

Campus Times



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Putting Brotherhood and Mental Health at the Forefront in ADP

BY SUBAAH SYED
FEATURES EDITOR

While fraternity life is often characterized by party culture and social hierarchies, the brothers of Alpha Delta Phi (ADP) at UR are choosing a different path — one rooted in vulnerability, wellness, and community support.

‘The brothers of Alpha Delta Phi (ADP) at UR are choosing a different path.’

ADP hosted a men’s mental health awareness event April 13, open to all fraternities on campus, featuring speakers from the Rochester chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

“We wanted to kind of educate our fraternity as well as just the general male population on campus about how they can deal with their mental health,” junior Alaap Rag, vice president of ADP, said. “We realized there’s nothing for us to do specifically unless we educate ourselves first ... in order to help other people, we wanted to learn how we can help other people.”

The men’s mental health workshop event hosted Board President of NAMI Michael Murphy, Board VP John Messenger, and Board Member Ryan Thibodeau. The talk began by discussing the fact that men are less likely than women to be diagnosed with mental health conditions, and how this problem arose



National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) speakers deliver a presentation on male mental health, hosted by Alpha Delta Phi (ADP).

ALAAP RAG / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

due to the “glorification of the strong, silent type,” which is a symptom of the deep-seated cultural norms that favor self-sufficiency in traditional masculinity.

Throughout the talk, the guest speakers and the audience discussed the negative stereotypes of being a psychiatric patient, the origin of these views, the cultural and generational differences in men’s mental health, and how the media — for better or for worse — has impacted the stigma around men’s mental health. At the end of the talk, the speakers distributed resources with numbers to call, people and organizations to reach out to, and suggestions for ways that frat brothers could support each other mentally.

“Whether or not we’ve personally been affected by poor mental health, we’ve seen another brother go through it,” junior Brandon Sookoo, secretary of ADP, said. “And I think sometimes, it can feel kind of powerless. So we just wanted to be able to empower

brothers with the resources or practices that they need. And also kind of switching the culture around talking about mental health in Greek life.”

Being a fraternity member often comes with preconceived notions, especially about masculinity. Rag noted that the stigma surrounding mental health is especially perceived in men in Greek life.

‘Being a fraternity member often comes with preconceived notions, especially about masculinity.’

“The stereotypical fraternity man is supposed to be a little bit more macho and not supposed to show their emotions,” he said.

More than just ADP are working to shatter those stereotypes, as frats across UR make moves toward social responsibility, such as Sigma Phi Epsilon’s recent collaboration with the 19th Ward community in the Spelling Bee.

Many Greek life houses have a risk manager, whose role is traditionally to look after people and make sure people are safe at their parties.

However, risk management doesn’t just pertain to parties. It is just as important in the day-to-day lives of the frat brothers. “This is a competitive school,” junior Nathan Weiss, president of ADP, said. “And that can take a toll on students. I see this every week. This is outside of fraternities as well as sororities. You just go, you work, and a lot of times you end up back in your room after studying. You got that feeling, man, I tried my best, and I feel like it’s not enough. And that can be a very painful feeling.” This is the reason why they take brotherhood seriously, Weiss explained.

The fraternity has earned recognition for its efforts in risk management, winning multiple risk management and harm reduction awards from both the University and the international organization for ADP.

The fraternity has also been working on establishing its new health and wellness committee. “They’ve already been effective in helping some of our friends here, which has been very nice to see,” Weiss added.

In line with their commitment to supporting the community and fostering wellness, ADP will also be having a Clothing and Book Drive starting in May.

Syed is a member of the Class of 2027.

Petition To Protect Student Activism Gains Traction on Campus

BY NATALIE OPDAHL
NEWS EDITOR

In an academic year rife with tensions between students, University administrators, and the Trump administration, UR students have taken a stand on activism in university settings.

The undergraduate-led “Petition to Defend Student Activism, Free Expression, and Academic Freedom at the University of Rochester” calls for the University to stop “actively silencing its students,” listing out specific demands that range from a declaration that free speech is protected in the University, to the reversal of disciplinary action against student protestors.

The petition was circulated on Instagram by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP), and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), and has since gained over 100 signatures from the University community.

Senior and Organizing Chair of SDS Elena Perez was one of many who signed and endorsed the petition. When asked about why, they stated that they believe some of the University’s current policies do not allow for intellectual and personal development.

“There can be no affirmation of students’ right to free expression without the removal of excessive surveillance and policing, whether that surveillance and policing comes from administration or external enforcement agencies,” Perez told the *Campus Times*.

The petition is under junior Isha Agarwal’s name on the Students Association website, however in email correspondence with the *CT*, Agarwal said that the petition was written by senior and student activist Sarah Aljitawi. Aljitawi did not respond to the *CT*’s request for comment.

Opdahl is a member of the Class of 2026.

From Proliferation to Power: Mitochondria in the Developing Heart

BY KSHIRIN ANANDKUMAR
STAFF WRITER

Newborns with heart defects are born into a race against time. Their hearts, even if capable of pumping blood, are immature, still in the essential process of differentiating into specialized structures. It is this critical window that Dr. George Porter and his research team are trying to better understand. A pediatric cardiologist and researcher, Porter

is leading efforts to uncover how mitochondria — cellular structures best known as the “powerhouses” of the cell — play a central role in guiding cardiac development. Positioned at the intersection of basic science and clinical care, the work of Porter’s lab could one day help vulnerable newborns win that race.

Porter always knew he wanted to go into pediatrics. His love for research, on the other hand, was more unexpected, stemming from an

unplanned summer lab position as an undergraduate student that inspired him to pursue basic biology alongside medicine. After earning a dual MD–PhD from the University of Maryland, Porter used his background in muscle cell biology to investigate heart development at Yale. It wasn’t until his move to Rochester, however, that he became more familiarized with the critical role of mitochondria in the developing heart. That spark set the

stage for his current work: uncovering how mitochondria regulate cardiac development and drive the maturation of cardiomyocytes (muscle cells responsible for the heart’s ability to contract and pump blood).

