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Remembering Parker Thompson

Damian R. Wilson
News

Parker Thompson, a second-year undergraduate studying applied and computational mathematics, Secretary of ASCIT, and a peer advocate, passed away on February 3, 2026. He was 19.

Thompson arrived at Caltech in fall 2024 as a QuestBridge Scholar and participant in the First-Year Success Research Institute. In his application to the Institute, one recommender called him “a once-in-a-lifetime academic, humanitarian, and dreamer.” A member of Ricketts House, he became active in student leadership, serving as ASCIT Secretary and peer advocate.

President Rosenbaum described Thompson as “an integral member of the student community and student leadership,” remembered as “an engaged, caring individual with a gentle smile.”

Faculty recall both his intellectual range and his ambition. Jennifer Jahner, Dean of Undergraduate Studies and Thompson’s first-year advisor, said he brought equal enthusiasm to mathematics and the humanities.

“Parker was a gem, and I use that word in its specific sense,” Jahner said. “He shone bright; he dazzled all of us with his smile and spirit.” She added that he “loved the multifaceted beauty of mathematics and art, poetry and music,” and that he reflected “the essence of the Caltech community: unfettered curiosity, fierce care for others, and deep reserves of strength.”

Jahner noted that Thompson had expressed interest in founding Caltech’s first mock trial club. After participating in mock trial in high school, he had considered pursuing environmental law.

Beyond his academic and campus commitments, Thompson was a gifted writer. Professor Jenny Factor, who taught him in En 85: Poetry Writing, described him as “radiant” — a word she said perfectly captured “his generosity toward others, his natural sparkle, his intelligence and creative gifts.” She recalled that he “cared immensely about writing poems” and “would like that to be said of him. And it should be.”

Factor described Thompson as a talented poet who was “always eager to talk about craft, about how a poem could be skillful and original,” and who



“grasped and held onto each new idea.” His creativity, she said, “saturated his work,” from a poem that imitated the motion of waves to another that blended lyrical description with scientific observation. In workshop discussions, he was the “kind of student who turned discussion into permission,” reading both “the room and the poem together” and making it “safer for others to try on new approaches to writing and reading.”

“Just the very moment he walked in the workshop room,” Factor reflected, “his empathy, compassion, and love of literature sort of glimmered, and his sparkle lit up the workshop.”

Within Ricketts House, students remembered Thompson as someone who encouraged open conversation and made himself available to others navigating depression, anxiety, grief, and trauma.

“There are no words to express how deeply the loss of Parker will resonate throughout the Caltech community,”

said ASCIT President Ashlyn Roice (CS ‘26, Lloyd). “He was the most kind and gentle person ... and a bright light to all who met him.”

In the days following the announcement of his death, students created a memorial in the inner courtyard of Ricketts House. Flowers, photographs, handwritten notes, and personal items were left throughout the space. On the evening of February 5, community members gathered for a candlelight vigil attended by Thompson’s mother and uncle before walking to Caltech Pond to set small lights afloat. Students later shared Abuelita hot chocolate, his favorite drink.

Thompson is survived by his mother, Amdana, and his two younger brothers, Miles and Ryan.

Students seeking support may contact Student Wellness Services (SWS) at (626) 395-8331 (press “2” for after-hours support) or call and text 988 to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

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The Chilling of Caltech

Myles Sherman & Damian R. Wilson
Feature

There is a chill passing through Caltech.

Over the past year, the foundations of U.S. education, research, and democracy have been systematically targeted by the Trump administration. Hostile rhetoric against racial minorities, immigrants, and the LGBTQ community has escalated into ICE kidnappings, withdrawal from international collaborations, bans on federal programs promoting “diversity, equity, and inclusion” and more.

Within the education and research community, the fallout has been immediate: federal funds withheld or delayed; fellowship and grant programs paused, rewritten, or purged for “DEI” language; and uncertainty that has left faculty, graduate students, postdocs, and staff scientists in limbo. International students have been disproportionately targeted with new barriers to travel and renewal, heightened scrutiny of social media for anti-Trump sentiment, and threats of indiscriminate detention and deportation. Across the country, universities report decreased international enrollment as fear and friction rise.

The “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education” recently codified White House demands for universities in exchange for federal funding: cut DEI programs, cap international students at 15% (and ensure they share “Western values”), use a vague and exploitable “force” to elevate conservative voices, and reject transgender, gender non-conforming, and intersex identities among students. The “Compact” was opened for universities to sign; none have publicly endorsed it outright, though some have been pressured directly with lawsuits and reached settlements implementing portions of its agenda. Others have raised tuition or cut positions to make up the gap. Many have remained silent — including Caltech.

Caltech has not been the epicenter of retaliation like some peers, but it has not been immune. I interviewed 25 students, faculty, staff, and administrators about the impacts they’ve observed, how Caltech has responded, and what this moment is doing to speech and trust on campus.

