to ever-more sophisticated students. This entails creating a multitude of easily navigated choices: mobile, desktop, and immersive technologies and different paths for mastering information. All learning outcomes are aligned with ever-shifting industry needs, and students may customize their experiences at critical points in degree attainment.

That level of personalization is borne of systems, both digital and physical, but also

classically human, Toney said. "Community building is also important," she said. "If we can engage with our community and really support it from that service perspective, we are going to be successful."

In fact, "community" was the first word Toney mentioned when asked about her vision. Last year, CSU Global moved into a building owned by Aurora Public Schools. The facility is a physical symbol of a public education partnership that benefits Colorado students and employees. Through the partnership, APS staff and graduates benefit from tuition discounts, scholarships, and professional development.

Partnerships with Colorado school districts are fairly new, but collaborating has always been part of CSU Global's DNA. For example, industry partners – numbering some 3,500 in all – have shaped the university's central mission of offering career-relevant credentials for working adults. These affiliations yield a variety of benefits, such as

tuition-sharing and enrollment discounts. Industry partners also help develop curricula that build key workforce skills. Why is this significant? "Not only do students have this certification or degree, but their credentials already have workplace alignment that is recognized and valued by employers," Toney said.

The new president fully understands what students juggle. On top of her leadership responsibilities, she is a mother of two and an active member of her community north of Denver – a bio similar to those of many Global students. "She understands how important this work is," Takeda-Tinker said.

All it takes to motivate Toney is to recall something incredibly specific – herself as a student – and to remember where her education led her. "Education was my way to learning how to better myself and find a different path in life," Toney said. Shining a light on that path, "and being able to help people, is really what I do." ♦

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A busy harvest day draws to a close as dusk settles on the irrigated Arkansas Valley, one of Colorado’s key agricultural regions, which stretches across the Plains east of Pueblo.

As dusk neared, Crites drove with his 14-year-old daughter, Emily, to a chile field, where a crew of a dozen seasonal farmworkers had earlier moved methodically down furrows plucking peppers. Crites checked plants laden with chile and worried about a forecast of early snow that could threaten the crop.

“He’s a very hardworking man. That’s what he’s done his whole life,” Emily said of her dad, as she stood amid rows and rows of chile plants. “I’m very proud of him.”

Father and daughter later joined Kay and Gary Crites at the roasting shed for a dinner of takeout pizza from a Pueblo restaurant. It was topped with green chile from their own farm. “This is the rewarding part,” Bryan said, sipping a beer as the sun set. “I like being able to grow something that people enjoy.”

That enjoyment starts with chile seed. And that, in turn, starts with research scientist Mike Bartolo.

For 30 years, Bartolo has cultivated and analyzed chile at CSU’s Arkansas Valley Research Center and has shared his findings with area farmers. Chile has been his passion project, a sideline to countless studies of irrigation efficiency, pest management, soil health, and other issues central to sustainable farming practices.

It has been a labor-intensive approach to plant breeding: Sow chile seeds in farm ground, observe the plants and fruit produced, identify thick-walled peppers with superior flavor and heat, collect the seeds from those peppers. Repeat. Over the decades, Bartolo has made some 400 selections using this process. “It’s out of hand,” he

said, laughing. “It might be some kind of sickness.”

His work has yielded three distinct chile varieties grown by area farmers – now branded and marketed as Pueblo chile. Tops among them is the Mosco chile, a hot, meaty pepper that is the most widely grown cultivar in the Arkansas Valley. Bartolo’s chile breeding also has produced the Giadone cultivar, a pungent pepper named for the late Pete Giadone, a well-known Pueblo farmer and chile advocate; and the Pueblo Popper, a round novelty chile that works well for stuffed pepper recipes. The strains grew from a landrace called Mirasol, Spanish for “look to the sun,” which refers to the fruit’s upward growth habit.

Bartolo’s family story is familiar in Pueblo: He is the grandson of Italian immigrants who arrived to work in the steel industry and started farming on St. Charles Mesa; their surname, later shortened, was Bartolomucci. His family always grew chile, Bartolo said. He remembers it in his grandmother’s kitchen and at many meals and gatherings.

Near Bartolo’s family farm, his uncle Harry Mosco had a modest truck farm and grew chile, each year keeping seeds from desirable pods to sow for the next season’s crop. It is the exact process Bartolo has used to develop varieties branded as Pueblo chile.

After his uncle died, Bartolo inherited a small cloth sack of chile seed. It is marked “H87” – Harry’s chile seed from 1987. Harry didn’t live to plant the seed in 1988. But his nephew did. That dusty white bag of seed, weighing no more than a little paperback novel, launched Bartolo’s chile project. It launched an entire web of community effort to yield Pueblo chile.

“The farmers who came before us gave us an opportunity,” Bartolo said. “We’re building on their backs. We should never forget that.” ♦



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