



Jerry Cha-Jan Chang

A Master in Balancing Family and Work

STORY BY BETH DEBOUCK

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSH HAWKINS

DURING WORKING HOURS, it would've been unusual to find Jerry Cha-Jan Chang outside of his classrooms or Beam Hall office. After all, if a student had questions, the information systems professor wanted to be there in person.

That might also explain a quirk he had. At the age of 64, he did not use or own a cell phone.

His students often recounted this detail with amusement or admiration, but the reason he gave was clear: The people in his life would always take priority.

Mimi Xu, '17 BA Communication Studies and '20 MS Management Information Systems, took his graduate-level networking class. "The first week he let us know that, if we wanted time with him outside of class and office hours, we had to email and officially schedule it because he didn't own a cell phone. He didn't see the need for one since he had one in his office and one at home.

"He also told us he doesn't stay after class [in the evenings] because he wants to make it home on time so he and his wife wouldn't miss whatever show they were watching."

Tsion Melaku, '21 MS Management Information Systems, added, "When I asked him, as a tech person, why he didn't use a cell phone, he said that he wanted to show his appreciation for the people around him. He said that many people waste their time on their cell phones and neglect the people next to them."

Chang was looking forward to retirement within the next year or two.

Keah-Choon "KC" Tan, a professor of operations management, met Chang in 2001, when the latter applied to UNLV. Chang got the job and bought a home within two miles of Tan. They had children similar in age and became friends as their families spent time together.

Eventually Tan's favorite hobby became one of Chang's.

"We took our children ice fishing together back in those early days at [Sunnyside Wildlife Management Area]," Tan said at a press conference. "During one of our trips, both of us driving two different cars, got a speeding ticket — each at the same place by the same trooper. We learned our lesson."

Chang taught classes in database design and implementation, data communications, and database management at the Lee Business School. His research focused on the use and impact of information technology, human-computer interaction, organizational learning, and software piracy. He received multiple research awards and previously was ranked as a top

100 information systems researcher by industry journals.

"Jerry was a rigorous researcher and a good teacher who deeply loved his students and UNLV," Tan said. "In fact, he loved UNLV so much that he and his wife discussed some time ago the idea that he would like to donate his body to research."

The Chang family was able to honor his wishes by donating his body to a university in San Diego, California. "Even after he died, he continued to want to expand research and educate students," said Tan. "That's how serious he was about teaching."

Chang earned five degrees and previously held academic positions at the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, and Fu-Jen University in Taiwan.

Colleagues at UNLV remember his kind and gentle nature and his influence on new faculty and emerging researchers.

"He was a mentor of the highest caliber, offering guidance and support — not just in words but through actions," said Ha-fen Hu, a professor in management, entrepreneurship, and technology. "He shared his experience and wisdom generously, patiently helping them navigate the complexity of academia."

His students remember his teaching style. "When any of us asked him a question, he would respond with a question instead of simply giving

us the answer," said Ashley Weckesser, '15 MBA and '15 MS Management Information Systems. "We'd all sit there feeling like nobody wanted to raise their hand and try to answer his questions — but that's how he taught. He would keep asking and help us get to the correct answer."

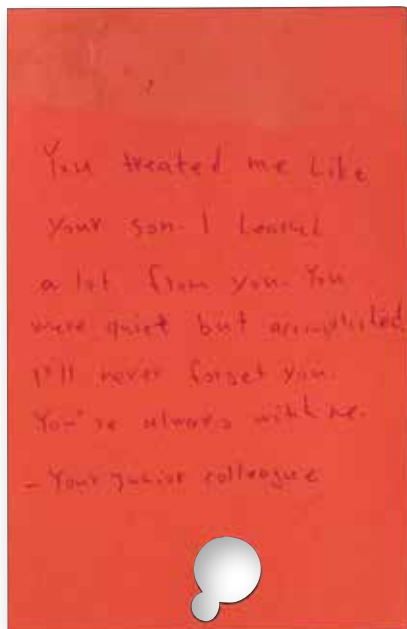
"He was patient, he was very genuine, and he was always happy."

Weckesser teaches part-time at UNLV. "I try to encourage my students the way he'd encourage us," she said. "I want to help them become independent learners and thinkers."

Outside of work, Chang worked on his computer, hiked, and fished. Survivors include his wife, Li; a son; and a daughter.

"We will miss him," said Tan, "But his legacy will live on, not just in the memory of those he touched but in the spirit of cooperation, dedication, and student-centeredness."

Xu, the grad student who explained his longstanding aversion to cell phones, will remember Chang as "a man that loves and prioritizes his wife and, even though he worked in technology, he still lives the simple life."



**Still
Strong**

Those We Lost



Naoko Takemaru

A Sensei They'll Always Remember

BY AFSHA BAWANY

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSH HAWKINS

BACK IN 2010, DEVON WHITAKER REMEMBERS standing in Naoko Takemaru's office holding his copy of her book, *Women in the Language and Society of Japan: The Linguistic Roots of Bias*.

The book wasn't even officially on bookstore shelves yet. He wanted to be the first one to buy it, and he wanted to do it in person, in front of his sensei. It was like getting the book signed by a celebrity author.

"We knew her as Takemaru-sensei," he said, going on to add, "She helped boost my spirits up to the point where I started to believe in myself more and more each and every single day. That drive and that passion she instilled in me is priceless."

Whitaker clutched that same book at the memorial service for Takemaru, 69, and two other professors killed in the Dec. 6, 2023, shooting on campus.

