

in TOUCH

Official
Newsletter
of the
**C. D. MOTE, JR.
INCENTIVE
AWARDS
PROGRAM**
SPRING 2026

CREATING A LEGACY
**Two Generations,
One Alma Mater**



CREATING A LEGACY

Two Generations, One Alma Mater

IT WAS MAY 1, 2025, College Decision Day at Baltimore City College, the day when high school seniors represent the college they will attend during a special assembly to celebrate their achievements. When the University of Maryland was announced, over thirty students, donning Maryland gear, bounded onto the stage to the cheers of their fellow classmates. It was a thrill for Assistant Principal **Yavona Pirali '05** to witness, not only because her own daughter, Ariana '29, was in that great number, but because she recalled her own start at the university 24 years earlier when she matriculated as one of only five City students.

Yavona's college journey started when she was selected to be part of the first cohort of what was then called the Baltimore Incentive Awards Program. "We were the guinea pig class," she laughed. "It was a struggle. We were trying to figure out where we belonged on campus." The fact that the program was being developed, brick by brick, only added to her uncertainty.

As the first in her family to attend college, Yavona was reversing what she

calls a "generational curse" of family members who had the talent but not the opportunity to pursue higher education. Armed with brains and grit from her parents, she set out to blaze a trail for those who would come after her. "We figured it out and now, everybody else has the blueprint," she says.

"Everybody" includes her older sister, several cousins, and scores of students from Baltimore City, some of whom she has taught and all of whom have earned a degree.

Through the life Yavona and her husband, Angelo, have created, Ariana and her sister, Carmen, have more opportunities than their parents. "She (Ariana) grew up differently than I," said Yavona. She's had vacations to Turkey, Greece, and Italy and shadowing opportunities with professionals that I was never exposed to. We are proud that we get to have our kids be a more expansive version of themselves. They get to choose the life they want."

Ariana's admission to Maryland was a source of pride rather than Yavona's dream for her. "I'm glad

that she really loved my alma mater and that she thought it was going to be a great place for her, because it was a great place for me. My hope is that Maryland will give her what she is seeking," she said.

As for Ariana's hopes and dreams, they are still a work in progress. A freshman English major in University Honors, she is digging into classes and activities, making friends and enjoying the spontaneity of campus life. "Though I'm not really sure about what I want to do with my degree," she says, "I want to explore who I am as a person and I can do that here at Maryland. I look at my parents as the measure for success so I can look to them for guidance on what I could become. They push me to enjoy my interests and experiment with them." ★

“ I feel at peace because I made the right choices in life. I did some things right. And that comes with a certain level of confidence that what I did mattered.

— YAVONA PIRALI '05



PHOTO BY AMINA LAMPKIN

Coming Down the Pike

Collaboration with **SUCCEEDS**

THE SUCCEEDS CLINIC supports students with ADHD as they pursue their academic and personal goals. Through a developing partnership, IAP students, regardless of their diagnosis, will tap into the strategies for time management and goal setting through workshops and resources.



In-House **Tutoring**

IAP'S TUTORING PROGRAM formalizes the support that many students have offered their peers for the last several years. Paid tutoring positions will allow IAP students to share their knowledge and guide small groups through some of the most challenging courses on campus. By dedicating their talent and time, tutors will play a key role in fostering academic achievement in the IAP community.

Financial Support for **Professional Development**



MODEST STIPENDS are now available to support professional development pursuits. Students can use funding for travel, registration fees, lodging, and meals, putting enriching conferences within reach. To date, students have attended the AfroTech Conference, the national convention for the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers and have used the stipend for travel expenses to conduct research at the University of Maryland Medical School. By investing in these experiences, IAP helps pave the way for students' professional growth and success.

Wellness **Seminars**

AS PART OF OUR COMMITMENT TO HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORT, IAP will offer seminars led by licensed psychologists to equip students with essential tools to maintain healthy relationships, foster resilience, manage life transitions, and support overall wellness.



Focusing on What Matters: IAP Goals

IAP FOCUSES ON FOUR ELEMENTS to help transform student potential into measurable success and lasting impact through intentional programming, meaningful connections, and tangible opportunities.