The impacts

Across the Institute, federal funding instability has been front of mind given President Trump’s initial proposal of 60%, 40%, and 25% cuts to the NSF, NIH, and NASA and a 15% cap on indirect costs. This would leave graduate students and postdocs without reliable lab support, projects without funding, and faculty unable to accommodate new students.

There are signs of partial stabilization: recent Congressional appropriations would leave agency funding flat, and court rulings that may limit some indirect-cost reductions. (Explore [The American Association for the Advancement of Science’s](#) appropriations dashboard) But budgets on paper have not prevented research funding from being withheld, delayed, or canceled. For many, the damage is already done.

BBE graduate students Maria Carilli and Jasmine Emtage saw NIH funding or applications delayed or cancelled. Jasmine, President of Caltech Graduate Researchers and Postdocs United (CGPU), ultimately secured a NIH F31, but noted: “other students in my lab were suddenly losing their funding because their grants have been canceled for mentioning DEI.”

PMA postdoc Dr. Ruby Byrne’s postdoctoral fellowship was temporarily withheld amid the DEI purge: “the expectations that the federal government will follow through on the obligations they’ve made ... we can’t rely on that anymore.” Dr. Cameron Hummels, a research scientist at Cahill and Director of Caltech Astrophysics Outreach, described NASA proposal calls pushed back by six months or more, with some canceled outright.

Zoe Readi-Brown, a chemistry graduate student, has been searching for a new lab after her previous one, an atmospheric chemistry lab, had to downscope a proposal: “that means that I actually can’t be funded.”

But science funding is only one layer. The atmosphere is also shaped by escalating ICE raids, heightened visa vulnerability, renewed marginalization of racial minorities and LGBTQ+ students, and the broader polarization of U.S. politics — including campus tensions around Israel-Palestine advocacy.

For example, Ilana Smith, Director of the International Offices, points out the travel bans: “Students from these

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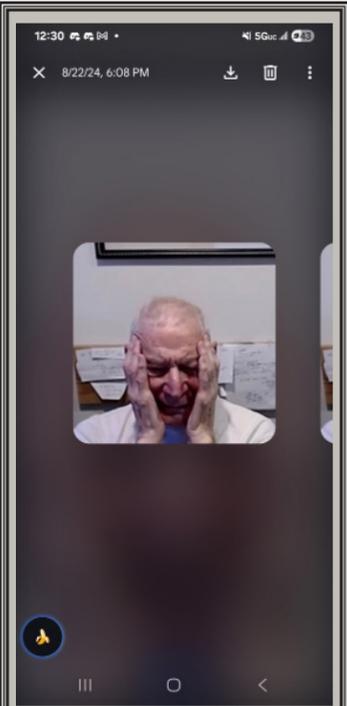
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Remembering Parker

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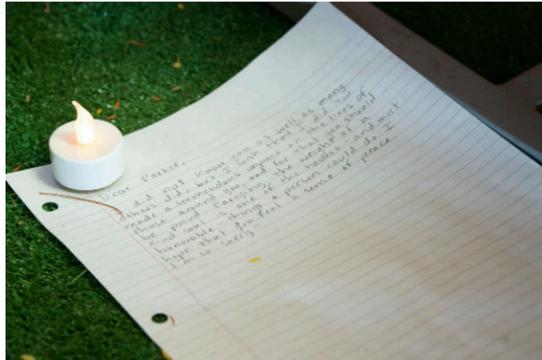


I remember during FSRI we were in the same research duo. We were also suitemates (our suite was goated), and we would bond over stressing about our FSRI research---how we felt like we could not please our SURF mentor and were in anguish when he would make faces during our presentation (he managed to snap of screenshot of him making it during a Zoom call which is the image I am uploading). He lowkey put me onto Magdalena Bay, and was one of the first Questies from Caltech I talked to the week we matched. I was not necessarily close to him, but he was great company, and I remember when he would laugh with Carolina and Tuyen; it was infectious. I will miss bro.

— Luis Serrano Laguna (MechE '28, Blacker)

Parker, you're such a sweet, witty, and smart boy. I'll miss our funny banter. I'll miss your funny stories. I'll miss our weird conversations. I'll miss fighting off your allegation that I was stalking you. Running into you at the Lacy Park, the Huntington Gardens, or on the 10 (bus) DOES NOT count as stalking ;). I am so grateful to have met you during Discotech and to have been your friend through FSRI, freshman and sophomore year. I will always hold onto the last memory I have with you during Ricketts Interhouse. You're the greatest thing we've lost. I'm sorry that you were hurting. I hope you're at peace, you deserve to be. You'll forever be in my heart. Rest in peace, PARK-AH!!

— Bhakti Ahir Ahir (Ch '28, Blacker)



Parker was my best PA and a friend since discotech. When he lost his partner, that reminded me of myself at a point in my life and we shared a moment over this ode.

I named it "Ode to a Lover Departed" and he loved it.