"Even rereading it for me is hard. Every word I read, it's like she's directly reading to me," said Whitaker, '12 BA Asian and Asian American studies.

This was to be her 20th year at UNLV, where she is credited for developing the Japanese language program and taught upper-division courses on culture and business. Her book and academic papers often explored how language both reflected and reinforced gender bias.

"Because of her modest and unassuming manner, many people do not know of Naoko's cutting-edge research," said Deborah Arteaga, a world languages and cultures professor. "It is not an exaggeration to say that she was born a socio-linguist."

She went on to tell a story of Takemaru, who as a child in her hometown of Okayama, questioned why Japanese children's stories always cast ogre-villains as women. That observation would lead to her book as well as numerous journal publications, conference presentations, and book reviews.

She first came to the United States as a foreign exchange student in 1974 and eventually returned for her master's and doctoral degrees. The College of Liberal Arts awarded her its William Morris Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2014. And she welcomed students into her office any time. The office was covered with the markings of a "cat lady" — calendars, pictures, and puzzles of felines.

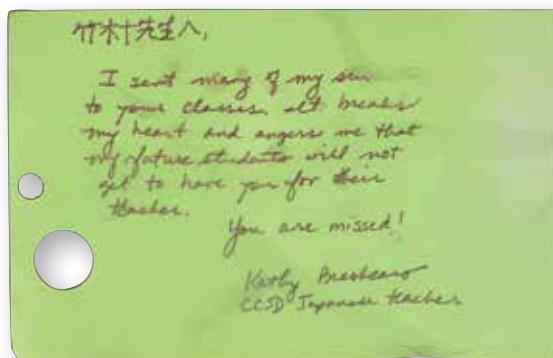
Melikabella Shenouda, '21 BA Psychology, often received congratulatory notes from Takemaru as she began her master's program and worked as a graduate assistant at UNLV. "We shared a love of linguistics, gender, intersectionality, and

education," she wrote on Instagram. She had planned to stop by Takemaru's office soon. "I was too embarrassed of how my Japanese speaking skills have regressed. I wanted to brush up on the language to show her that it wasn't just another class. That I held her teachings near. That I respected her time. That I loved learning from her."

Alexander Yurkov, '18 BA History, took Japanese from her in 2018. "She believed in her students and knew we had all the tools for excellence, and she expected us to reach that excellence. She was one of those teachers that brought something irreplaceable to the material. ... Even after many years, I'll know Takemaru-sensei was the one who taught me to be careful of this usage or that pronunciation. I'm eternally

grateful for her critical impact on my Japanese that will stay with me forever."

Susan Byrne, a professor of Hispanic studies and former department chair, noted the way that Takemaru had of drawing fellow faculty together. "Naoko was consistently and wonderfully kind, understanding, and supportive of me in my role as department chair. The same beautiful spirit persisted as I stepped down from that



role," Byrne said.

Takemaru's thoughtfulness required no translations, and they often came in the form of small gifts.

Alicia Rico, current chair for world languages and cultures, said when her father died and she had to go back home for services, Takemaru handed her a present. It wasn't for Rico, though; it was to give her grieving mother.

Spanish professor Germán Negrón-River once mentioned that his mother had Parkinson's disease, so Takemaru began sending her an annual gift and postcards. Her mother, too, had had the disease.

Takemaru had a patissier license and worked in a Tokyo restaurant. She also had lived in France.

Margaret Harp, an associate professor of French, remembered Takemaru as a "triple threat artist." "She was a professional concert pianist who left that career due to physical disabilities. She embroidered beautifully, creating her own designs. And every holiday season, she brought us her homemade chocolates."

"Naoko was frail physically; however, she was lionhearted in kindness, lionhearted in generosity, lionhearted in humanity — the point of liberal arts. And I have no doubt she was lionhearted in her final moments on Earth."

She is survived by her brother, Hisashi Takemaru of Okayama.

**Still
Strong**

Those We Lost



Patricia Navarro Velez

A ‘Larger-than-Life Personality’

BY NATALIE BRUZDA

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSH HAWKINS

TO START HER ACCOUNTING 409 CLASS LAST FALL,

Patricia “Pat” Navarro Velez asked students to share pictures of themselves. In turn, she gave them a glimpse of her life at home.

The photos helped students get to know each other in class. And she asked her graduate assistant to add them to her roster so she could better remember each individual.

But her merging in pictures of her life at home — a devoted wife and mother of four — with her life as a professor of accounting information also demonstrated that the path for students was attainable.

“Seeing her face light up when she talked about how much she loved cooking and her family was amazing,” student Kyra Larossa remembered. “In the photo she shared with us, she showed us how proud she was of her new 25-quart brazier in the kitchen.”

Navarro Velez, 39, was killed in the Dec. 6, 2023, campus shooting. She had joined UNLV as an accounting professor in 2019 after completing her Ph.D. at the University of Central Florida. She quickly got to work — unlocking a “promising and timely stream of research focused on cybersecurity and data analytics,” according to department chair Jason Smith. But just as important, “Pat immediately made a positive impact in the lives of students and her colleagues. She had a larger-than-life personality, an infectious smile, and a genuine kindness that made everyone around her feel like family.”

Originally from Ponce, Puerto Rico, she earned a master’s at Bowling Green State University. She worked for five years in risk assurance at PwC, an international accounting firm known as one of the “Big 4,” before pursuing her doctorate.