To foster a sense of belonging by creating safe, inclusive spaces that encourage authentic expression, shared experiences, and meaningful relationships.



To create systems and pathways that increase awareness of and access to transformative personal, educational and professional opportunities.



To equip students with the skills to confidently navigate educational, professional and life transitions, build strong personal foundations and thrive in various environments.



To empower participants to achieve personal, academic and programmatic milestones by building competencies, resilience, and fostering a strong culture of achievement.

PERSONAL PHOTOS

FORWARD

FORWARD, the University of Maryland campaign for the Fearless, is an ambitious \$2.5 billion five-year fundraising effort that engages the entire campus to transform the university, the state, and the world. Focused on expanding access to a world-class education, fostering innovation, and strengthening connections for the greater good, this campaign will advance the university's mission. The Incentive Awards Program will do its part to raise money for scholarships and programming support and move the Office of Undergraduate Studies closer to its \$40 million goal. We're on our way! ★





2025 IN REVIEW

1. Community Service
2. Spring Retreat
3. Fall Welcome
4. Maryland Day
5. Fall Retreat
6. TERP Magazine, Cohort 1 Feature
7. 25th Anniversary Dinner
8. Annual Career Panel
9. Summer Discovery
10. Cohort 1 Reunion and 25th Anniversary Kick-off
11. High School Visits
12. Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?



Alumni Make **Bold Steps Forward**



MAY SOE MIN '25



MARK AGUILAR '25



CHUKWUMA ODIGWE '18

From College Park to Bologna: Building a Future in Foreign Service

After graduating from UMD, May did not hesitate to take the leap across the Atlantic. Now pursuing her M.A. in International Relations at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Bologna, Italy, May is diving headfirst into graduate-level coursework while navigating an entirely new country and culture.

As a Thomas R. Pickering Fellow, a prestigious program for future diplomats, May is on a pathway to the U.S. Foreign Service. Her days include policy courses on global issues and Asian regional studies, building the adaptability her career demands. "Navigating two completely new environments has pushed me to take more risks and maximize every opportunity," she says.

Trading Comfort for Copenhagen: Returning to Denmark

After graduation, Mark made an audacious move: returning to Copenhagen, where he had studied abroad during his junior year. When a position opened at DIS Study Abroad—the same foundation through which he had once been a student—Mark did not hesitate to seize the opportunity. Now, as an Academic Assistant, his work involves providing office support to DIS professors and students while also planning study tours across Europe—curating the very experiences that transformed him.

This next year will be both a professional launching pad and personal test of courage, he says. "I'm gaining real independence and showing myself that I can do this."

Mark credits IAP with giving him the courage to take this leap: "I had imposter syndrome, but IAP helped me believe I belonged and could do things I didn't think were possible."

Transitioning from Electrical Engineering to the Priesthood

Chukwuma's path was unconventional. After graduating from UMD with a degree in Electrical Engineering, he worked coordinating drone research in Washington, D.C. Yet Chukwuma felt the pull toward priesthood that he first felt in college growing stronger. After a brief period working with Catholic Charities serving the poor, he made a decision in 2019 to enter the seminary.

He spent two years at St. John Paul II Seminary in D.C., then four years in Rome at the Pontifical North American College. This past spring, he was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington—a moment he had been working toward for six years.

Now serving as Parochial Vicar at Mother Seton Parish in Germantown, Father Odigwe's journey proves that the boldest moves are not always the most obvious ones, but the ones that have been calling you all along.

Next Generation of Leaders

CAMPUS LEADERSHIP INSPIRES A WALK ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

Alvaro Ceron-Ruiz '27 ■ Public Policy and Criminology & Criminal Justice

Alvaro is campaigning for a seat on the Prince George's County Board of Education representing District 2, which includes College Park, New Carrollton, Greenbelt, and Riverdale. One of the youngest candidates in the race, Alvaro is challenging assumptions about who belongs in leadership spaces. He is hoping to bring student-centered, community-focused leadership to local government.

Alvaro's campaign reflects the spirit of a trailblazer: stepping forward despite uncertainty, amplifying community voices, and redefining what student leadership can look like beyond campus.