*I watch the boughs stretch,
The roots knit the ground,
The years cascade and
Clash against the wind,
Corroding your tombstone.*

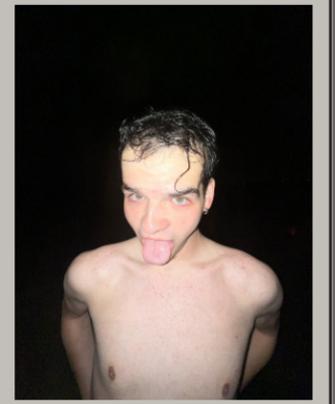
*Yet, you don't mind, impervious
To the ceaseless churn of the seasons,
Content with the specter you left
In the corridors of my mind.*

*And I glimpse fragments of you
Flicker in these corners,
Chasing them as a moth
Ultimately to my doom,
Just as I was Icarus for you*

*And soared too close to our passion.
Now, my happiness evaporates,
Like a man's beauty on
The weathering shores of time,
Leaving behind a residue*

*Of insatiable hunger that gnaws
On our love, and all that remains
Is resentment and envy,
For you depart with my prayers,
And I linger in your absence.*

— Anonymous ('28, Ricketts)



I don't think people always saw how much heart Parker put into being there for others. He showed up when it wasn't convenient. He cared when it wasn't easy. And he did it without needing attention for it.

Some people leave echoes.

The kind that stay in the quiet moments, in the dining hall conversations, in the late-night check-ins, in the way we instinctively try to be a little gentler with each other now.

He made people feel seen. And that's such a rare thing.

There are people who fill a space just by being loud. And then there are people who change a space simply by being steady. He was steady. He was kind. He was the kind of PA who led with empathy instead of ego.

Our community is better because he was part of it.

And we will carry that care forward because that's what he taught us to do. I love you Parker.

— Samaiyah Snowden (MechE '28, Ricketts)

The *Tech* is collecting stories and tributes to include in the next issue to capture everyone whose experience at Caltech was made brighter by Parker's presence. If you have any memories of Parker, or anything you'd like to share about him, please fill out this form (QR code on right). Thank you for honoring Parker's memory.



For Parker

Damian Wilson
Inner Voices

yours is the death that cheapens all words and as i write this i scan each one not for beauty but for adequacy not for music but for weight i test them in the mouth of the sentence i press them against the fact of you gone and each one gives slightly under pressure as if language were made of softer materials than we had been told as if it were built for description but not subtraction as if it were designed for continuation and not interruption and this is not an English problem though English has its evasions its polite evasions we say loss as though something were misplaced we say passed away as though you stepped briefly into another room we say nineteen and expect it to hold still obedient to

arithmetic but the number will not stay in its place it trembles under its own counting because numbers are supposed to add and what has happened here does not add it removes and it removes without ceremony and still the verbs conjugate still the calendar advances still the dining hall opens still the workshop door swings inward and the room arranges itself as though nothing essential has shifted which feels like a kind of cruelty not that language fails but that it continues functioning perfectly well in your absence

you loved craft how a line could move like water how description could bend toward science without surrendering music how revision was not embarrassment but belief that the thing could be made more exact and i want that to be true here i want revision to be pos-

sible beyond the page i want to revise the world back to the version where you walk into the workshop and the air adjusts imperceptibly but undeniably where conversation becomes permission where someone else feels brave because you did where thought expands because you were there to hold it steady but revision requires a draft and this is not a draft this is the final copy and finality is the one thing language pretends not to understand

particularity resists summary you were not promise not potential not radiance though you were radiant you were the slight pause before speaking as if making room for someone else's thought you were the way someone could read a room and a poem at once you were the almost invisible generosity that altered the temperature of a space and there is no col-



From Parker's candlelight vigil. (Photo: Iris A. Lubashev)

lective noun for that there is no grammatical tense for that there is no construction that returns it once removed
this is not an English problem it is the fact that language

was built for construction it assumes tomorrow it leans forward by habit
and yet here we are still writing



Chilling of Caltech

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countries who are in the U.S. now can apply, but they're not going to get approved."

Some students, including Rohan Shenoy, an international PMA graduate student and organizer with CGPU, face new restrictions on visa renewals that increase delays and risk.

Beyond Caltech, threatened cuts to the Department of Education and disability support programs ripple outward. The Assistant Director for Education Outreach at the Caltech Teaching and Learning Office (CTLO), Dr. Kitty Cahalan, warned that undermining funding to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act "is going to affect families who have kids with special needs that are not going to be met."

The fog of uncertainty

President Rosenbaum declined to comment for this article. His July 13 letter indicates Caltech joined four lawsuits challenging indirect-cost caps and created a working group to discuss funding cuts, while resolving to "Increase Revenue" and "Reduce Expenses" by withholding cost-of-living raises, reducing faculty hiring and graduate admissions, and exploring private philanthropy and investment as replacement funding sources. Ashley Pallie, director of the Undergraduate Admissions Office, also declined an interview.