Her Ph.D. mentor, Steve Sutton, noted that her “unique and high-demand skillset” was difficult to replace, and her PwC managers tried to convince her to stay. “Pat did not waver. She wanted to be a teacher, mentor, and scholar; she knew what her dream was,” Sutton said.

Navarro Velez’s graduate assistant, Jennifer Lopez, likewise worked in the private sector after her bachelor’s degree before returning to pursue her master’s degree.

“It’s hard to talk about someone when they’re no longer with us,” said Lopez. “But it’s hard not to agree with a lot of the other sentiments shared about Pat. She was a larger-than-life person. She was approachable. ... She was always there to help her students and explore the career possibilities in accounting.”

Adrian Gordon, who will graduate this spring with his bachelor’s in accounting, said Navarro Velez was the first minority teacher he had in accounting. On the first day of class, Gordon, who is Black, asked to speak to his fellow classmates about joining Beta Alpha Psi, an honor organization for financial information students.

“She was really an anomaly,” Gordon said, adding that he sat at the front of the classroom for each class session. “It made me feel comfortable to stand out.”

“I remember that she looked at me like she believed in me. She was so interested in what we had to say, and in us as people.”

During the fall semester, he was developing a UNLV chapter of the National Association of Black Accountants and had planned to talk to Navarro Velez about their plans when she was killed.

“Obviously we can’t have professor Navarro back, but I hope that we can find some way to make sure that her spirit sticks — that we mitigate this loss as much as we can, and that we don’t allow this to take us back in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

Glori Roque-Melendez, a lecturer of accounting, connected to Navarro Velez through their shared backgrounds growing up in Puerto Rico and studying at Bowling Green State University.

“When we saw each other the first time, we embraced each other like we were friends forever,” she said. Glori quickly became the newest member of the Navarro Velez

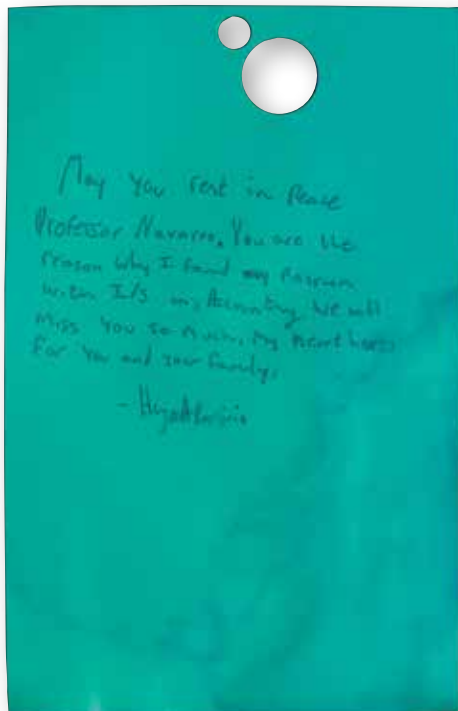
“Family,” friends who become family.

“She always found excuses to get together,” said Roque-Melendez. “She has built a great community here of friends and introduced me to so many wonderful people.”

Survivors include her husband, David Robles, and four children.

At Thanksgiving, just two weeks before her death, Navarro Velez hosted a large blended group and asked everyone to wear burgundy. She was, perhaps, envisioning a color-coordinated photo of the Framily to share at start of classes this spring.

“I can’t even express how difficult this loss is. You could always feel that she was full of joy, full of life,” Roque-Melendez said. “She always excelled in everything she did as a proud Puerto Rican. I just want to make her proud and make sure that her legacy endures forever.”



**Still
Strong**

Those We Lost



‘There is hope’

*Economics professor
Bot Rith, a survivor of the
Dec. 6 campus shooting,
returns to the classroom*



*The unexplained moments
that brought officers
Damian Garcia and
Nate Drum together*



Officer Damian Garcia and Detective Nate Drum of University Police Services received the Award for Valor from the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators (IACLEA) for their response during the shooting on Dec. 6, 2023.

‘This is what the job is’

On Dec. 6, 2023, two University Police officers found themselves confronting an attacker. The man had just taken the lives of three faculty members – Patricia Navarro Velez, Jerry Cha-Jan Chang, and Naoko Takemaru – and seriously wounded a fourth. They brought the gunman’s violence to an end.

This is their story. It is a story of camaraderie and connection. And of the small moments and odd coincidences that tie the Rebel community together.

STORY BY FRANCIS MCCABE
PHOTOS BY BECCA SCHWARTZ

CHAPTER 1: A CALL TO SERVICE

Approximately 11:45 a.m. Dec. 6, 2023

Officer Damian Garcia was in a restroom inside the University Police headquarters, adjusting his bullet-resistant vest. He planned to do some maintenance work next. National Finals Rodeo was to begin the next day, and heart defibrillators needed to be installed in patrol vehicles.

He stepped out into a frenzied scene. Officers were grabbing gear and rushing out the door. Calls were flooding in to University Police dispatch with two dreaded words: active shooter.

Damian shouted at Detective Nate Drum, “Grab your vest.” “There’s no time,” Nate answered.

The two hopped in a car and drove from the Gateway parking garage on the east side of Maryland Parkway down University Drive. They turned north onto the sidewalk in front of Tonopah Hall, making their way to the campus interior.

Throngs of students were running from Beam Hall. “I saw fear on these kids’ faces as they’re running. I’m like, ‘This one’s real,’” Damian said.