At the heart of Porter’s research is the mitochondria. Mainly thought of as producing energy for the body, mitochondria also play a pivotal role in guiding cardiomyocyte maturation.

SEE **HEART** PAGE 2

INSIDE THIS CT

FROM MOURNING TO FEAR

PAGE 3 OPINIONS

VAGINISMUS

PAGE 6 OPINIONS

GREAT COMET REVIEW

PAGE 7 CULTURE

ROACHES FOR DINNER

PAGE 8 HUMOR

CAMPUS

FROM HEART PAGE 1

Interestingly, early in the neonatal period — which lasts four weeks after birth — these mitochondria are still immature, alongside the cells that they are located in. Porter's team has shown that as mitochondria mature, they help drive the transition of cardiomyocytes from rapidly dividing, unspecialized cells to fully functional specialized cardiac muscle cells. Though the team is interested in understanding the entire span of cardiac development, the lab has shifted its priority to after the baby is born, where clinical intervention becomes a possibility. Porter noted how the four-week neonatal window offers both a critical phase of development and a rare opportunity for potential therapies to make a difference in real time.

To understand how mitochondria influence cardiac development, Porter's lab has turned its focus to the mitochondrial permeability transition pore (mPTP). The mPTP is a channel regulated primarily by a mitochondrial protein known as cyclophilin D (CypD). Prolonged opening of mPTPs is typically associated with mitochondrial dysfunction and cell death, and Porter's lab has shown that the closure of these mitochondrial pores during embryonic development is what drives mitochondrial maturation and subsequent cardiomyocyte differentiation. This shift marks a transition from proliferation (rapid cell division) to differentiation (specialization). As Porter puts it, "you need to make more cells, but at some point those cells have to form mature cells." More recent investigations from Porter's team have demonstrated that the same phenomena occurs in neonatal hearts — where the closure of the mPTP improves mitochondrial function and enhances cardiac performance.

This novel understanding of mitochondrial involvement in cardiac development carries significant clinical promise, but its translation into practice relies on whether these insights can be safely and effectively applied in the neonatal setting. Two drugs of particular interest to Porter — cyclosporin A and NIM811 — promote the closure of the mPTP and encourage cardiomyocyte differentiation by inhibiting the mitochondrial protein CypD.

More differentiated cells produce more cellular energy and have greater strength to contract and pump blood. This shift could help

neonatal hearts rapidly mature to meet postnatal circulatory needs, especially in newborns with congenital heart defects. However, this shift towards maturation comes at the cost of proliferation, potentially limiting the total number of cardiomyocytes formed during a critical developmental window.

Despite this tradeoff, Porter believes the benefits could outweigh the costs in critical care scenarios. "If you can get the kid through that neonatal period," he explained, "not just by giving them drugs that cause the heart to squeeze better, but by actually changing the trajectory of the cells that are there? That would be good." Supporting early maturation, he suggests, could stabilize these fragile hearts to get them through their sickest stretches. As for the long-term consequences of reduced proliferation, Porter stated that it "can be dealt with later."

Despite its promise, translating this research into treatment remains complex. Cyclosporin A, while promoting cardiomyocyte maturation, has historically been used as an immunosuppressant, posing serious health risks for already vulnerable newborns. Even non-immunosuppressive alternatives require extensive testing for safety and efficacy in neonatal contexts. Still, if a targeted therapy could safely accelerate heart maturation in the days following birth, it could change outcomes for infants with congenital heart disease, helping fragile hearts stabilize not just through surgical repair, but through cellular resilience.

'His hope is simple but bold.'

Understanding how mitochondria govern the heart's transition from fetal to postnatal life offers more than just insight — it opens doors. For Porter, the next five to 10 years are about translating this bench research to safe, targeted therapies that can guide developing hearts toward function when it matters most. His hope is simple but bold: to give fragile newborns not just a chance at survival, but a stronger start. If successful, the research Porter's lab is pioneering could change the outcomes for the tiniest hearts facing the biggest odds.

Anandkumar is a member of the Class of 2028.

Partnering with the Community to Support Children with Developmental Disorders

BY SUBAAH SYED
FEATURES EDITOR

For Dr. Suzannah Iadarola, Associate Professor of Pediatrics and Public Health at UR, research goes hand in hand with community partnership. Change doesn't only take place in the lab, but also out in communities, interacting directly with families and working with community-based institutions. Recently named the Haggerty-Friedman Professor in Developmental/Behavioral Pediatric Research in the Department of Pediatrics, Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, Iadarola incorporates inclusive approaches in healthcare for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Her work focuses on community-driven research, particularly in collaboration with people with disabilities, their families, and the networks that support them. "Disability rights and justice are part of our collective responsibility," she explained.

'Her approach is rooted in challenging ableism and the systemic biases that often underestimate the capabilities.'

Iadarola's research spans autism, cerebral palsy, and a broad range of neurodevelopmental conditions. Her approach is rooted in challenging ableism and the systemic biases that often underestimate the capabilities and needs of disabled individuals. Ableism refers to "perpetuated biases about what people with disabilities are capable of or not," Iadarola explained.

To Iadarola, the most rewarding part of her research is the collaboration inherent to her work, whether it be with the community, her trainees, or other collaborators on projects. "The field of disability [research] is relatively new, so there is a ton of evolution that is still happening that makes it an exciting place to be," Iadarola said. With this comes "a very strong sense of accountability and responsibility."

'For autistic students and others with disabilities, the challenge can be quite exacerbated.'

In the summer of 2024, the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* published a paper on the

Building Better Bridges intervention — a model developed to support autistic students transitioning to elementary and secondary schools Iadarola contributed as part of the research team. "There are significant challenges for any kid who is transitioning from school systems, [but] for autistic students and others with disabilities, the challenge can be quite exacerbated," Iadarola said. In these cases, support is needed for both the "sending and receiving team" — the sending team being the parents who send their children to school, and the receiving team being characterized as the teachers at school. However, there are not always dedicated pathways to alleviate these problems and meet the needs of the children and adults navigating through this transition.