According to Smith, Caltech's International Scholar Services (ISS) submitted a public comment to oppose a proposed Congressional rule that would apply 4-year limits on F and J visas, updated [their website](#) to track immigration policies, and is developing an emergency ICE response plan. Zoe discussed how CGPU prompted Caltech to extend appointments for students struggling with visa renewals and create an emergency fund. Dr. Jasmine Bryant, Director of the CTLO, also noted that administrators were checking in to ensure incoming international students could obtain visas.

Caltech has offered various stopgaps, reassuring some: "interest free loans to kind of bridge the gap" (Ruby), quick absorption of some displaced JPL staff (Dr. Nivedita Mahesh, PMA Postdoc), and advocacy trips to Washington. Mars Arechavala, chair of the Student Life and Experience Conference (SLEC), described staff in CCID who want "to fix the issues that they're seeing." Former co-chair of Black Scientists & Engineers of Caltech Thomas Henning feels like, "we get the support and attention to do effective work."

But as one anonymous graduate office administrator notes, "We all know about what's happened at Columbia and Harvard ... I think there is incentive to keep a low profile on these issues."

Thus, Caltech has not directly responded to the "Compact" or publicly opposed DEI and immigration policies. Shayna Chabner McKinney, Associate Vice President, Strategy Implementation and Chief Communications and External Relations Officer speaking on behalf of Caltech, explains that, "there is no existing form that is out

there for signature," despite the letter's availability [online](#). "I'm not going to comment from Caltech's perspective on [the 'Compact']."

"We have to be thoughtful," Undergraduate Dean Professor Jennifer Jahner says, "because so much remains up in the air in the budgetary cycle...The core principles of Caltech have always been to create opportunity...and we remain true to that spirit of inquiry."

McKinney's responses to anti-DEI policies on behalf of the Institute nonetheless ring hollow: "Caltech continues to act within legal parameters, and continues to maintain its focus on the research and education experience...The Institute has maintained its commitment to support its community." It is the Institute's unsatisfactory response which creates the condition echoed in nearly every interview: uncertainty.

Jahner described "a space of profound uncertainty and unpredictability ... not being able to rely as you used to on certain expectations within funding structures ... that impacts all of us ... in concrete ways ... and intangible, psychological ways."

Rohan described how fear bleeds into daily life: after seeing a DHS vehicle near the gym, "for a month after that I was scared every time I saw a black SUV ... This all is the background to which life exists, and then I get to work, trying not to think about this."

CCE Professor Bil Clemons, who has advocated for diversity efforts on campus, captured the practical dilemma: "If Caltech makes a statement that jeopardizes JPL's funding, how many mouths are not going to be fed? ... It would be irresponsible ... for our leadership to be too flip-pant."

McKinney agrees: "The Institute doesn't make a lot of statements because...as an Institute you are speaking with one voice ... You are assuming you can assert authority over the voice of a diverse community of individuals."

And yet many cannot see what's being done. Theresa Tsaggaris, co-chair of BSEC, said she "ha[s] not seen a very strong response." Others echoed that gap between internal action and public reassurance. Administrators argue that language is being cooled to avoid misrepresentation or retaliation; as a graduate administrator put it, "those programs still exist. But there is a kind of 'toning down' of the language, to be in compliance with US Department of Education directives."

"Language is easily taken out of context," Jahner said. "I think the best thing we can do ... is to back our values with our actions."

This is where the "chill" becomes more than budget anxiety. As many interviewees noted, our voices are powerful: that makes our silence terrifying.

How do students know that the Institute advocates for their interests when their efforts are hidden? Whose language should be tailored and scrutinized? How should students know that they are supported without becoming the victim of harmful policies? When will the Institute cross the fine line between keeping the peace and becoming complicit in oppressive policies?

McKinney's inquisitive re-

sponse is most telling: "What would indicate or communicate to them that the Institute was taking action in support of their interests?"

I realized I had approached the edge of the administration's considerations, and that it's perhaps this failure to relate Institute actions to students' experience that lies at the heart of that "uncertainty" hanging like a fog over the Institute.

The shape of censorship

The chilling effect is self-censorship: limiting language preemptively under threat of authoritarian pressure. BBE PhD student and co-founder of the Palestinian Cultural Club Marina Lecoeuche put it plainly: "Caltech doesn't have to receive the 'Compact' for it to have its intended effect."

Some have not observed limits on Caltech's speech. Ilana Smith, for example, thinks the Caltech administration has been, "consistent in their messaging about how much they value diversity." But others described silence taking root — not because administrators are overtly hostile, but because fear shapes institutional incentives.

Marina described how risk has changed the cost of association: "People are afraid to be publicly associated with [PCC] if they are vulnerable ... Caltech doesn't really create a culture where people feel like that's a possibility."

Ruby voiced frustration with institutional timidity: "There's a lot of power in speaking out ... Caltech's certainly not been on the right side of this ... putting restrictions on student protest around Palestine."

Hummels described how institutional constraints shape outreach: as a representative of a federally funded nonprofit, he must be "particularly careful about the wording" to avoid appearing partisan or jeopardizing status.