LEADING WITH PURPOSE, RECOGNIZED FOR EXCELLENCE

Luzmary Hernandez '27 ■ Finance

For Luzmary, the induction into Omicron Delta Kappa, a national leadership honor society, represents a deeply personal milestone: "This recognition showed me that staying true to my goals and becoming the best version of myself through meaningful relationships and experiences really matter." Serving as a peer mentor with IAP and the Maryland Promise Program and as head of outreach for the Collegiate Financial Management Association, she tapped into her communication and interpersonal skills and combined mentorship with education. Together, these experiences highlight the leadership, service, and character that define her contributions to the UMD community.

LOCAL CHAPTER PRESIDENT GETS NATIONAL RECOGNITION

La'Myrah Jackson '26 ■ Public Policy, Sustainability Studies minor

Since joining the University of Maryland's chapter of Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS), La'Myrah has become a leader focused on equity, collaboration, and professional development in agricultural and environmental spaces. As chapter president, she supports underrepresented students pursuing careers in agriculture, natural resources, and related sciences. "Leadership means understanding that everyone plays an integral role in the organization's success and as president, I have to take responsibility for the outcome, regardless of the circumstance," she said, adding that she works closely with her executive board to strengthen programming and member engagement.



IN TOUCH

Cohort 1 (right) launched the 25th anniversary year with a live podcast-style conversation about the program's early years, their lessons learned and their personal and professional lives since graduation.



(left to right) Jackie Lee, Reginald Jones III, Myron Goldstein, Tiana Wynn, Essence Jordan, Ebony Washington, Yavona Pirali, Ima Ibadapo.

HUMAN LIBRARY

Alumni became “living books” to share personal stories and answer students’ questions in an open, reflective format.



GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

Kareem Branch '06 and **Esther Ekanem '17** (below, center) welcomed scholars and fellow alumni into their homes for dinner and conversation, strengthening the legacy of connection.



Esther Ekanem '17 is flanked by Nabreiya Scott '17 (left) and Brian Robinson '09 (right).

Paying it Forward

Alumni strengthen the IAP community through connection, storytelling, and guidance, offering students real world insight and meaningful support across cohorts.

CAREER PANEL-IN-THE-ROUND

Nancy Canales '13 (far right) facilitated the annual panel, which offers students guidance, networking opportunities, and insight into navigating professional life.



LINKEDIN ALUMNI-STUDENT PAGE



Kareem Branch '06 created a shared LinkedIn space to foster an alumni-scholar professional network.

SELECTION COMMITTEE

Alums dedicated time to meet and interview candidates for the next cohort.



FALL WELCOME

When the UMD community welcomed cohort 25, alums were there to share in the celebration.



Alum Embraces a Return to the One Room School House

ONE ROOM SCHOOL HOUSES, once common in the 1930s, are making a comeback in the form of microschoools, and **Rhonda Idris '14** aims to open one. A career educator, she discovered the microschoool concept when doing extensive research for the best educational fit for her daughter, Amirah, because traditional schools did not meet her unique needs. Amirah, who is on the autism spectrum, taught herself to read fluently at eighteen months, can memorize things with amazing speed, and readily identifies and applies patterns. However, she needed support with comprehension, social interaction, and more time and space to move physically. This unique blend of gifts and needs required an alternative to even the best school Rhonda could find for her.

"When I was in the classroom, I noticed that students did best in smaller groups and when they could apply what they know in a real world context and where they can see what they're learning connects to other disciplines," says Rhonda, who is now the director of STEM strategy for District of Columbia Public Schools.

This is precisely the aim of microschoools: to provide more personalized instruction in intimate settings that foster innovation and strengthen connections between teachers and students. These settings promote increased engagement, essential skill development, self-direction and flexibility, among other benefits.

Rhonda's target population includes advanced learners who would thrive in non-traditional settings, such as neurodivergent students. "Students of all types will learn side by side in classrooms transformed into makerspaces to provide hands-on, interdisciplinary, project-based learning using core STEM content," she says.

Leveraging her extensive work in local public school systems, a master's degree in education from Johns Hopkins, and doctorate in educational leadership from Liberty University, Rhonda has everything she needs to realize her vision. "All of my experiences have prepared me for this: teaching, being an instructional coach, developing best practices, curriculum development, research, educational leadership, grants, budget and people management and more," she says. "Being able to have discourse with people at higher levels of leadership, like the chancellor and the mayor will be particularly useful."