At 62, Damian Garcia doesn't strike you as someone who has worked more than 30 years in law enforcement. A jovial, gregarious presence, he's like the uncle you're happy to see during the holidays or run into at the grocery store.

Born in the Buffalo area of New York, he first got the idea to be a police officer because his uncle was chief of police in Niagara Falls. At a young age, his parents moved the family to Southern California, settling in San Diego. "My dad was just tired of all the snow," Damian explained.

His father was a restaurateur, but it was his uncle's career in law enforcement that stayed with him. "He started off on patrol and worked his way all the way up to be the chief of police," he said.

Damian played high school football — both on offense and defense, he likes to remind his fellow officers. He was good enough to play at San Francisco State University, where he played on offense as a wide receiver, even though he preferred playing defense. "Defense is how you win championships," he said. "If you don't let people score, you win."

He studied criminal justice and began his career in law enforcement on San Francisco's BART public transit system before joining the Carlsbad Police Department in Southern California.

He worked nearly every job there was. Street patrol. Motorcycle cop. Beach patrol. And while the different roles all had perks, one job just seemed to fit his temperament best: school resource officer.

"I did that twice. Yeah, that was my favorite," he said. "It was probably one of my favorite jobs because I coached high school football at the same time. But I didn't just coach high school football; I made sure I was at every basketball game, I was at every softball game, I was at every water polo game. I even went to the beach to watch the surf team."

Many of Damian's colleagues in the police department disliked dealing with young people, he said. "I had no problem with it, and I really made it a point to connect with them. I wanted those kids on the campuses to realize that police officers weren't the bad people. We were there to help."

For the "tougher kids" or the ones who seemed to challenge authority more than the average teen, Damian's calm demeanor seemed to help. So the calls about young teens illegally playing roller hockey on school property often came his way.

One of those roller hockey kids was Ian McDonough. "He was always the responding officer," McDonough said, noting that Damian would usually grab a stick and take a couple of shots before prompting the teens to move along. "That's how I first really got to know Damian. He would show up and just talk to us."

"With a guy like Damian, you didn't feel that threat of intimidation by law enforcement. He was just like, super *caszh*."

CHAPTER 2: ARRIVAL

Approximately 11:50 a.m., Dec. 6, 2023

Nate parked on the southeast side of Beam Hall, and both officers entered the building and began methodically checking each room on the first floor for threats.

"I'd say within 30 seconds to a minute after we got in, five more shots went off and we weren't sure whether that was our people [other officers firing] or not," Damian said.

When gunfire first started echoing throughout the building, faculty and staff pulled colleagues and students into offices, locking doors and setting up barricades. Eight people huddled in the fifth-floor office of the Economics Department chair, Ian McDonough, that same high school hockey player from Carlsbad. The son of a police officer, McDonough knew what gunfire sounded like. Inside his office, once person called 911 while others heaved stuffed file cabinets and desks, as if they were empty boxes, in front of the doorway.

Professor Daraboth "Bot" Rith was in a fourth-floor restroom when he heard the alarm. Maybe a fire? he thought. He went up one floor to check on a student taking a final exam in his office. He found his door open, but the student was gone.

Rith closed his door and walked down the hallway to evacuate. Standing by the elevator doors was a man, taller than Rith, wearing a black trench coat. "I saw him. He was dressed up, you know, like one of us, like one of the faculty, like a professor," Rith said. "When he saw me, he pulled something out of his black coat."

"Oh, it's you," Rith recalled the man saying to him before opening fire.

Rith was shot 10 times in his torso and left arm. Somehow, he was able to run down four flights of stairs and escape the building. Outside, two Metro officers loaded him in a police cruiser and took him to a nearby ambulance. Their quick actions saved Bot's life. [Read his story of recovery on Page 32.]

McDonough and those in his office heard the gunfire. Then came kicking on his door. The group stayed quiet, but prepared to fight using office furniture and supplies, whatever was around.

McDonough peeked under the doorway and saw the light flicker as the person kicking the door walked away.

Nate Drum, 31, had been in Beam Hall many times before. First as a UNLV student, then later as a University Police officer.

Born in San Diego, Nate is the son of a police officer and a nurse. His mother, Nicole Drum, describes her son as a good listener and a rule follower.

"He was just an all-around good kid and very well-behaved and very disciplined. He was always motivated, always striving to be the best that he could be. He was always trying to

reach his maximum potential. It was something his dad really instilled in him as a child."

Nate was very much in awe of his dad, Tim Drum, and his accomplishments as a police officer. "Nathan knew all along that's what he wanted to do. He wanted to help people like his dad," Nicole Drum said.

Like Damian, Nate played football. In high school, he was a wide receiver and punter, but a broken wrist caused him to focus on the latter. He played at a junior college in California, hoping to eventually make the roster of a Division I team.

He moved to Las Vegas and tried out for UNLV as a walk-on punter. He didn't make the team but stayed to finish his undergraduate degree here. "He loved the campus," Nicole recalls.

He got an apartment and a job at a nearby Starbucks. He began studying criminal justice. "He was busy, and he loved it. It was probably some of the happiest times of Nathan's life," his mother said.

Nate remained focused on his long-term goal, hitting the gym and studying hard to finish his degree early. "I didn't want to waste any more time. I just wanted to get school done with so I could start my career as a cop," Nate said.

One class, taught by now-retired professor Karen Seale, stood out. "It wasn't even criminal justice. It was a stress management class," he said. "We had to share different parts of our lives through songs we liked. And then you'd get feedback from your classmates.