Graduate Student Council co-chair Zac Chase described the crackdown on language transgressing personal narrative: "I'm a first generation student, I'm an LGBTQ student... Those define my story. ... And now, it kind of makes me less myself."

For international scholars, the chilling effect is sharper because consequences can be immediate. "As an international student? I'm scared," Nivedita said. "are you going to read something on my social media, or that I say at Caltech, [and] tomorrow, I can't get my green card?" ... I hate that I have to be quiet." Rohan agrees: "I don't know if I have the right to free speech in this country."

McKinney's view contrasts sharply: "I've never met a Caltech student who didn't feel empowered to reach out or write to anyone in leadership." I'll remind the reader that President Rosenbaum immediately declined my request for an interview.

Self-censorship is not just individual; it reshapes organizations. Theresa and Maria noted that DEI rollbacks began before the Trump administration: division DEI committees were renamed for "community-building", and some narrowed funding streams while others halted meetings.

Theresa is especially thankful for the financial support of DEI committees, which have been essential for BSEC to organize spaces for Black students like the CEBAS confer-

ence: "[BSEC's] main sources of funding were those DEI committees from all the divisions and within some of the divisions." But they've received less money for this year's conference; without them, "I think the future of [CEBAS] is...looking bleak unless we can secure external funding."

And the campus-wide "business as usual" posture only deepens isolation. Rohan has "learned to compartmentalize" within a culture he experiences as politically disengaged: "Sometimes when my labmates are talking about something trivial, I've become a little bit jaded." He finds hope, instead, in community structures — especially the union.

What students are doing anyway

Despite this chill, students are not inert. They are building mutual support structures and pursuing policy leverage.

PCC, Marina said, is primarily community: "keffiyeh lunch once a week ... [is] a way that we can find community during a time that feels really scary."

CGPU has pushed for protections and broader solidarity, including campaigning for a proposed \$23 billion bond supporting California science research (SB 895), contract expansions allowing visa reimbursement, and advocating for due process in the dismissal process. For Rohan, this is a matter of dignity as much as funding: "community is always good ... but also we need to live lives of dignity in this country."

EAS Professor Leonard Schulman also reflects that Chabad at Caltech and Caltech Hillel provide spaces for faculty to be "a sounding board for students ... there's a Jewish community here at Caltech, we like to support it, it has to do with maintaining community. That's our main role."

Student leaders face the same linguistic minefields. Mars described how SLEC work requires "really specific language now," careful to avoid "getting in trouble," even when the intent remains unchanged. Yet these constraints have not prevented action: student groups organized rapidly after weak racial representation in admissions, urging a town hall to demand concrete commitments.

Ashlyn Roice, ASCIT President, emphasized peer support systems and collaboration with Student Wellness Services and the International Offices to address holistic wellbeing: "When you're not talking about things, you're contributing to the problem, so it's important that we have spaces for open dialogue." Ashlyn and Mars suggested that institutional quiet has, paradoxically, made them more compelled to speak.

Maria agrees: "I feel empowered ... there are avenues through which I can express my discontent." Jasmine described a confidence rooted in collective victories: "we were able to win our Union ... I find a lot of strength in our power and numbers." Zoe framed voice as her remaining hope: "I as an individual do still feel emboldened, empowered to keep standing up for what I believe in."

The way forward

There are no easy answers. Many interviewees are sympathetic to the administration's conundrum: speak too loudly

and invite retaliation; stay too quiet and ally oppression. Zac called Caltech's safety "a simple matter of luck." Mars stressed that visible silence can obscure real care and effort.

Still, Caltech cannot persist indefinitely under a climate where advocacy is chilled and support is mostly private. Community spaces function as pressure valves and lifelines. They model what a university is supposed to protect: the ability to gather, speak, and belong without fear.

Several interviewees agreed that collectively, universities can signal that academic freedom and international collaboration are non-negotiable while protecting their most vulnerable members.

Rohan warned against "Caltech exceptionalism": Caltech might survive by staying quiet, but "it might be the rest of academia that's destroyed," along with the collaborations Caltech depends on. In that view, institutional self-preservation without solidarity is not neutrality, but a choice with downstream costs. In response, McKinney says, "we're in a period of real complexity, change, and uncertainty."

On the individual level, interviewees preach resilience and communication. Ruby spoke of grieving and adapting without shutting down. Clemons hoped the turbulence could produce "a better desire to work towards a common good." EAS Professor John Dabiri urged scientists to make the public case for why Caltech exists — and not assume appreciation is automatic. Hummels warns, "We need to be more aware of what's going on and think about the best way to help make a difference."

That communication work is inseparable from DEI: as Nivedita noted, outreach and accessibility efforts are often led by the very structures now under attack. If the public is alienated from science, funding collapses; if marginalized communities are excluded, science loses the diversity that improves it.