'More than just a professional milestone — it's a deeply personal honor.'

The Building Better Bridges intervention used a coaching model that provided tailored support to families and educators. "We worked directly with parents and created highly individualized profiles for each student," Iadarola explained. The model has been implemented in locations like Rochester, Los Angeles, and Sacramento, with promising results across the country. Even throughout different locations, the themes did not differ. The collaboration between caregivers and teachers promoted children's transitions and increased caregivers' self-efficacy as well.

One of Iadarola's current projects, Mind the Gap, is a family-centered program designed for families navigating their child's new developmental diagnosis. "When families receive a diagnosis, they often do not have a lot of guidance, and families don't know how to gain access to resources," she said. Mind the Gap fills that void by offering a collection of practical tools and information. Central to the program is the use of peer navigators — experienced parents trained to support others going through similar experiences. The program includes an intentional matching process that factors in the different priorities of different families. "We asked questions and did our best to match what was most important to [the families]," Iadarola said. The program

has shown significant success, increasing parents' social support networks, reducing stress, and empowering families to take control of their children's care.

Iadarola's recent appointment to the Haggerty-Friedman Professorship is more than just a professional milestone — it's a deeply personal honor. The position was previously held by her mentor, Dr. Tristram Smith, a pioneering figure in the field of developmental and behavioral pediatrics who passed away in 2018.

"This professorship hasn't had another host since Dr. Smith passed," Iadarola said. He was a longstanding mentor and friend, and someone who truly championed community partnerships, making the professorship personally meaningful to her. "When he passed, there was ongoing research from his legacy, [so] the professorship will be able to ensure these research problems will be completed to the best extent," Iadarola said.

'It would take four very accomplished faculty members [to match] one Tristram Smith.'

"It would take four very accomplished faculty members [to match] one Tristram Smith," she said, emphasizing the profound impact of Smith's work and the legacy he left behind. Working with Smith at the start of her career is what sparked Iadarola's passion for working with children with disabilities, and part of what pushed her to continue to partner with the community and align her research with that of Smith's.

As the national conversation around health equity evolves, Iadarola remains steadfast in her research and advocacy. "Equity work has specifically been under attack," Iadarola stated. "We use terms like 'equity' and 'justice,' but what we're really talking about is health for all. I would hope that 'health for all' is non-partisan, and I have faith that the [University] will make sure health promotion remains intact."

Syed is a member of the Class of 2027.

OPINIONS

From Mourning to Fear: How the Hijacking of Social Justice Changed my Campus Experience

BY HANNA BEN AMI
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

On the morning of Oct. 7, 2023, the Palestinian militant group Hamas launched an unprecedented terror attack on Israel. Over 2,000 rockets were launched from the Gaza Strip, and thousands of Hamas fighters entered Israel in trucks, cars, and on paraglides. Almost 1,200 people were barbarically murdered, women were systematically raped, and 251 civilians were kidnapped to Gaza. Entire communities were reduced to ashes. Shockingly, these atrocities were celebrated in the streets of Gaza.

Hamas has been the sole governing body in Gaza since 2007 and has been designated a terrorist organization by the U.S., EU, and various other countries. In its original 1988 charter, Hamas expressed their belief the region should be an “Islamic land” and advocated for the “obliteration” of Israel. This same founding charter explicitly encourages the targeting and killing of Jews — a belief that was tragically put into practice on Oct. 7. Many have framed the attack as an act of resistance, and even place blame on innocent Israeli civilians. But let’s be clear: Rape and civilian hostage-taking are war crimes, strictly prohibited under international humanitarian law.

Since Oct. 7, the scariest thing I’ve heard on campus is the call for a “Student Intifada.” Many students claim to stand for peace while chanting “There is only one solution — intifada revolution” and “Globalize the intifada!” However, this is rhetoric deeply rooted in violence.

We must evaluate ideas and slogans based on their real-world applications, not just how they’re framed rhetorically. In practice, an Intifada has never been a peaceful uprising — it has been a display of violence, terror, and the targeting of Jews. The first two Intifadas took the lives of over 6,000 people, more than 800 of whom were Israeli civilians. They were marked by deadly terrorist attacks and suicide bombings against Israeli civilians on buses, in restaurants, and on city streets. Palestinian civilians also suffered during this period; over 100 were executed by the Palestine Liberation Organization and organizations connected with it for suspicion of

cooperating with Israeli forces.

Promoting such incendiary language under the guise of social justice does a disservice to the cause of peace and dangerously normalizes incitement to violence.

Jewish students should not have to live with threats of violence or feel unsafe because of their identity. It is the responsibility of the University to protect students, both from harm, and from being misled into promoting terrorist ideology. The spike in global antisemitic violence since Oct. 7 is not a coincidence — it’s a direct consequence of this kind of rhetoric. Hearing my peers support these ideas in person and on social media is not just unsettling, it’s terrifying.

Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) is not a recognized University organization despite publicly using University branding. They are neither affiliated with the University, listed on CCC, or obligated to follow official guidelines for student groups. Using UR logos on social media posts doesn’t make you an official club, it just makes you guilty of trademark infringement.

As a student, what’s most disturbing is knowing that an unrecognized Hamas-linked group can operate on campus, and even collaborate with official student organizations. SJP has been at the forefront of encouraging hate speech, including threats to Jewish and Israeli students — myself included.

The national SJP organization has been linked to Hamas through the American Muslims for Palestine Organization (AMP). AMP has been at the forefront of expanding SJP’s collegiate presence and is tied to Hamas themselves. In a letter from Senator Bill Cassidy, the chair of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, the senator calls into question AMP for their connections to Hamas. It’s not a stretch to suggest that the campus presence of SJP has a connection to Hamas in some way.

Aside from SJP, an opinion article published in *Campus Times* presents some uncalled-for anti-Israel opinions. One example of this is the article, “Israel Week Promotes Nationalism Within Our Jewish Life on Campus.”