"Then we would open up. And so it was essentially like counseling, but in the form of a class. It didn't feel like counseling. It was just sharing parts about my life. You could go as deep as you want and then you have your classmates giving you feedback on it, and it was all good stuff."

What he learned has stayed with him, helping him engage when working with victims of crime and dealing with tragedy.

Nate graduated with a bachelor's in criminal justice in December 2015 and headed back to San Diego, where he applied to the city's police department.

CHAPTER 3: INSIDE BEH

Approximately 11:52 a.m

Damian and Nate took up positions near the entrance to Beam Hall's atrium. There was so much noise with the fire alarm blaring as people fled the building.

University Police and Las Vegas Metropolitan Police officers poured into the building, climbing the stairs to the second floor, shouting directions to each other and following training protocols for school shootings.

The elevator doors opened, and a man in a black trench coat emerged. As seen in body-camera footage, a Metro officer pointed a rifle at him from the second floor and yelled at him to leave the building.

The man kept walking.

"He totally looked like a professor," Damian said. "The fire alarms were blasting, and I started yelling at him, 'Sir, come to us. We're the police. Come to us!'"

Nate told Damian he was going to go talk to the man and ask what he saw.

The veteran officer's "Spidey-sense" started tingling. Something was off. "He just didn't respond. He didn't even look up at us," Damian said. "I said [to Nate], 'I think that might be our shooter.'"

But Nate didn't hear him. He holstered his gun and followed the man out the front doors of Beam Hall.



As a member of the UNLV football security team, Detective Nate Drum runs with the team across the field at Allegiant Stadium.

Nate has a gift for calming and de-escalating tense situations, his mother said. "He knows the difference you can make in someone's life with quick action, intervention, and showing compassion. Mental health is one of the first things he thinks of when he's talking to a victim."

After returning to California from Las Vegas, Nate was accepted into the San Diego Police Academy. He was 23 years old. His father was 22 when he became a police officer.

Halfway through the program, his training was nearly derailed by a family tragedy, but Nate was determined. He finished his training and joined the department. About a year later, he decided to move back to Las Vegas. "I wanted to be able to be a homeowner," Nate explained. Even working full time for the San Diego Police Department, he couldn't afford to live there.

University Police Services offered him a position, and he started in October 2017.

CREATING A RESILIENT COMMUNITY



UNLV's Tourist Safety Institute in the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs is helping organizations from around the world develop effective strategies to prepare, mitigate and respond to tourist safety issues.



PLANNING FOR
MAJOR EVENTS



ADDRESSING TOURIST
VULNERABILITIES



RESPONDING TO
CROWD DYNAMICS



IMPROVING
HOMELAND SECURITY



POLICYMAKING

Partner with us to enhance safety and security in the tourism industry through innovative researched-based solutions. For further information, contact us at tsi@unlv.edu

unlv.edu/urbanaffairs/tsi

Tourist Safety Institute

UNLV | GREENSPUN COLLEGE
OF URBAN AFFAIRS

CHAPTER 4: THE CONFRONTATION

Approximately 11:54 a.m.

Nate caught up to the man in the black trench coat, just past the steps of the front entrance to Beam Hall. "The reason I holstered my gun was because I recognized at that point that I was just wearing a dress shirt and a pair of slacks," Nate said. "If I approached this person with my gun out, it would cause a fear in him to, you know, he may not respond to me. He may be scared that I'm the shooter."

The man in the black trench coat never said a word to Nate. "He looked at me with a straight face and then he puts his left hand into his satchel, and all of a sudden I see him pull out a black gun," Nate said.

Damian was trailing several steps behind Nate, but he saw the gun too, and his training took over. He raised his gun and fired, striking the man at least three times. Damian began to reload.

The gunman kept charging at Nate. There was a scowl on his face, Damian recalled. "It was evil."

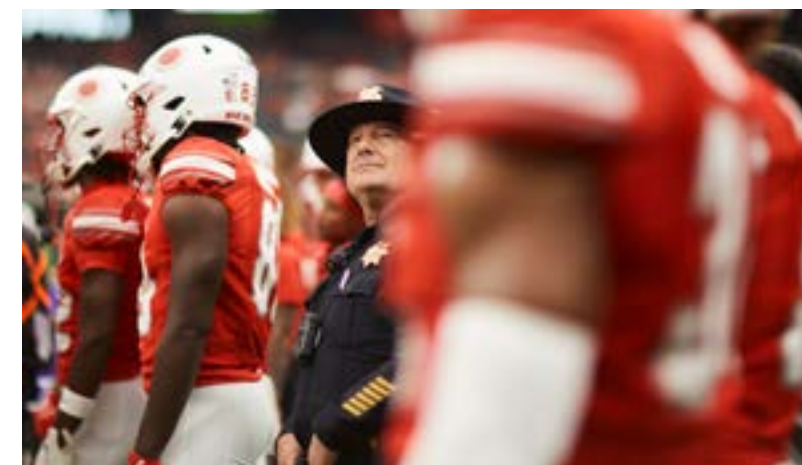
After more than 30 years in law enforcement, Damian retired and moved to Las Vegas to be closer to his mom and dad. "I knew pretty quickly retirement wasn't for me," he said.

He became a bailiff in the North Las Vegas Municipal Court system, but that wasn't for him either. When he heard about a part-time job in events security at University Police, he applied and was hired in 2018. Damian quickly found himself working full-time hours, often doing security for the UNLV football team.