Concrete actions exist, even with uncertainty: write legislators; join advocacy and governance groups; attend a union, GSC, or ASCIT meeting; show up to a CTLO or Caltech Y event; reach out for help early. "If we don't know the answer ... we can find somebody who does," Zac said. Ashlyn: "I want to hear what our student body needs and do my best to fulfill them." Jahner emphasized CALE and divisional support for planning, applications, and contingencies. CTLO leaders urged students to use campus resources to reduce unnecessary stress.

Community itself is the consistent throughline — stronger than policy, stronger than fear. Zoe described how support transformed her experience from isolation to endurance. She hopes that others "are empowered and emboldened to use their own voices ... to build a community to feel supported."

Marina offers a closing sentiment: "This act of community is an act of hope, and it's an act of faith in our future. When we build a community like this, it can serve as a sanity check that what's happening right now isn't normal, but also it won't be like this forever — it's the actions we take now that make a difference."

On Self-Love

Anonymous
Inner Voices

A lot can happen in one minute. Sixty little seconds. An infinite number of moments. It only takes a moment for everything to change, not just for your life, but the lives of the people around you too. It's interesting how things happen, the way we come out with these nice things we normally wouldn't do. People say things they normally wouldn't say. People value other people more than they normally would. People forgive each other for things because whatever they were mad at becomes insignificant in comparison to the thought of losing someone they're close to.

So if life can be gone so quickly and so unexpectedly, why don't we say those things before we don't have the chance

to? It can be hard to live in such an extreme or open way; a lot of people might not know how to respond. But there are certain times when it's better to say too much than not enough. Because really, what's the harm? Even if you're hurt or embarrassed, it never lasts forever; that's the beauty of time. Eventually, things fade. Why wouldn't you say too much?

I think many of us tend to forget the position of privilege that we are in at Caltech. The little island we're living on, between Wilson, Del Mar, California, and Hill, tends to keep us a little more ostracized from the rest of the world than most of us have ever been or even realize. I've seen too many people worrying about sets, deadlines, and doing things right rather than thinking about how they're actually spending their lives. Are we then living in line

with our values, or just mindlessly moving through time? We're lucky to be able to worry about arduous schoolwork because our basic needs are already met. That's not something everyone gets.

The chances of us being here, on this earth, at Caltech, at this exact time, are impossibly small. The possibility of the chain of events that had to happen for you to be reading this with the people around you is zero. And yet here we are. None of us should be here, but here we are anyway. So check in on the people around you. Push each other up. Remember that life exists outside of this bubble, and that the people beside you are carrying more than you can see.

And while you're at it, love too hard. I don't think it's possible to love someone or something halfway. Either you do, or

you don't. So if you do, give it everything. At least if you fail, you'll know you laid it all out there. Pride gets in the way of a lot of potentially beautiful moments. After a while, all the little things you don't say start to pile up. And then you're left with a heavy heart and all kinds of regret. All because you wanted to stay safe. Living a life full of regret turns your gifts from god into endless punishments.

I've gone into relationships where I knew heartbreak was practically a guarantee, and I went for it anyway, just on the off chance that I might find something rare. I'm an endlessly hopeful person in that way. You might end up getting hurt, but you'll still be here, and you'll be a better person because of it. You can't let hurt change you, as hard as it may try. Find the grace in your failings, and remember to stay vul-

nerable, stay kind, stay understanding, and stay gentle.

When it comes down to our infinite number of moments, our time on this earth with the experiences and people we love is finite. We are a result of the experiences life hands us and how we react to those experiences. If all of our experiences have been somewhere in that "halfway range," then what kind of person does that make us? Of course, not every day has to be extraordinary. That isn't realistic when you factor in all of the responsibilities and obligations we have to keep up with. And honestly, for me, sometimes living life to the fullest means going back to bed. But we can all do ourselves a small favor by saying what we need to say, and then saying a little bit more.

TV Review: *The War Between The Land and The Sea*

Emily Yu
Culture

What would happen if all the trash humans have dumped into the ocean rained back onto land? *The War Between the Land and the Sea* considers what would happen if an underwater species suddenly revealed itself, fed up with the damage humans have inflicted on them through pollution and other actions at sea.

The show is a spinoff in the *Doctor Who* universe, but viewers don't need to know much to follow along beyond a few minor references to "The Doctor" interspersed throughout the show. The first couple of episodes set the stage for thoughtful reflections on how humans have impacted the environment, how we would act if we were forced to confront that, and the political and economic factors at play. While the show later veers into something more akin to a forbidden love

story, there are still moments to reflect on.

Barclay Pierre-Dupont, a civilian employee of the Unified Intelligence Taskforce (UNIT), unexpectedly becomes humanity's ambassador to Homo Aqua, a technologically advanced underwater species. Their representative, Salt, demands an immediate end to ocean pollution. When humans counter with a gradual reduction over 40 years, Salt dismisses it as nowhere near fast enough and the talks quickly sour.

Homo Aqua escalate toward coercive tactics, and the ensuing negotiations put several real-world issues on the table: the environmental damages caused by globalization, the endangerment of marine species, water contamination, and the amount of trash in the ocean.

