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**SAN ANTONIO**

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CELEBRATING OUR A&M-SAN ANTONIO ALUMNI!

**ALUMNI FIRST RESPONDERS**

Inspiring! The profiles of the Jaguars you are about to read are simply inspiring. Not only are these alumni first responders facing danger and unpredictability almost daily, they are also stellar parents, outstanding teachers, award winners, and remarkable students. In addition, they all have some interesting hobbies. All five alumni featured in this Spring 2022 Alumni Update are excellent examples of the grit, perseverance, and audaciousness of the entire alumni network.

# Lyndi Atkins



## BACHELOR OF APPLIED ARTS AND SCIENCES-2021

If you think the fire service industry is a strictly male domain, you haven't met Lyndi Atkins '21.

Lyndi grew up in Pearland, TX, with a mother and father who were both police officers, and her dad retired as police chief. She credits them as her major influence. She also has a sister who holds a degree in wildlife and fisheries from Texas A&M. As a child, Lyndi wanted to be a veterinarian, "but what kid doesn't," she laughs. As she grew up she realized that helping others was her calling.

She entered the fire service in 2006, where she encountered people who would look at her skeptically and think "she's just a girl" or "oh, a girl firefighter." But she dismisses such thoughts or comments and remains dedicated to a career in fire service and proud of her ability to handle a demanding and dangerous job.

Since 2013, Lyndi has been with the Harris County Fire Marshal's Office, where she is a hazardous materials specialist. She works on the duty crew at Sheldon Fire Department and part time for the Fort Bend County Fire Marshal's Office on the hazmat team. Her work revolves around responding to all hazardous material calls within Harris and the surrounding counties. Although undaunted by the dangers of handling hazardous material, she says the pandemic has made her job "a bit nerve wracking." She's vaccinated but still concerned she could get Covid-19 due to her exposure to the public.

In 2021, Lyndi earned her B.A.A.S. in fire administration at Texas A&M University-San Antonio, maintaining a 4.0 GPA and graduating summa cum laude. She was also honored as an Outstanding Senior and is currently almost finished with a master's program at the University of Texas-Permian Basin. She hopes to receive her M.P.A. in June. Her 10-15-year goal is to become a fire chief



in the Houston area or possibly a city manager who will be 100 percent pro the fire/EMS service and support those divisions to give emergency responders everything they need to keep the citizens safe.

Currently, working and going to school leaves her with virtually no free time, but when she finishes, she will take up the leisure pastimes she enjoys most—attending concerts, traveling, and going fishing and hunting. Her current companions are her two “four-legged children” Shelby Jo, a 6-year-old Texas Red Heeler, and Waylon, a 6-month-old “Cowboy Corgi,” which she describes as half Texas Blue Heeler and half corgi.

It was a great friend and mentor who talked her into going back to school to obtain her degree and continue with the master’s program. “Without his influence in my life, encouraging me toward higher education and why it is important in our field, I would not be where I am today. Thank you, Chief McMahan, for believing in me.”





# Manuel Casarez

## BACHELOR OF APPLIED ARTS AND SCIENCES-2015

After graduating from St. Anthony Catholic High School in 2000, Manuel Casarez '15, who had believed a university degree was not an option for him, was unsure of what to do next. But having married early, he knew that he couldn't waste any time.

With no specific goal in mind, he enrolled at San Antonio College (SAC). "I had to start somewhere," he says, "and my major changed multiple times." Indeed, between 2001 and 2010 he accumulated some 90 credit hours and, inspired by a childhood friend, ended up graduating with an A.A.S. in fire science. He went on to earn numerous fire or emergency management certifications. Having discovered an aptitude for teaching, he stayed on at SAC as a part-time adjunct instructor. In that capacity, he learned about the new Fire and Emergency Services Administration (FESA) program that had been established at Texas A&M University-San Antonio. "I knew if I wanted to teach A.A.S. degree courses, I would have to earn that degree," he recalls.

While working full-time and supporting a wife in nursing school and four children, he enrolled at Texas A&M University-San Antonio and admits it was a struggle. However, he earned a B.A.A.S., graduated magna cum laude in fall 2015 and went on to Texas State University to become a certified public manager. "In doing so, I not only got the education I needed to teach more, but it just worked out that now I was qualified to apply to be fire chief at Universal City.