Soon after both joined the department, it became clear that Nate and Damian would have a special relationship. Both were from Southern California, had worked in police departments there, and had played football. And both loved to give each other a hard time — Damian about Nate's time as a punter rather than a "real" football player and Nate about Damian's Legoland police beat in Carlsbad. Don't get them started on their age difference.

They worked well together, and often.

Since the shooting, Officer Damian Garcia has sensed a change in how UNLV football players view him. He's not just working a job, he's part of their community, he said.



CHAPTER 5: A LEFT TURN

Approximately 11:55 a.m.

As gunfire exploded around him, Nate was very aware he was not wearing his bullet-resistant vest. He ran, dove, rolled over, and sprung back to his feet before finding momentary cover behind a police cruiser.

With his sidearm now unholstered, Nate scrambled toward the rear of the police cruiser. He'd lost sight of the shooter and didn't know which way he might be approaching. Nate pointed his gun north, toward the mall and Wright Hall and — unbeknownst to him — away from the gunman.

Something pushed him to turn left, he said. For the second time, he came face-to-face with the gunman. Nate squeezed his trigger, firing multiple shots. The man in the black trench coat fell forward to the ground. About 10 minutes had gone by since that first call for help.

To this day, Nate has only one explanation as to why he turned left. He never saw the shooter in his peripheral vision. He didn't hear him approaching. He just ... turned left.

"Something just told me that I needed to look left. It was almost like — I felt as though — my head was kind of like forced that way. I do think my dad was with me that day."

Nate's father died on June 4, 2016.

He was about halfway through the San Diego Police Academy when his father took his own life. "I was with him at home when it happened."

Nate doesn't have firm answers as to why his father did it. "I think it was the trauma of the work he did," Nate said his father, a child-abuse detective, carried the job with him, physically and mentally. It wore on him. He had chronic back pain from an on-the-job injury and, Nate said, likely suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.

At the academy, the instructors were shocked Nate didn't quit. "I told them this is where I belong. I knew that's where I needed to be," he said.

To stay, they required him to do six months of psychological counseling, one session per week. "It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life. But it kind of helped me. I was able to learn to process a lot," Nate said.

Counseling helped Nate learn to cope with the loss. He also learned to handle trauma and high-stress situations.

"I had to move on and make the most of my own life," Nate said.

THE SCHOOL OF INTEGRATED HEALTH SCIENCES



WHERE SCIENCE AND TRAINING SHAPE THE FUTURE OF HEALTHCARE

The School of Integrated Health Sciences supports eight graduate and six undergraduate programs and groundbreaking research in the departments of Brain Health, Physical Therapy, Kinesiology and Nutrition Sciences, and Health Physics and Diagnostic Sciences.

Each degree path offers students unique opportunities to change the world and the community through research and healthcare education.

Take the first step toward shaping your future! Learn more today at:

unlv.edu/integratedhealth

UNLV

REBELS **MAKE IT** **HAPPEN**

CHAPTER 6: THE AIRPORT

Sometime after 8 p.m.

Nate suffered scrapes and bruising as he evaded gunfire, but otherwise neither Nate nor Damian was physically injured further.

After the confrontation ended, officer-involved-shooting protocols began. Damian and Nate were isolated from everyone else and then interviewed by Metro detectives. Hours later, Nate and Damian left UPD headquarters together to pick up Nate's mother from the airport. He had texted her earlier and asked her to come to Las Vegas as soon as possible. He couldn't tell her why, but she soon figured it out.

In the dark of the evening, after 8 p.m., the detectives went together to meet Nicole Drum at Terminal 1 at Harry Reid International Airport. Nate hugged his mother. It was a different type of hug — "not one of those 'I'm-just-here-to-visit' hugs," she said.

The two wept. Then she scolded him for not wearing his vest.

The two officers were placed on leave, per department protocols, while Metro detectives and the Clark County District Attorney's office reviewed their actions on Dec. 6. And both have gone through counseling.

Nate and Damian received local and national recognition for their bravery. On June 26 in New Orleans, they were awarded the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators (IACLEA) Award for Valor.

When they both returned to active-duty last spring, they were assigned to work events security and for the UNLV football team, which includes traveling with the team. At the end of each game, Damian and Nate, wearing navy blue uniforms and triple-brim, campaign-style hats, run alongside the players and head coach Barry Odom as they cross the field to shake hands with the opposing team.

At a preseason practice over the summer, Odom introduced Damian and Nate to the players and told them they were the officers who had ended the violence on Dec. 6.



"I wanted to recognize them for serving our community, and I wanted our guys to understand that they're part of our family and our team," Odom said. "I wanted to pay them respect for the job of what all officers and service people do in the line of duty."

After that, Damian said, "they all seemed to treat us a little differently. We have more of a personal relationship now." Kind of like the relationships he built with McDonough and the kids in Carlsbad, Damian said.

Odom understood the change. "Everybody's going to have a different description on what they describe as a hero, but in my scope, I would say they would deserve that label."

Nate and Damian don't mention the word hero when they talk about themselves and what happened on Dec. 6. They do, however, use the word hero when they talk about professor Rith, or Bot, as he's known, and everything he's done to get back to teaching students. They talk about the families of the victims who didn't make it and all they've gone through. They talk about the staff with UNLV's counseling and psychological services who have helped so many people recover emotionally.