Following the UR’s annual Israel Week 2024, the article sought to diminish and misrepresent Israeli culture and identity. Despite not attending the majority of the events, the student authors deemed it appropriate to label the efforts of Rochester Students for Israel (a group I am a member of) as propaganda and accuse us of promoting nationalist rhetoric. Their portrayal not only diminished the intent behind Israel Week — which was to celebrate culture, history, and community — but also villainized those who participated and organized it. I couldn’t be more proud to be Israeli. Smearing someone based on national origin is bigoted and illegal in the U.S.

Like much of Israeli society, Israeli culture is shaped by the traditions of diasporic Jews. It is also shaped by the millions of non-Jewish citizens whose cultures are also deeply interwoven into the broader fabric of Israeli life — something we proudly highlighted and celebrated during Israel Week.

There are many cultural overlaps between Jewish and Arab-Muslim communities in the Middle East, just as there are shared elements between Arab culture and other ethnic and religious minorities in the region. In fact, the majority of Jews in Israel fall into the category of Mizrahi or Sefardic, who are Jews who have immigrated from surrounding Middle Eastern/North African countries. To suggest that Israel is somehow unworthy of a cultural identity, simply because it is a predominantly Jewish country, is antisemitic. Denying the existence and legitimacy of Israeli culture silences an entire people and erases the rich, complex history that defines them. Thus, the notion that Israelis have no culture, or no right to express that culture on this campus, is not just discriminatory — it is rooted in ignorance, and frankly, racism.

Diminishing the cultures of other students on campus will not improve the lives of anyone in the Middle East. Repeating violent rhetoric

and aligning with terror groups like Hamas also does nothing to advance peace. In fact, such actions have only, and will only deepen the suffering of the Palestinian people. These cycles of violence hinder any chance of meaningful dialogue or reconciliation.

The University cannot resolve the conflict in the Middle East. What it can and should do is ensure academic neutrality, freedom, and respect for students of all religions and ethnicities, and encourage healthy and diverse viewpoints.

As students, we must also take responsibility. We should strive to build bridges, not walls, between our peers. If we truly want to pursue peace abroad, let’s first create peace on our own campus.

Editor’s Note: The digital version of this article (on campustimes.org) includes hyperlinked sources.

Ben Ami is a member of the Class of 2025.

Campus Times

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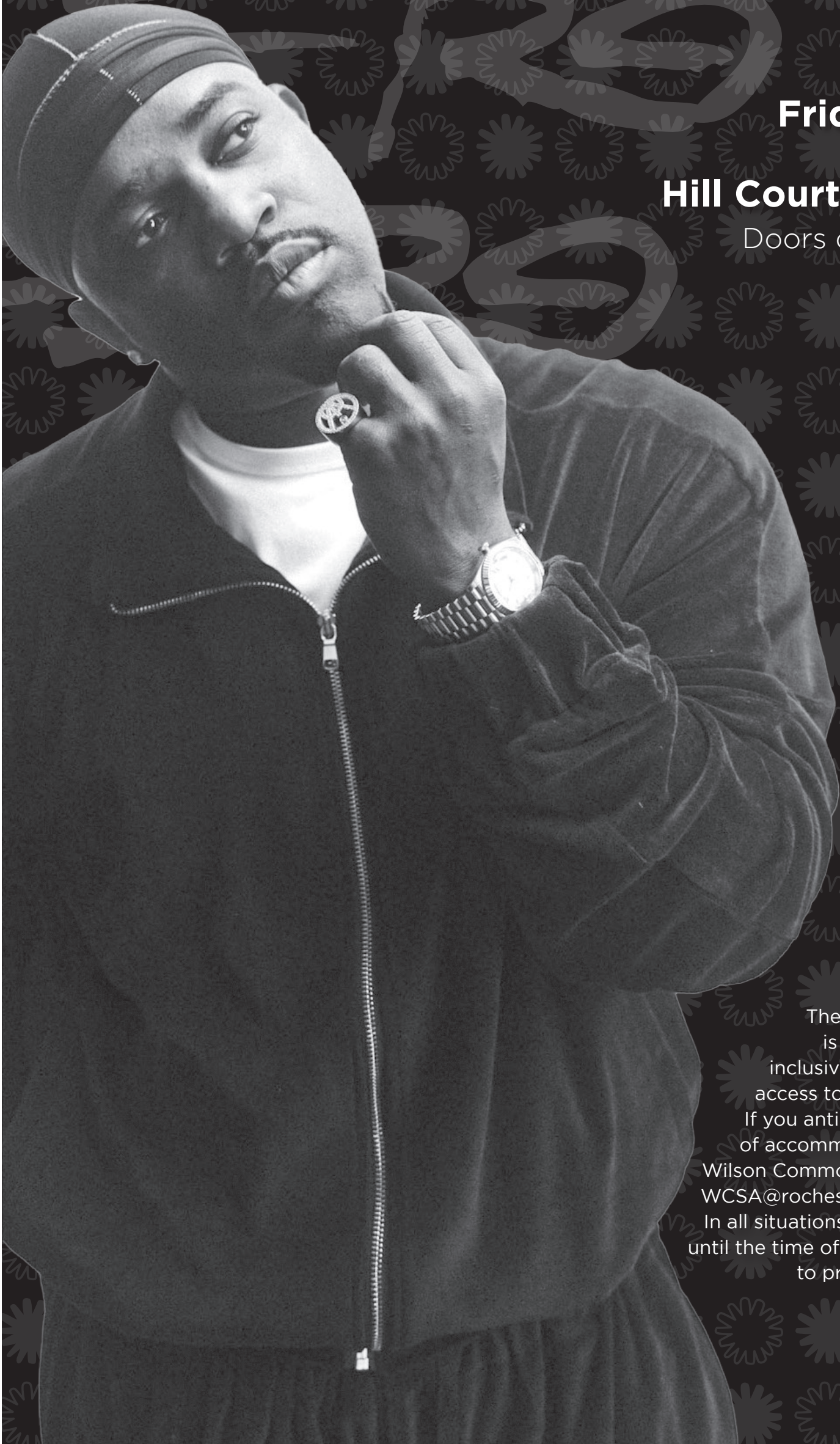
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It is our policy to correct all erroneous information as quickly as possible. If you believe you have a correction, please email CT_editor@u.rochester.edu.