The next step? Rhonda is working with mentors at KaiPod Catalyst to guide her through the business model, finding a location, identifying staff and facilitating enrollment. "I want to fill a gap, provide a service and accessibility to all students despite socioeconomic status and language, who need something more or something different. I'm excited." ★



Remembering Suzanne G. Valenstein: A Life Devoted to Art, Scholarship, and Giving

BY LAURA CECH

ART SCHOLAR AND PHILANTHROPIST Suzanne G. Valenstein, who was a founding supporter of the Incentive Awards Program at the University of Maryland, died late last year at the age of 97.

Known to her many friends and colleagues as “Sue,” she and her husband helped launch the Suzanne G. and Murray A. Valenstein Baltimore Incentive Awards Program.

Created as a pilot initiative with just nine students in 2001, the program now serves 120 students each year, becoming a life-defining success story for nearly 270 alumni to date.

“It was the early believers like them who gave us the momentum we needed to get going,” said IAP Director Jackie Wheeler Lee. “Their commitment was one rooted in faith, a belief in their hometown, Baltimore, and a deep hope in something yet to be seen. Sue knew that the scholarship would remove a financial barrier and a barrier in the minds of students.”

Sue and her husband, Murray Valenstein '40, an advertising executive who died in 2013, were both natives of Baltimore and graduates of public high schools. They were deeply committed to expanding educational opportunities for students facing financial and personal challenges.



“The Valensteins’ support has been truly transformative—to students, to families, to our communities, and to our campus,” said William A. Cohen, associate provost and dean for undergraduate studies. “Their generosity created opportunity and lasting impact that will be felt for generations.”

In addition to their support for the Incentive Awards Program, the Valensteins created a bequest that generously endows a scholarship program that will be known as the Valenstein Merit Scholars.

Beyond her philanthropy, Valenstein was a distinguished research scholar and curator of Chinese ceramics at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Over the course of thirty-five years, she wrote numerous books and publications. She received an honorary doctorate from UMD in May 2012.

Valenstein followed UMD news and celebrated students’ achievements. On the 20th anniversary of IAP, Valenstein wrote, “Murray and I were privileged to watch IAP students become IAP alumni and go out into a challenging world. We were proud that so much of their success can be credited to the University of Maryland Incentive Awards Program.”

IAP alumna Kelly Smith '06 recalled how proud Valenstein was of her when she earned her master’s degree, bought a house, and started a family and successful career.

“She lifted people up and changed the course of countless lives, mine included,” said Smith, who affectionately called her “GV”—short for Grandma Valenstein. “She made a profound impact not by seeking recognition, but by quietly giving: her time, her wisdom, her love, and her belief in others.”

Valenstein also profoundly touched the lives of students she never met.

“Suzanne didn’t just change one life, she created a ripple. Every time I mentor a student, volunteer in my community, or encourage someone who reminds me of where I once was, that ripple continues,” Gerard Dailey '16, who now works as a bank vice president, said at Valenstein’s memorial service. “Her kindness lives on through every scholar who dares to dream bigger and through every person who strives to give back because someone once gave to them.” ★



CLASS NOTES

MYRON GOLDSTEIN '05 obtained a certificate in project management from Cornell University in September and is preparing to take the Project Management Professional exam later this year.



TIANA WYNN '05 married Gene Smith in December 2024.

JANICEIA BYRON '07 is in a School Building Leader/School District Leader program, which she will complete by December. She will pursue a school district leadership position after program completion.



SHIRON LINDSAY '09 married William Thomas III in November and they started their lives together in a new home in Towson.



RANDAL WILLIAMS '09 gave birth to a baby girl named Maika in May. "Levi and Titus are wonderful big brothers. She is the perfect addition to complete our family," she said.

"My wife and I just celebrated 6 years of marriage," wrote **AARON JOHNSON '11**. "Our two children are in private school as well. I now work for the Baltimore City Government in the Mayor's Office, still in IT. We moved from Baltimore to the White Marsh area."