"Damian and I do not consider ourselves at all this way. This is what the job is," Nate said.

"I'm supposed to feel good right now, but I'm so shocked, still. From everything. I'm so frustrated and upset about what happened. I'm not superhuman or a superhero. I think given the circumstances that I had, I did the best that I could."

"This is not something I ever want to do — to take a human life. [The gunman] forced my hand to do that, because it's not something I had ever wanted to do."

When Nate and Damian found out a few hours later about the victims, Nate said, "It just made me furious, because it was just, why would somebody do that?"

It's something we all will struggle with, they both agreed. "I think we need to move forward and not forget. But we need to move forward," Damian said.

Dealing with the "why" in the wake of traumatic events is something Nate has dealt with for a long time. It goes back to the death of his father.

"The whole time I grew up, I wanted to be like him. And I wish he could be here to go through the aftermath of this experience. And that's frustrating."

But Nate is certain it was his father who saved his life.

"He was there on Dec. 6. I truly believe that. Me looking to the left? There was no way. I felt my head just forced that way."

"I can't explain that." ♦

Economics professor Daraboth “Bot” Rith, seated, and Dimanche Rith, a business manager for UNLV’s Office of Online Education

After Months of Recovery, a Return

Critically injured professor Bot Rith is back to teaching – with g ratitude for the officers who saved him and for the colleagues who worked behind the scenes to make Las Vegas home to his family.

STORY BY FRANCIS MCCABE | PHOTOS BY JOSH HAWKINS

As a young boy returning home from school in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Daraboth “Bot” Rith was often greeted by his Yeay, or grandmother in Khmer. Her name was Chhea, and when school was challenging or he wasn’t feeling well, she would comfort him by preparing his favorite meal—nom banh chok, a traditional Cambodian rice noodle dish.

This simple act of care would give him the confidence to overcome the difficulties he faced at school.

“She raised me. She taught me to study hard. Work hard. And she fed me good food,” Bot joked. “Every time I got out of school, she had food on the table. She really took care of me.”

After her passing in 2017, Bot kept a picture of his Yeay with him wherever he moved. On Dec. 6, 2023, the picture was in his office in Beam Hall, still in an unpacked box.

On that tragic day on the fifth floor of Beam Hall, Bot encountered a man, taller than him, wearing a black trench coat and dressed like a professor. “When he saw me, he pulled something out of his black coat. I thought it was a notebook or something,” Bot said.

It was a gun and the man, whom Bot had never seen before, shot him 10 times.

The bullets tore through his left arm, with five of them entering his torso. Blood soaked his shirt. “I knew immediately this is real. This is life threatening. I knew I needed to run as much as I can. I could hear some gunshots behind my back. I pushed through the exit door and took the stairwell from the top floor all the way down.

“And I was praying to my grandmother, my late grandmother. ... I prayed, ‘Please get me out of here! Please keep me safe from this monster.’”

His voice cracked as he explained, “I prayed to stay alive to see Abbie. To see my daughter again.”

Bot ran down four flights of stairs and escaped to the east side of Beam Hall. Outside, he happened upon Jake Noriega

“This experience has taught me so much about the power of community, the importance of compassion, and the incredible things that emerge in times of adversity. And it has shown me that even in the most challenging times, there is hope; there’s always a path forward.”

— Daraboth “Bot” Rith
at his first campuswide appearance since the shooting



Rith found comfort in memories of his grandmother as he recovered.



and his partner Ty Vesperas, both Las Vegas Metro police officers. Bot recalled telling Noriega that he couldn't breathe. "He was trying to close the wounds. I began to lose my sight at that moment. I had an image of my daughter, and I thought that it could be my last one."

The two officers, who had just arrived at the main entrance to the building, acted quickly, moving Bot into their police cruiser. Noriega provided medical care as Vesperas drove to an awaiting ambulance.

"Without them," Bot said, "I could be gone. I feel that I owe gratitude, immense gratitude, for the service they do to save people's lives."

OCEANS AWAY

Bot and his wife, Dimanche Pharath Rith, now a business manager with UNLV Online Education, began sharing their story with the UNLV family in September. The couple had met in high school in Cambodia and began a long-distance relationship a couple years after Dimanche's family moved to Australia, and her with them.

When an opportunity arose for Bot to attend the Southern New Hampshire University in the U.S., he jumped at the chance. When he wasn't studying, he was trying to convince Dimanche to join him.

In the United States, there were so many opportunities, he would say. She could achieve her educational goals alongside him.

After earning his undergraduate degree and working at a bank in Boston, Dimanche joined her high school sweetheart and attended the University of Massachusetts, Boston. They were married, and 10 months later, they welcomed their daughter, Abbie.

Both of them went on to pursue graduate degrees at Suffolk University. As Bot was finishing his Ph.D. work and looking for a professorship, Dimanche and Abbie returned to Australia to be close to her family. He was offered a job as a visiting professor at UNLV by then economics chair Jeff Waddoups.

On Jan. 17, 2023, his first day at UNLV, Bot stopped outside Beam Hall to take a selfie. "Teaching economics is more than a job," he said. "It's the way to change

lives. That I can show off the beauty of economics," he says, sometimes halting to gather his words. "For me, teaching is more than a dream come true."

Bot had been at UNLV less than a year when the tragedy happened. He was beginning to pursue his research goals and networking with colleagues. He was also in a new city. He missed his wife and daughter and his friends in Boston and Cambodia.