Manuel had started out as a volunteer firefighter in 2004 for the Universal City Fire Department and was hired full time in 2006. He was promoted to Lieutenant in 2007, received Firefighter of the Year honors from VFW in 2007, was named Fire Officer of the Year in 2013 and 2014 and, ultimately, promoted to fire chief in 2016, his current position.

As Fire Chief, Manuel's responsibilities are normally largely administrative and include planning, finance, emergency management coordination, hiring, and setting policy among other duties. However, he reports that the pandemic has totally changed his work because it has placed him in "a different state of readiness." He is dealing with not only the pandemic-related emergency responses but also with the health and safety of his responders, their families, and community they serve. He says being fire chief has tested his grit and perseverance, especially regarding personnel matters that have occasionally backed him into uncomfortable corners. "However," he continues, "my education at A&M-San Antonio and training have given me all the tools I needed to persevere."

According to the Universal City manager, Manuel has done a tremendous job. "He took over a fire department that was siloed and had not had any significant changes in many years," he explains. "With tact and diplomacy, he was able to mold the operations to embrace new procedures, install new technologies, and most importantly, to get his firefighters to see themselves not as a stand-alone department, but as a fully integrated component of the overall operations of the city. The culture change has been profound."

Thanks to his finely honed leadership skills and strong educational background, Manuel became an inaugural member of the Universal City Leadership Lab, a group of upcoming local leaders who spend time reading, discussing, and enacting a broad spectrum of thought and behavioral practices into municipal government. His example of life-long learning has also filtered to his firefighters to whom he makes the books he has read available, encouraging them to become life-long learners as well. He remains active in a number of state and local professional fire service organizations and served nine years as president of the Universal City Professional Firefighters Association local 4073. During his tenure, he organized golf tournaments and a pancake breakfast twice a year to raise funds for the community.

Manuel spends most of his free time with his children but says travel also plays a large part in his life, calling it a great stress reliever. He also enjoys projects at home that include woodworking and remodeling. While his future may be a little uncertain, he is not without aspirations. He has goals he'd like to achieve as fire chief and hopes to attain a certain level of job satisfaction before reaching retirement. At age 39, he is also considering law school as a possible transition into a new career. Another goal is to teach courses at A&M-San Antonio. "The most important thing is to remember that when you continue to challenge yourself and learn new things, you build a toolbox that can carry you through anything life throws at you."

# Nathan Gershon



## BACHELOR OF APPLIED ARTS AND SCIENCES-2014

As a young boy, Nathan Gershon '14 showed little promise. As it turned out, there was no need to worry. He ended up with lots of education, three very different careers, and his youthful dreams fulfilled.

Raised by his grandparents in Houston, he did not do well in school. After flunking 6<sup>th</sup> grade, they sent him to San Marcos Academy in San Marcos, TX, a place he considers his hometown. His ambition at the time was “to be a pilot or figure out how to be rich and have lots of free time to do car and motorcycle stuff.” One credit short at high school graduation, he opted to get a GED instead of summer school because “it was quicker.”

He went to college, studied physics, worked in research and development, and then marketing for an industrial company. Along the way, he got a U.S. patent for a wind tunnel design for indoor skydiving. He moved to San Antonio where he tried his hand at several businesses, “some more successful than others,” married his first wife and had a daughter, now 17.

Divorced and depressed at age 28, Nathan set about rebuilding his life. Having been a volunteer fireman with several friends at age 16, he had observed that “firefighters had to sit around and wait for stuff to happen, while cops could go out and find stuff to do.” Naturally, he wanted to be a policeman in San Marcos. While at the Police Academy at San Antonio College (SAC), he discovered that his classes there would count toward an A.A. Thinking “Why not?” he did earn that degree as well. He also met his current wife, who had just started medical school. That precipitated a change of plans.

He began applying to law enforcement agencies in San Antonio, but the city of La Vernia hired him first. At the time, he'd never heard of Texas A&M University-

San Antonio, but is glad he finally did. He discovered that the University would give him credit for his SAC degree and Police Academy work as well as accept credits from all the colleges he had attended previously. He enrolled and despite a tight schedule—“sometimes I had to attend class in uniform”—he earned his B.A.A.S. and graduated cum laude in 2014.