Editor’s note: We misspecified the positions Nicole Sampson held prior to becoming the Provost at UR in the March 26 print. In addition to the position stated in the article, Sampson was also Dean of School of Arts and Sciences at UR.

Springfest Weekend

FIRE



Friday, April 25
8 p.m. EDT
Hill Court Parking Lot
Doors open @ 6:30 pm

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Sex & the CT: Vaginismus Edition



BRIDGET TOKIWA / SENIOR STAFF

BY MARIAH LANSING
COLUMNIST

Anonymous, a 22-year-old straight female asks: “Vaginismus: let’s talk about it! It’s a really hard issue, especially when your bf REALLY wants to have sex with you...”

Dear Anonymous, thank you for your request! Admittedly, I was not very well-informed about vaginismus and its treatments until I took the time to look into it at your behest. Now, I agree that this information is vital for sexually-active college students to have.

Vaginismus, according to most peer-reviewed medical sources, is a condition when the muscles of the vagina involuntarily contract upon penetration. This response, which is not something the individual can control, can lead to pain during penetrative sexual intercourse. Vaginismus causes dyspareunia, the medical term for painful intercourse. Vaginismus differs from other types of sexual dysfunction in that there is no physical sign of why the person is experiencing contractions.

Sometimes this pain can make it difficult to insert tampons and receive gynecological exams. For many people with vaginismus, not being able to have sex without

experiencing pain causes a lot of distress. It can be a burden, especially if they already feel pressure to perform sexually.

The cause of vaginismus is unknown, and variable between each individual’s narrative. Medical journals say vaginismus could be caused by a traumatic assault or unwanted sexual contact, an injury caused during childbirth, social stigma surrounding women’s sexuality, or even anxiety. Vaginismus is typically considered to be more of a psychological dysfunction than a somatic dysfunction, meaning the person’s body is likely reacting automatically to stimuli it perceives as a threat.

‘Vaginismus is typically considered to be more of a psychological dysfunction than a somatic dysfunction.’

The most likely reason we don’t have more definitive answers of what vaginismus is, how it starts, and why it happens is that there is very little published, vetted research on the subject. A comprehensive study by the National Institute of Health concluded that it is difficult to pinpoint the best treatment for vaginismus because no existing study has enough reliable data extracted from a satisfactory sample size due

to the “heterogeneity of comparisons within the studies” and an “inadequate reporting of data.”

While the formal diagnosis rate of vaginismus is low, medical professionals believe more women, who are not comfortable bringing up the subject with their doctors, could struggle with the condition. Sexual topics are taboo, especially for women who have grown up in environments where sex, particularly before marriage, is seen as a moral failing.

If you, like Anonymous, suspect that you have vaginismus, the first best step would be to mention your concerns to your gynecologist. They might perform a physical examination to ensure that there aren’t any noticeable injuries or alternative reasons for involuntary pelvic muscle contractions. From there, your provider may have a few suggestions for treatment.

Common forms of treatment for vaginismus are sex therapy (either solo or with your partner), pelvic floor physical therapy, education, and systematic desensitization. The last form, systematic desensitization, is a very scary looking phrase that means getting your vaginal canal used to the stimulus of penetration in a controlled environment. This can be done with a finger or with a tool called a dilator. These long, silicone tools look similar to

dildos, but come in progressive widths and lengths to allow the user to work up to penetration for larger objects, like a penis.

While I wouldn’t recommend this for more sensitive issues, I found that the subreddit r/vaginismus is full of various experiences from people who have dealt with the condition themselves.

Anonymous, the only concern I have with your submission is that you mentioned vaginismus is really hard to deal with, “especially when your bf REALLY wants to have sex with you.” It’s all fine and dandy that your boyfriend wants to have sex — but do *you*? Do you feel pressured to have sex even when it is painful or uncomfortable? Because that will not help alleviate the symptoms of vaginismus.

‘Sex should be fun and pleasurable, not something that you dread because it hurts.’

When it comes to overcoming a challenge in sexual intercourse such as vaginismus, it is really important that the person with the condition is supported and does not feel pressured to do anything that is *painful*. Sex should be fun and pleasurable, not something that you dread because it hurts.

This is not to say women

who have vaginismus do not feel desire — it’s actually quite the opposite. Vaginismus does not hinder a woman’s sexual desire unless she feels extremely nervous about the pain she expects to experience during sex. Women who have vaginismus often *do* want to have sex, but can’t due to their condition making it painful.

Overcoming vaginismus is likely going to be a time commitment for the person who has it. Treating vaginismus requires a lot of patience and grace with yourself; it won’t go away overnight, and being hard on yourself will likely only make your symptoms more persistent. And if your partner can’t handle going without penetrative sex, the onus is on *them* to communicate that and collaborate with you to find a way to meet their needs.

Vaginismus can be incredibly difficult to deal with, but treatment is available. The most important thing is that we have open dialogues about vaginismus. Hopefully, this can lead to more comprehensive studies and more avenues of treatment becoming available. Ultimately, this can reduce the stigma surrounding dyspareunia and painful intercourse, in turn making it easier for women to get help for this issue.

Lansing is a member of the Class of 2025.