It was a Friday afternoon in Australia (Thursday in Nevada) and Dimanche was working from home when she received a call from a friend in Boston about the shooting at UNLV. As Bot was undergoing extensive and multiple surgeries, she didn't know how to find out what was happening to her husband.

"I just knew there was a shooting at UNLV and Bot was one of the victims and, at the time, no one knew if he was OK," Dimanche said.

As a social worker at Sunrise Hospital connected her with Bot's doctors for medical updates, UNLV helped orchestrate an emergency journey to Las Vegas for Dimanche and Abbie. Provost Chris Heavey and his chief of staff, Tondra De, would play a huge role in helping the family recover together, Dimanche said. They helped set up living arrangements and encouraged her to apply for a job with UNLV. The university also arranged for Bot's parents to be with him as he recovered in the hospital.

"All this heartfelt support — each phone call from family and friends — served as a lifeline," she said. "It helped knowing that there were so many people out there trying to help our family."

'A JOURNEY OF STRENGTH'

Early on in his recovery, Bot's spirits were lifted by the many cards and notes he received.

"And all the words from anyone — from my family, from my colleagues, from my students, from friends — they are very meaningful to me," Bot said, gesturing to the stack of cards he spread out on a table.

Colleagues like professor Ian McDonough would visit him, and some snuck food into the hospital, Bot remembered. "They would offer: Is there

something that I really wanted to eat? I could only eat a little, but they brought in some delicious food."

Bot's goal has been to get back to who he was on Dec. 5, 2023. He remembers telling his physicians: "I want to stand up and be able to walk again. I want to be the person I used to be."

He was in a medically induced coma for about two weeks following the shooting. As he regained consciousness, sedation left him confused, and he would mix reality with dreams. He had compression boots on his legs to prevent blood clots. When they would inflate, he thought someone — someone who shouldn't be there — was dragging him by his legs.

The lights in the room would bother him, too; they seemed so bright. "I was so angry that someone kept turning an overhead projector on — like in school — and shining it at me. I couldn't understand why they would do that to me."

Physical therapy was a slow and deliberate process. With both fear and uncertainty to work through, Bot requested that the university continue to keep his identity private.

First he had to learn how to sit up. Then it was standing up. Then it was climbing a step. He described doing the most rudimentary movements: "I would feel so fatigued."

But Dimanche saw something else. "I witnessed a remarkable journey of strength, resilience, and hope," she said.

Bot's Buddhist upbringing and the teachings of his Yeay played an important role. Buddhists believe in the importance of finding joy despite life's suffering. Bot recalled a lot of physical pain, especially at night. "I kept crying. I would call (for medical staff) and ask them to stay with me," he said.

But he wouldn't give up.

"Life is precious. It's a gift from God or Buddha, that we have a chance to experience the beauty of the world. When you're in a down moment, as long as you keep trying, you have room to grow," he said.

It's a message he shares with his students as well. "I tell them, 'You can't give up. You may feel overwhelmed but if you give up, then there's no room to grow.'"



Nine months after the shooting, he slung his ever-present backpack over his shoulders and walked back onto campus. He taught an online course during the summer and is now back to teaching four in-person classes — the same number he was teaching when the shooting occurred.

"From day to day, I keep progressing to be a better person. I think less about what happened and focus on what's more important, especially my family and my teaching and my research."

"The person I am now, I am not just a survivor," he added. "I am someone who has been profoundly transformed by a tragic experience. But I am back, ready to embrace my role as a professor with renewed passion and enthusiasm."

"This is my calling, my way of positively impacting lives and elevating our shared humanity."

AT HOME IN NEVADA

Reserved and pensive, Dimanche considered everything they've been through. Before the shooting, the couple was uncertain of when they might live in the same place again. Dimanche had hoped Bot would join her in Australia.

"Being back together like we are now — it is like fate. Like we are meant to be together," she said.

The family has settled into life in Las Vegas. Abbie is now in a magnet program at a local middle school, and the family recently bought a home.

In September, they invited Buddhist monks to their new home for a blessing. "They blessed it so it would be a place to live with happiness," he explained. "Every time we come home,



Abbie Rith feeds ice chips to her father during his months-long recovery after the Dec. 6, 2023, shooting.

At left: Professor Bot Rith shows Las Vegas Metro officer Jake Noriega the scars on his arm during a thank-you luncheon in August. Rith credits Noriega and his partner, Ty Vesperas, with saving his life.

it is a living space that brings us joy, it brings us smiles, and it brings us all happiness."

Bot still has dreams filled with anxiety and fear that he attributes to what happened to him on Dec. 6. In those dreams he's running. He's being chased by dogs.

But he also has dreams of his Yeay and a warm bowl of nom banh chok waiting for him. That dream reminds him of the hope he still feels for the future. And if his mood ever dips, he looks at the photograph with his Yeay, now unpacked and displayed on a shelf in his office.

On Sept. 10, Bot and his wife made their first public appearance at a campuswide meeting to kickoff the new

academic year.

It was an emotional appearance for many in attendance, as it was the first time he was officially acknowledged as "Professor Bot Rith," rather than "the fourth victim."

Bot told the audience of 500 or so colleagues that there's always a path forward, even in the most trying of circumstances.

"We are here to lift each other up, to support and care for one another ... Let us seek peace. For it is only through peace that we can reveal and create a better world for us all."

"Thank you for your unwavering support, your kindness, and for being a part of this journey with me. We are the UNLV family." ♦