When his wife finished medical school, they moved to Boston and later Jackson, MS to accommodate her residency training. In Boston, he applied to graduate school and made it into the Harvard journalism program. He completed a master's there in 2016 and earned a certificate in legal studies. The move to Jackson was a different story. “My world crashed around me. There was nothing for me to do there,” he explains.

Struggling to find a place in his wife's new “doctor life,” he decided to “chase acting.” He had always wanted to be a “movie star,” and says the “bug” had never left him. Forty-years-old and miserable in Mississippi with nothing to do, he had nothing to lose if he tried. Nathan reached out to everyone he knew in the film industry and eventually landed a small part—“a single line and some camera time in other scenes”—in a movie being made in Houston called *Life Insurance Lottery*. It's available on Amazon Prime. That led to a larger role in a film being made in Los Angeles. His delight was short lived as the movie was never made. “That was crushing. My new movie career seemed over as fast as it had started,” he says. Then the phone rang and he was offered a co-starring role in a B horror movie (*Robo Woman*), which is also streaming on Amazon. The roles started coming, and he is scheduled to star in three movies due out in 2022 or 2023. He also has a small role in the Richard Linklater movie called *Apollo 10 ½* with Jack Black.

Today, he and his wife live in Corpus Christi, where she is a board-certified radiologist and partner/co-owner of Radiology Associates LLC and will finish her M.B.A. this summer. “She is amazing, and we support each other in our very different lives,” he says. He now lists his occupations as patrolman and “designated sniper” for the city of La Vernia, film and television actor, and public affairs officer for the Commemorative Air Force (CAF), the largest flying museum in the world. When not engaged with any of those pursuits, he is an avid racquetball and billiards player who “plays bass guitar poorly” and enjoys doing “anything related to cars, motorcycles, and planes.” He is a pilot but not yet qualified to fly any of CAF's planes, but says, “I will one day.”



# Richard Mann

## BACHELOR OF APPLIED ARTS AND SCIENCES-2021

Despite having his early dreams dashed, Richard Mann '21 considers himself lucky. "I get paid for doing what I love," he says. And what he loves is serving in the fire service industry.

Growing up in a rural community outside Topeka, KS, Richard aspired to be the first in his family to attend college. At age 15, his family's financial reversal made that impossible. Several years of working odd jobs enabled him to save enough to start college at the University of Kansas, with dreams of medical school and becoming a pediatrician. Although he worked as a janitor for two years while in college, the money eventually ran out, along with the realization that medical school was no longer a possibility. However, he was not totally disheartened.

While volunteering at the American Red Cross, he met the woman who would become his wife. When she accepted an offer with the Houston Red Cross and moved, he finished his second year, then joined her in Texas in May 1986. That summer, he enrolled at Houston Community College in the Emergency Medical Technician program, which set him on a "life-long career path in fire service." He earned certifications in EMT, Paramedic, and Structural Firefighting in preparation for his dream job: joining the Houston Fire Department (HFD).

For the next 31-plus years, Richard worked with "amazing and selfless individuals," ultimately becoming HFD executive assistant fire chief in 2012. Because promotions were based on testing, seniority, and certification, he focused on those areas, forgoing any thought of finishing college.

That changed in the fall of 2017.



Richard applied for the position of Fire Chief of the College Station Fire Department, assuming his extensive experience would make him a strong candidate. He did not even get an interview. When he saw the list of finalists, it became apparent that the top job in any fire department would always go to someone with a college degree. Again, his disappointment didn't last long.

In 2018, Texas A&M University–San Antonio professor Butch Miller came to the HFD to promote the University's new Fire Emergency Service Administration (FESA) program. Intrigued and inspired, Richard decided to go back and finish what he had started in 1984. When the same Fire Chief position opened up again in 2019, Richard re-applied. This time his extensive experience, coupled with his commitment to finish his degree landed him the job. He retired from the HFD in 2020 and began his new job in May 2020 amid the Covid-19 pandemic. He finished the FESA program at A&M–San Antonio and graduated summa cum laude in May 2021, where he was selected Outstanding Senior. “For me, they should have called it the Outstanding Senior Citizen Award,” he says with an impish grin.

