

AURORA



# Students boosted by giving

By Katie Straub

*Above: Teresa Chepoda Usibelli, UAF development officer (left), and Linda Hulbert, a New York Life agent and longtime UAF supporter, promote #UAGivingDay2020 with 'Nook in downtown Fairbanks in October 2020. Photo courtesy of Teresa Chepoda Usibelli.*

**Though her walk across the stage was virtual, Kristin Clark '20 still tossed her graduation cap in the air — in her living room.**

That toss, in May 2020, marked the end of Clark's long quest to earn her bachelor's degree in social work.

Financial challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic nearly stalled her quest within sight of the goal, but she finished her last semester at UAF with help from the Student Support Fund.





*Kristin Clark celebrates her graduation from UAF in May 2020. Photo by Kristin Clark.*

“I wound up leaving my job just two days before things shut down, and, all of a sudden, the world kind of collapsed,” she said.

The Student Support Fund, which helped Clark cover her costs, is just one way that philanthropic support from Nanook Nation has kept UAF resilient in tumultuous times. Students, faculty, programs and athletics all have benefited from a remarkable outpouring of support in the past year.

Clark felt that support personally.

“I wouldn’t have been able to get my degree and wouldn’t have been able to begin graduate school,” Clark said. “I would have had to choose between [tuition] and my family being able to have a house to live in or food to eat.”

She had spent years getting to that point. Starting as a single teen mom, she attended a for-profit college in Colorado, but she couldn’t afford to finish the degree. When she started again at a public college, she discovered the private school hadn’t been accredited, so none of her work transferred. Again, she was unable to finish.

After moving to Washington and then Alaska with her wife and family, she decided to try college again. This time, it worked.

“There were a lot of terrible things that happened in my own life during that time, and being at UAF I was still able to get my classes done, graduate with a good GPA and



actually have supportive teachers and communities that felt like I could get through it,” she said.

Now she’s in a master’s program at Metropolitan State University of Denver — the same public college where she had been unable to finish her bachelor’s program years ago.



*Left: Kristin Clark and her children, Maleah (left) and Elijah Vint (back), enjoy the view over the Tanana River valley in summer 2020. Right: Kristin Clark (center) celebrates the graduation of her son, Elijah (back), from high school in 2020. Her daughter, Maleah Vint (front), and wife, Valerie Clark (right), join them. Photos courtesy of Kristin Clark.*

## COVID-19 comes to Fairbanks

While many Alaskans had heard of the COVID-19 virus in February 2020, most could not have predicted it would spread so quickly and have such a pervasive impact.

By March, UAF issued an emergency campus closure and students were suddenly packing up dorm rooms and traveling home and would not be returning to campus after spring break. Many were unable to work, had to purchase plane tickets or needed to find emergency off-campus housing.

Along with CARES Act funding from the U.S. Department of Education, assistance was available from the UAF Student Support Fund, recently established by the UAF Alumni Association. The board had been looking for a way to honor alumnus **James Pruitt '73** who left a large bequest to UAFAA.

Pruitt strongly believed in giving students a “hand up” rather than a “handout.”

Awards from the fund aren’t linked to grades or field of study; rather, the fund gives students desperately needed help with such things as emergency surgery, emergency flights, medication, extra course expenses, food and mental health care.

Clark was just one of many students that the fund helped keep in school.

Juan Avila, a geological engineering student, found himself for the first time looking for ways to afford his bills and make his rent payment after losing his job.

“At the beginning of the pandemic, my boss told me he couldn’t afford to pay me anymore,” Avila said.

Members of Avila’s family in Florida also lost their jobs, so he applied for the emergency scholarship at UAF.

“When I received it, it really helped me to get through the semester after having a very hard time with my mother losing her job and me having to step up and help her and my brother. The scholarship helped me stay in school and continue my education,” he said.





*Juan Avila conducts a drill hole survey with an acoustic televiewer during a summer 2020 internship at the Kinross Fort Knox mine north of Fairbanks.*

*Photo courtesy of Juan Avila.*

**A philanthropic response to the  
new normal**

Giving Tuesday historically lands on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. Feeling the urgency to help with the sudden need caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people worldwide participated in Giving Tuesday Now on May 5, 2020.