While UNIT and Pierre-Dupont try to reach a peaceful resolution with Homo Aqua, self-interested businessmen and military officials conspire

behind the scenes to resolve the conflict with an iron fist, pressuring the British prime minister to achieve their goals. The critique is familiar: politicians who answer to donors, shareholders with vested interests in exploiting the environment—this sci-fi show is not so 'fi.'

After all is said and done, Homo Aqua are offered a trench in the Pacific Ocean, the deepest place on Earth. Pierre-Dupont calls it a "haven," free from pollution, sound, and viruses. One could also call it a reservation of sorts. As Salt puts it: "We will accept this offer if you give this land its true name: a hunting ground. We will live there in full knowledge of what you will do to us. We will do whatever you want, because we are terrified of you."

At the beginning of the show, Salt rejects the government's appointed ambassador and specifically requests Pierre-Dupont because of his "humanity and compassion," demonstrated by the respect he showed

to a deceased Homo Aqua. This choice can also be interpreted as a reminder that "nobodies" and regular people, as Pierre-Dupont describes himself, should have a voice in the decisions that shape the future of humanity and this planet.

At the end of the show, self-serving human leaders and officials have it their way—a cynical yet fitting ending that seems to be a warning, rather than a victory.



the Sea is available for streaming on BBC iPlayer and Disney+, and for purchase on Apple TV in the UK. (Image: [Apple TV](https://share.google/jeUaTaG1yYWXd-6fmx)) <https://share.google/jeUaTaG1yYWXd-6fmx>

The Frontier Myth in Motion: Ads of Super Bowl LX

Theo Havel
Opinion

This year's Super Bowl kicked off on Sunday, February 8th, between the Seattle Seahawks and the New England Patriots. Over 100 million people watch the Super Bowl every year, which creates a fierce competition between companies to create the best ads they can for the most effective viewer impression.

The most heartwarming ad — rated USA Today's #1 of Super Bowl 2026 — was Budweiser's depiction of the relationship over time between a Clydesdale foal and an eagle chick. These animals are closely connected to our self-image as a nation: courageous, independent, and resilient. Also, baby animals are cute.

The frontier thesis was introduced in 1893 by Fredrick Jackson Turner as a way to describe the American experi-

ence. It defined a unique type of person (courageous, independent, resilient, resourceful and hardworking) that thrived in the frontier environment. This myth took many forms throughout the 20th century and continues to strongly influence our relationship to the digital frontier in the 21st.

The ad with the highest engagement throughout the entire game was that of AI.com, despite being placed at the end of the fourth quarter and being extremely cryptic about what the service actually provides. It generated [9.1 times more engagement](#) than the median Super Bowl ad this year.

I found it to be one of the most intriguing I had seen all evening. It opened with two meteors flying around each other in space, perhaps symbolizing the user and their personal AI agent — a feature central to their service. It can also be interpreted as demonstrating

the ongoing human relationship with the digital world. The two meteors collided to form the AI.com logo, at which time the phrase "AGI is coming. Get your @handle now." appeared. It then showed three example handles (@mark, @sam, and @elon) — major players on the front lines of AI.

As is usually the case, the ads that hit *really* hit. However, they were few and far between for me this year. My personal favorite after the Budweiser ad was Anthropic's ad for its chatbot Claude, which explored the increased prevalence of advertising in chatbots and distanced the company from this trend.

Our country is at a crossroads as AI advances; the above-described ads juxtapose one another and highlight the historical and continued struggle we face between what we know and how that can change, a nostalgic view of ourselves versus the embrace of progress.



Budweiser's "American Icons" commercial depicted a Clydesdale foal befriending and protecting a baby bald eagle, set to Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird" in celebration of the brand's 150th anniversary and America's 250th. (Image: [Budweiser via YouTube](#))



AI.com made a flashy debut during Super Bowl LX following a \$70 million acquisition of the domain by [Crypto.com](#) CEO Kris Marszalek. (Image: [AI.com](#))

The Mindshift Conference: Nobel Laureates, an Academic Impostor, and Jeffrey Epstein

Staff Writers
News

In January 2011, several academics attended the “Mindshift Conference,” organized by Al Seckel (who has been accused of misrepresenting his credentials) and hosted by a financier and convicted sex offender, Jeffrey Epstein. The Nobel laureates include Professor Frances Arnold of Caltech and the late Murray Gell-Mann. Other attendees included former Caltech professor Christof Koch and Gerald Sussman of MIT, among other academics.

A recently released trove of files related to Jeffrey Epstein contains more details about this conference and emails from the attendees, including from Professor Arnold. In [one](#) of the emails, she wrote, “I want to thank you for hosting that amazing ‘conference’ last weekend... I’m sorry I did not get to interact with you very much, but I hope that you will visit us at Caltech sometime, where I can tell you more about laboratory evolution and all the crazy wonderful things we can make.”