Married for almost 35 years, Richard says his family, which includes two adult sons, keeps him grounded. He loves anything outdoors—hunting, diving, snow skiing, and building things. With the help of his wife and two sons, both of whom are in the construction industry, he built a small house on property he owns in Brazos Valley. It's become a weekend retreat as well as a popular Airbnb destination. They are also beekeepers, although, he insists, “I'm just the hired muscle for my wife who is the queen bee.”

Starting a new career at a time many people are considering retirement has been a breath of fresh air and it has reinvigorated and reenergized him. Noting that his profession has changed dramatically since Sept. 11, 2001, his goals now are on developing the next generation of fire service leaders. He plans to continue “as long as I am able to contribute to the success of the organization, make it better, and continue to enjoy doing it.” He's also looking forward to his next new job—becoming a grandparent. “One day I may decide to hang my helmet up for the last time, but for right now, I've still got a few good miles left.”

# Brian Vera



## BACHELOR OF APPLIED ARTS AND SCIENCES-2016

Initially, college just wasn't for Brian Vera '16. Until it really was. His journey as a non-traditional student is a successful and very relatable one and will inspire other late comers to academia.

Brian grew up on San Antonio's South Side, near Palo Alto College. He graduated from Holy Cross High School, where he was an unmotivated student admitting he only "did what I had to do to get by." Inspired in part by his grandfather, who with only a 5<sup>th</sup> grade education, had started a coin operating business with his father that is still in business, he chose to enter the work force instead of furthering his education.

It was not until he married, and his wife was expecting their first child, that he realized he needed to do more. He had occasionally thought about becoming a police officer, but never thought he could do it. "I did not have the right mindset at the time," he explains. Considering his new responsibilities, Brian applied to the Alamo Area Council of Governments Police Academy and was accepted. He attended the Police Academy while continuing to work full time and supporting his pregnant wife. It was tough and stressful, but he persevered.

Once he became a police officer, Brian quickly noticed that having a degree put one on a faster track to move through the ranks. He enrolled at Palo Alto College and earned an associate degree in criminal justice in 2014. It was at this point that he and his wife learned their young son had a mental disability. "We decided that we needed to do everything we could to help him throughout his life," he says. "Texas A&M University-San Antonio was an easy choice. The convenience of having the University in my back yard allowed me to attend in person and online while maintaining a full-time job and family." The couple enrolled in the University together and both earned their degrees—his a



B.A.A.S. in criminology and his wife Stephanie's a B.A.A.S. in general business. In 2016 they walked across the stage together and were recognized as husband and wife, "which was cool," he remembers proudly.

Brian had worked for 13 years as a community resource officer for the Southwest ISD where he taught 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders about the dangers of drugs as part of the Law Enforcement Against Drugs (L.E.A.D.) program. The curriculum, designed for a classroom setting, included social and emotional learning skills such as goal setting, decision making, building good relations, and managing emotions. The pandemic presented quite a challenge, but Brian continued teaching via Zoom, which required a lot of creativity to hold his students' attentions. The fact that he was honored as L.E.A.D. Instructor of the Year for 2021 and ASIS Officer of the Year for small departments attests to his skillfulness and adaptability.

Last October, Brian joined the A&M-San Antonio Police Department as a campus police officer. He is charged with the safety and security of the campus, as well as its students, faculty, and staff. In addition to his degree, he holds a Master Peace Officer certificate through the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement.

Brian remains highly motivated by his children. "My son with his issues has really opened my eyes to what real struggle is," he says. "I told myself early on that if he can struggle the way he does every day with a smile, then I can struggle to do better for my family."

Outside of work, Brian spends most of his time with his family. He especially enjoys fishing with his son and watching his daughter play sports and excel in school. He plays guitar and his wife sings in their church choir. He also is thinking about the future. Indeed, he chose a career with A&M-San Antonio to be part of the growth that is coming. "I want to grow with this department and maybe be in a leadership role one day," he shares.



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## ALUMNI FIRST RESPONDERS



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