UAF joined the effort, participating in a 24-hour event along with the other two campuses in the University of Alaska system. Donors gave \$75,000 to help students across the UA system.



*'Nook stops for a photo with students in the UAF Community and Technical College's culinary classroom at the Hutchison Institute of Technology. UAF photo by Karalee Watts.*



As the effects of COVID-19 continued to ripple through Alaska, the university system worked together to plan the first UA Giving Day, held Oct. 20-22 and billed as “49 hours for the 49th state.” More than 1,100 donors represented 47 states and nine countries.

The event raised about \$672,000 to support students, university programs, research, athletics and scholarships. More than half of those gifts were from UAF donors, who gave \$416,000.



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdNLfQniwA&ab\\_channel=UniversityofAlaskaFairbanks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdNLfQniwA&ab_channel=UniversityofAlaskaFairbanks)

*'Nook cheers for philanthropy outside the UAF Community and Technical College's downtown Fairbanks headquarters in this video produced to thank donors to UA Giving Day in 2020. UAF video by JR Ancheta.*

Longtime donors Kes Woodward and **Dorli McWayne '83** were motivated to fulfill a long-planned donation to



establish a scholarship to honor Woodward's first wife. The Marianna "Missy" Boaz Woodward Memorial Scholarship for students in the ceramics program was created and celebrated during the final hours of UA Giving Day.

"It was fantastic to be able to watch it unfold online over the two days," said Woodward, a UAF professor emeritus. "I was flabbergasted with how many people made gifts. Seeing those names and seeing other people make contributions, it makes you want to do the same."

Fairbanks community advocates Dr. Cary Keller and **Sarah Keller '90** were also inspired by the event to show support through donations to KUAC, UAF athletics and the UA Southeast-administered Alaska College of Education Support Fund.

"The more people who made gifts and offered challenges, the more we realized that there are a lot of other people out there who felt just as committed to the university as we are," Dr. Keller said. "There was a sort of pent-up desire to be helpful and positive."



*Photo caption: Riley von Borstel, president of the Associated Students of UAF, stands with 'Nook in front of the Patty Center. Photo courtesy of Riley von Borstel.*

Associated Students of UAF President Riley von Borstel, like many UA Giving Day ambassadors, promoted the event through posts on Facebook and Instagram. She shared her story and her family's long history of attending UAF.

"I talked about how for me UAF is synonymous with success, relationships, kindness and opportunity," she said. "I am in awe of the generosity of those in our community. In a time of uncertainty and anxiety due to budget cuts

and coronavirus, we are proof that Alaska is strong and there is still hope. I'm reminded every day that I made the right choice in choosing UAF for my higher education."

## The philanthropic tradition continues

For students who receive help through scholarships and funds such as the UAF Student Support Fund, the benefit is immediate, but impacts can last far into the future.

Thankful for the support she received at a time when she needed it most, Kristin Clark feels like it was an extension of the experience she had at UAF.

"I don't think I've had a school experience before UAF where it felt like everyone kind of wrapped around each other and cared," Clark said.

The university will continue to offer opportunities for the community to get involved. The Blue and Gold Celebration will be held virtually this year. The university is planning to bring guests together in a virtual space on Feb. 27, 2021.





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In addition to honoring distinguished alumni and faculty at the annual celebration, this year's fundraising efforts will be directed toward the new Nanook Commitment Scholarship. The renewable, need-based scholarship could cover up to half of tuition costs for undergraduate students who qualify.

As a new UAF alumna, Clark is thoughtful about the impact of donations beyond her degree. She didn't have to choose between her family and paying tuition. And it doesn't end there.

"These decisions to help people have ripple effects that you don't always see, but it's really meaningful," she said. "What work do I get to now go do that helps support the community because I was able to finish my degree? I think

it's meaningful in ways that we don't always see immediately."



*Kristin Clark. Photo courtesy of Kristin Clark.*

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