‘Great Comet’ Shot Too Close to the Sun

BY ELAINE WU
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Marketed as an “electropop opera,” Dave Malloy’s “Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812” is, much like its source material, a challenge — one recently tackled by UR’s International Theatre Program. Ripped from the eighth book of Leo Tolstoy’s “War and Peace,” “Great Comet” details the stories of two Russian aristocrats: Pierre Bezukhov (Eastman first-year Jordan Oney), who undergoes an internal crisis worsened by a lack of support from his wife Hélène (first-year Annabel Barker) and other peers, and Natasha Rostova (junior Annika Almquist), who longs for her fiancé Andrey (senior Gabriel Pierce) after he goes off to war. Behind the lush orchestration, entrancing score, and fanciful plot lies a simple yet transcendent tale of hope, love, and rebirth, showing that one can still rebuild their life even when they think it is over.

While UR’s production of “Great Comet” stunned as expected, I left the show with decidedly mixed opinions surrounding their unique interpretation of the source material.

When I entered the black-box in the Sloan Performing Arts Center, I was met with an incredibly immersive room complete with a bar and couches. I will avoid spoiling too much about the show (as it will be returning next weekend), but the set felt as if it was truly inhabited by the actors. This feeling of immersion only increased as the show began with its dazzling opener “Prologue,” which solidified for me that the production was going to be something special. The show

kicks off with a dizzying pace, perhaps too dizzying. For the first time, I realized how fast “Great Comet”’s first act is.

Regardless, the performances were excellent all-around. Oney nailed the character’s debilitating internal battle with himself, and Almquist as Natasha sold the role of a young ingenue longing for her fiancé. Some members of the cast played instruments, at times while singing, a feat which I can’t imagine the needed skill and practice to complete. The instrumental backing, played by the pit band on the upstairs mezzanine, was well done and sounded much like the original cast album. I’d also like to shout out the incredibly energetic ensemble moments, which were an absolute standout. It should be noted that since many of the lyrics are taken straight from Tolstoy’s prose, the characters often narrate their actions like in a book, which may be a turn-off for some audience members.

The staging throughout “Great Comet” was creative and impressive. While there were many wonderful elements to rave about, I particularly loved the usage of a disco ball that showed up during important emotional numbers. Taking the fullest advantage of the small venue at Sloan, the disco ball set piece elevated UR’s production of “Great Comet” to heights greater than the original production, which used a chandelier instead. Lighting, in general, was utilized exceptionally well to heighten emotion.

Yet while most elements of the staging and blocking worked, one elicited mixed reactions from me. At the end of Act I, rolling gurney

platforms were introduced and then utilized throughout most of Act II. Though there were times when these rolling platforms added to the scene, in others they seemed somewhat gimmicky. Additionally, in certain scenes when the platforms were used, lights turned on for what I assume were safety reasons, which had the unfortunate effect of breaking my immersion. Even with the lights on, I had my doubts on whether the platforms were safe for the actors; whenever someone jumped on one, it shook. While I did not think the rewards were worth the costs, I’ll still give points for creativity.

Now it’s time to talk about the premise of this production. Unlike the original production, which was set in a posh Russian dinner club-inspired setting, the Theatre Program’s “Great Comet” took place in what looked to be modern war-torn Ukraine. The set heavily evoked Ukraine, containing war propaganda and distinctly Ukrainian references. Costumes also reflected modern military clothing.

Setting “Great Comet” in Ukraine is a risky move. “Great Comet” is an explicitly Russian-inspired show that cannot be removed from this context. The music is inspired by Russian folk music, there are lyrical references to Moscow and Petersburg, Russian customs are invoked, and the characters even at times sing in Russian. Therefore, having characters in a Ukrainian setting perform this Russian show is a strange decision, especially when considering the ongoing Ukrainian backlash against Russian culture in real life in response to Russian denial of Ukrainian identity. While the

director’s note acknowledged a similar nationalist sentiment during Napoleonic conquest in regards to Russian backlash against French culture, I found that this explanation was insufficient in explaining why Ukrainians were telling a story inherent to Russian culture.

Because “Great Comet” and its source material are originally set during the Napoleonic Wars, the choice of setting also served to create parallels between Napoleon and Putin, who are both egomaniacal conquerors in a sense. But that parallel also seems mismatched: While Russia was defending against Napoleon at the time “War and Peace” took place, Putin’s Russia is now on the offensive in 2025. Thus, it seems awkward when a Ukrainian pretending to be a Russian aristocrat criticizes Napoleon/Putin.

I can, to an extent, understand where this rendition of “Great Comet” is coming from. In 2017, the Broadway revival of “Once on This Island” had a similar directorial concept wherein the premise was connected to current events. “Once on This Island,” which is set in the French Antilles and based on the original “The Little Mermaid” fairytale, was originally framed as a story told to a little girl on an unnamed island who is scared after a thunderstorm. In the 2017 revival, the creative team modeled the premise on Haiti after a 2016 hurricane, transforming the stage into a storm-devastated beach complete with windswept debris and sand. Furthermore, the characters wore makeshift costumes that reinforced the main theme of regular people telling stories. This revival

was praised by critics for addressing timely events.

In theory, “Great Comet” would have been a great vehicle for similar messaging; after all, the characters in the show constantly remind the audience that they are telling a story, and they even play their own instruments. However, this wartime-inspired concept cannot be applied as readily due to the differing historical context mentioned above. Instead, it comes across as Ukrainians telling a Russian story, which doesn’t make sense.

Overall, I struggle to understand what this production of “Great Comet” brings to the table that justifies putting it in a political context, as the message the production wants to convey with its Ukraine setting clashes with the material given by the original script. I think the show is strong enough to stand on its own without needing to make it explicitly political — if anything, politics have the potential to distract from and dilute its simple themes of hope, rebirth, and the universality of the human experience.

Putting politics aside, “Great Comet” is a high-quality production with plenty to look forward to, and I thoroughly enjoyed it as a whole. In terms of performances and technical aspects, the show remains an excellent piece of student theatre. “Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812” is running at the Sloan Performing Arts Center until April 25, with free tickets for students at the door.

Wu is a member of the Class of 2027.