AMY ALDEN '12 wrote, "I am an accountant at Cross Street Partners LLC, where I support the firm's work in the adaptive reuse of historic properties throughout Baltimore City and surrounding areas. I was married in late 2023, and in May 2025, my spouse, Ryan, and I welcomed a healthy baby boy, Declan. These experiences have been both rewarding and grounding and I value maintaining a strong balance between my professional career and family life."

LAMARA SUMMERS '12 is in her eighth year as a professional school counselor and is also a licensed therapist.

VICTORIA GOLD '14 started a new job as associate director, patient access liaison for Amgen, a multinational biopharmaceutical company.



CATHERINE SAYIKANMI '14 started a new position at Georgetown University Student

Health Center as the Immunization Compliance Manager. She is celebrating four years of homeownership, which has been both humbling and rewarding.



GANIYAT LAWAL '16 married Ron Smith in October

in Potomac, MD and they live in Baltimore. She wrote, "He proposed on Mackinac Island in Michigan. We have been together since October 2019 and we got married on the anniversary of our first date!"

CHIJIAKU MADUKA '16 joined The Arc Central Chesapeake Region as the director of talent development. He shared: "I'm honored that I've been named a finalist for the Top 100 Learning & Development Professionals Award through OnConferences. This recognition reflects not only my own work, but the collective effort of a team and organization that prioritizes innovation,

meaningful action, and thoughtful leadership development."



JOSHUA TROWELL '16 is completing his Ph.D. in public health in May from Uniformed Services University. He recently moved to Vanuatu with his partner to create an NGO dedicated to improving emergency preparedness and public health on the island nation. He was recently nominated for the Public Health Emerging and Engaging Leaders Award by his faculty mentor. He remains connected to Maryland and speaks to students whenever he has an opportunity.



JASMINE DRUMMOND '17 is engaged to Lamont

Wade, Jr. "We both went to UMD together and have been together since high school. This past year was full of a lot of travel for us and we are excited to travel again in 2026 for both of our careers. Lastly, I'm super excited about a new brand I am developing to enhance my financial coaching business," she wrote.



JESSICA NOLASCO '17 is a second year doctoral student at UMD, where her research focuses on bilingual language assessment. She continues to practice as a



C. D. MOTE, JR. INCENTIVE AWARDS PROGRAM

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CLASS NOTES, CONTINUED

bilingual speech-language pathologist and has presented her work at national conferences, co-authored publications, and mentored students and young professionals in the field.



ZALANDRIA POWELL '18 and her husband expanded their financial brokerage and gave birth to their daughter, Yara.



CELIA BARRIENTOS '19 wrote, "I am recently engaged to my partner of nine years who I met during my

time at Maryland. Additionally, I passed the Certified Rehabilitation Counselor exam on the first try."



BRITTANY ESHUN '19 got engaged last June to her boyfriend of five years.

TAYLOR-OMAREE SMITH '20 is in her last year at the University of Baltimore School of Law. ("This will be my fourth (and final) degree, lol!" she wrote.) She is the executive director of programming and advocacy for CASA Baltimore for youth in the foster care system. She is the lead clerk for the Baltimore City Council and interns in Circuit Court. She is a new homeowner and will be launching her interior design company, "Tailored by Taylor." "I'm very excited and super busy, but blessed and always thankful for my IAP roots!" she says.



SHAMON THOMAS-GREEN '20 is engaged to fiancé, Keyon, and celebrated her second anniversary working as a program assistant at the Housing Authority of Baltimore City. She is working towards becoming a HUD Certified Housing Counselor. Lastly, she purchased her childhood home in East Baltimore and is working on renovations and looking forward to calling East Baltimore home again.

JOSHUA BROWN '21 is engaged to be married.

SIERRA MAIER '21 wrote, "I got married this year in September! **TEDDY ROSEMOND '21** even officiated our perfect ceremony and **SHEANICE**



CHARLES '21 was by my side as a bridesmaid. It was everything I've ever dreamed of."

ARIEL WRIGHT '24 married Naseem Abujuma in December 2024. She is the resolutions and legal department coordinator at United Educators.

REBECCA OLUWASANMI '25 conducts cancer research as part of a post-baccalaureate program with the American Cancer Society at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Her team focuses on pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma, one of the deadliest forms of cancer, to improve patient outcomes.