Jason Momoa Performs Humiliation Ritual in the Form of ‘A Minecraft Movie’

BY RILEY HOWE
STAFF WRITER

Readers, I’m going to do my very best to write this review, but you’ll have to forgive me if it isn’t my best work: I estimate that a third of my brain cells were massacred during my first viewing of “A Minecraft Movie,” and another third bit the dust the second time around. Can I sue Jared Hess or something? I mean, thank god I’m not premed anymore. Let’s not even try to imagine the damage I’d do down the line to whatever poor soul was under my scalpel after that two-hundred-minute fever dream (in 3D, no less).

“A Minecraft Movie” is

directed by the aforementioned Jared Hess, who (along with his wife Jerusha Hess) delivered such classics as “Napoleon Dynamite” and “Nacho Libre.” Hess brings the movie’s titular sandbox game to the big screen with the sort of avant-garde whimsy that only a lifelong Mormon can provide: I’m vaguely in awe of the kind of brain that can write dialogue like this while dead sober and uncaffeinated.

Furthermore, the film stars a frankly bizarre cast of characters; including Jack Black as an erratic version of Minecraft’s default avatar, Steve, Jason Momoa in a pink leather jacket, Danielle

Brooks (who I actually don’t even have a snide comment about), and two of the most boring child actors of all time. Oh, and we can’t forget Jennifer Coolidge and her vil-lager meet-cute side plot.

The standout character here is Jason Momoa, not because of any aptitude as an actor but rather because his performance evoked a rapt attention in me that is typically only inspired by car crashes. Genuinely, I have never said this before in my life, but I truly believe this movie may have been a humiliation ritual of some sort. It was so base and abject that, eventually, around the one hour mark of the first viewing, my disdain

started to mutate into a sexual objectification so gripping I was forced to reevaluate the depth of my famed sadistic streak. For reference, I recently swooned over a scene of a man drinking large quantities of blood so quickly I thought he was about to vomit like he pushed Thanksgiving too far (hot?), and what this movie did to Jason Momoa still tested my limits.

As a whole, this movie was bad in about every way a movie can possibly be bad. Its writing was frankly incomprehensible, its CGI was disturbing, and the vast majority of its characters were almost intolerably insufferable. However, I’m not

quite pretentious enough to pretend the purpose of “A Minecraft Movie” is to provide a great work of art to an adult population of English majors: Obviously, it’s a blockbuster product selling nostalgia in return for Jack Black figurines and pink stuffed sheep revenue. Maybe that’s what’s disappointing about it: I simply didn’t feel that much nostalgia.

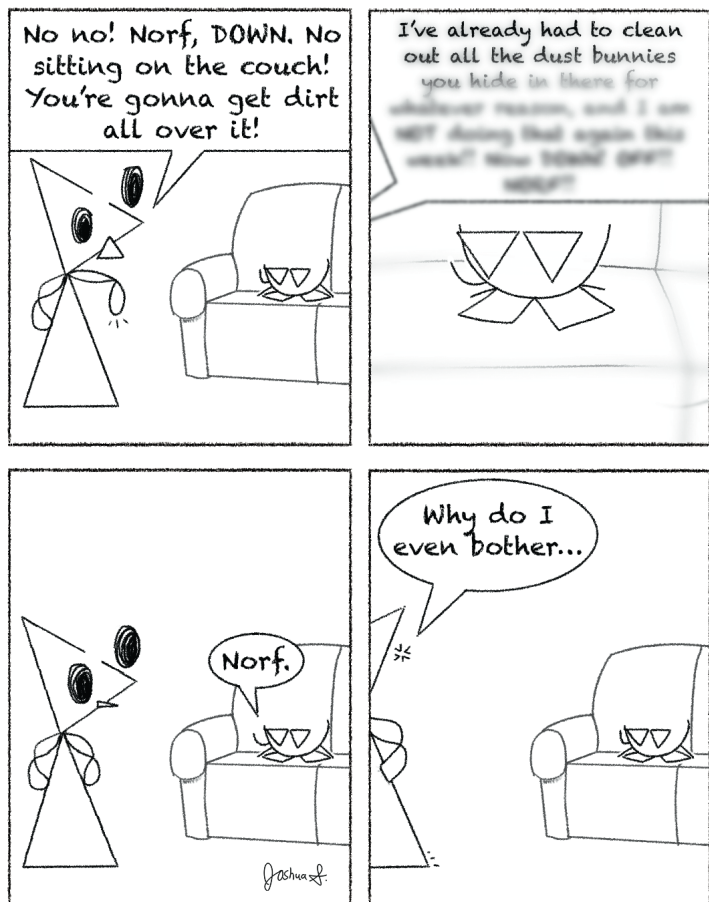
Read the rest of this article online at www.campustimes.org.

Howe is a member of the Class of 2026.

HUMOR

Papercuts: Pets

BY JOSHUA SCHIAVI
STAFF WRITER



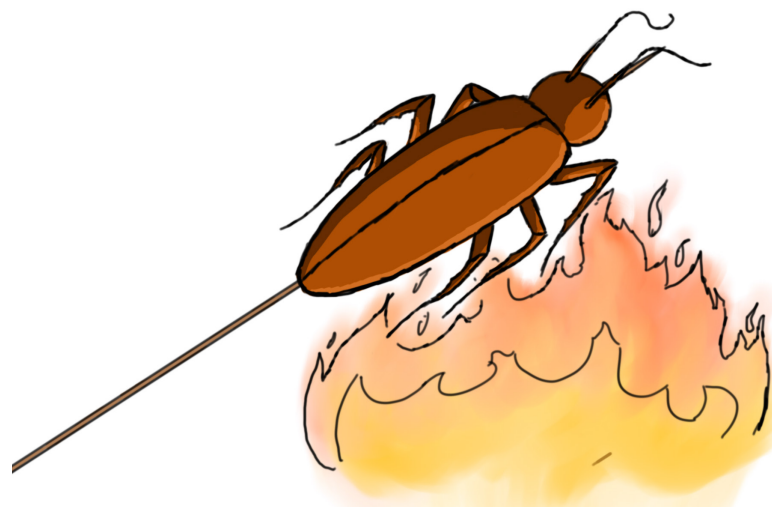
Roachester's New Delicacy

BY GABRIEL JIANG
HUMOR EDITOR

Do you feel like your meal plan isn't giving you enough food to live off of, or just that you're no longer satisfied with the food options in the dining halls? Well, let me tell you — it's your lucky day. A new popular food is spreading around the River Campus, and the supply is not expected to run out anytime soon. This new food, exploding in popularity, is bugs — specifically roaches.

'This new food with exploding popularity is *Periplaneta Americana*: the American Cockroach.'

If you've stepped in a dorm (or any building on campus), you probably have been graced with the presence of such a delicacy — or maybe it's been so long that you chose to forget about those times. Now, it's common practice to catch these roaches and flame grill them over an open fire in the middle of Wilson Quadrangle. With the light seasoning of salt and pepper, the flavors of these little critters hit like that childhood memory of Kumon work. The extra crunch they come with brings out the fresh taste



GABRIEL JIANG / HUMOR EDITOR

even more. Bonus: They're also high in protein.

'The new shipment of beetles for the BIOL-099 lab will definitely tickle those brain wrinkles of yours.'

If freshly-caught roaches right from the source aren't quite your style, the new shipment of beetles for the BIOL-099 lab will definitely tickle those brain wrinkles of yours. They're small and just the right size to pack and travel with. The small crunch they produce is instantly followed by a wave of juiciness unlike all else. With the high reproduction rate of these beetles, it'll be impossible for you to be

lacking food.

Now, the next time you get charged by a roach after entering Simon Business School or have to play with way-too-small beetles, just scoop them up with your hand, roast them, and now you have a perfect meal to enjoy.

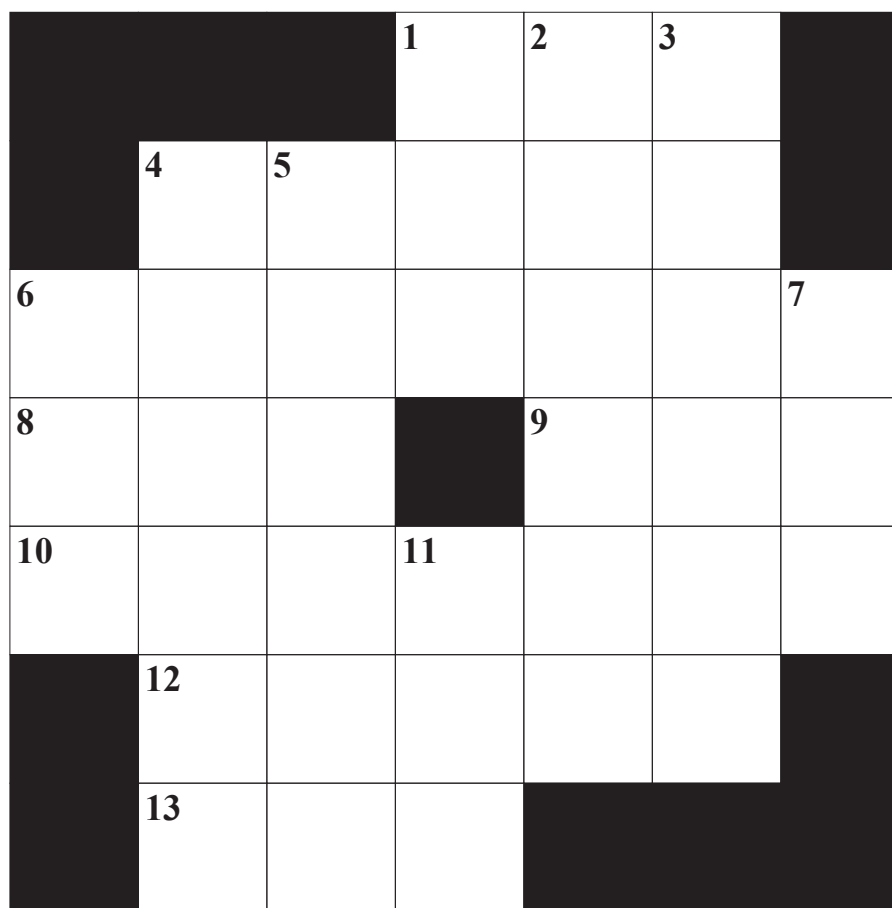
Jiang is a member of the Class of 2028.

Weed Between the Lines

BY CALEB OSHINSKY
STAFF PUZZLER

- ACROSS**
- 1 *Flower?
 - 4 Courtroom transcriber
 - 6 _____ aces makes a stellar poker hand
 - 8 Quarterback Manning
 - 9 Independent fiscal watchdog in the UK, or an anagram for ROB
 - 10 The toe of Italy's "boot", in Italy
 - 12 Cello opening
 - 13 *Quality flower?

- DOWN**
- 1 "___ Mir Bist Du Schoen": Andrews Sisters hit
 - 2 Spread out, as a yoga mat
 - 3 *Grass joint?
 - 4 *Jazz cigarette?
 - 5 "Meditation in motion" you might see in the park



6 UR music technology org, or an anagram for SEA

7 ___ Diavolo, or an anagram for ARF

11 Suffix with super or infer

Correction

BY KATIE JARVIS
COPY CHIEF

In the April 1 edition of the *ClemenTimes*, a bias disclosure incorrectly stated that (former) copy chief Katie Jarvis was born to an English citizen. The former copy chief's mother contacted Jarvis in the family group chat this past week to inform her that there is "no such thing as an English citizen" and that she is instead a "British citizen." Jarvis' sister joined in the conversation stating "this is [an] embarrassing mistake to print," and further alleging that Jarvis does not have "strong opinions about tea," and that she "[doesn't] even drink it with milk."

These are serious accusations and measures will be taken to ensure that such an error does not happen again. As punishment, Jarvis will be forced to retract her resignation and will be reinstated as Copy Chief for the remainder of her term.

Jarvis is a member of the Class of 2026 (T5).