In an email to the *Tech*, Professor Arnold stated, “Someone organized a conference where I met Epstein briefly. I never spoke or interacted with him before or after, other than the ‘thank you’.” Other than the conference (where he spent little time, as you can see from my note), I had zero connection with the man. Of course, had I know[n] about him, I would

have declined to even go to the conference, but I was completely unaware.”

However, the files contain earlier correspondence from [June 2010](#). In an email to Seckel, Professor Arnold noted having spoken with Epstein before June 1 and remarked that she “could tell [Epstein] knows quite a bit about topics that are interesting to [her].” [Additional emails indicate](#) a conversation with her and Epstein the following Sunday.

In response to a follow-up request from the *Tech* for comment, Professor Arnold stated, “I frankly don’t remember any conversation with him before, or after, but that was a long time ago. The email seems to indicate there was one, so I guess that might be the case. Really, I don’t remember. I was raising three boys whose father had died and was rather busy at the time.” She suggested a clarification: “It was fifteen years ago, and I don’t recall interacting with him before or after, other than the ‘thank you.’”

An [email](#) Epstein forwarded to Seckel, purportedly from a woman named Susan, complained that the Mindshift Conference was “the worst meeting we have ever funded” and described attendees as “boring,” among other descriptions. Susan, [according](#) to Seckel, was just Epstein himself. The [itinerary’s](#) guest list also does not include anyone named Susan as an attendee.

Not every single name mentioned in the Department of

Justice’s avalanche of files is guilty of participating in Epstein’s crimes. Authorities have not alleged that any of the academics whose names appear in the files engaged in wrongdoing connected to Epstein.

Another connection to the Institute is the relationship between Al Seckel and Caltech, which predates this conference, and involves Richard Feynman, former Caltech president David Baltimore, and questionable circumstances.

In July 2015, Mark Oppenheimer wrote a [profile](#) of Seckel for *Tablet*. He reported that Cornell’s alumni office said an “Alfred Paul Seckel” attended Cornell but never received a degree, and described a broader pattern of Seckel presenting himself as a Cornell graduate and a Caltech doctoral candidate when he was not. Seckel spent enough time around the Institute that some people assumed he was a grad student or postdoc. Among the important relationships he cultivated were with the late Richard Feynman and Murray Gell-Mann, whom he would invite to his house for dinners and parties.

Oppenheimer wrote that after Feynman’s death, and as Gell-Mann “became less active, not to mention more skeptical of Seckel,” Seckel built relationships “with two younger Caltech professors, who seemed not to know that Seckel had a past on campus,” namely Christof Koch and Shinsuke Shimojo, who also attended his parties.

Koch and Shimojo eventually learned Seckel was not actually a credentialed scientist, and they cooled on him. Caltech’s then-president David Baltimore, “who, of course, had also partied at Seckel’s house,” was pulled into the situation, stating it was hard to tell whether Seckel was “nefarious or just unusual.” Shimojo stated, “I did receive multiple warnings from multiple directions, including a few external people and Caltech officials (Baltimore, Biology) and Koch.” In the end, Caltech decided not to have an official relationship with Seckel, and Shimojo and Koch warned Seckel not to use their names in any official contexts.

After Caltech cut him off, Seckel hosted the Mindshift Conference. Caltech-affiliated attendees (former or current) included Gell-Mann and Koch. Gerald Sussman of MIT stated, “I got invited, I said, ‘Gee that’s interesting, I know nothing about Mr. Epstein or anything else. But if a rich man wants to talk about science, why not just get on a plane and go?’”

Files indicate that in September 2010, Seckel [offered](#) to clean up Epstein’s digital presence and “cause all that crap to disappear” for \$20K. He tried to [game](#) Google search results and [revise](#) Epstein’s Wikipedia entry by removing his mugshot and emphasizing material about his philanthropy. A few weeks before the Mindshift Conference, Epstein [wrote](#) to him, “Why don’t you stop and

look, the results are marginal.”

In 2015, Seckel was reportedly found dead at the base of a cliff near his home in southern France, where he lived with his wife, Isabel Maxwell (Ghislaine Maxwell’s sister). Reports of his death surfaced not long after Mark Oppenheimer’s profile was published. The profile also described allegations that Seckel defrauded rare-book buyers and sellers, including claims that he failed to pay for or failed to deliver books.

Why might academics have been mixed up with him and ended up on Epstein’s island? Many other academics have now found themselves in the hot seat, having to explain their appearance in the files, and say they engaged with Epstein largely because he was wealthy and might help fund university budgets and research—even though those interactions occurred after Epstein had pleaded guilty to procuring prostitution from a minor.

For better or worse, private donations have been a long-standing pillar of the funding for colleges and universities. According to [The New York Times](#), “some college presidents say they spend at least a quarter of their time fund-raising.” The dependence on private money can make schools more likely to seek or accept gifts from donors whose reputations are questionable.

CDS Celebrates Black History Month

Damian Wilson
The Inside World

On February 12, CDS celebrated Black History Month in Browne Dining Hall with a wide-ranging menu featuring soyrizo mac ‘n’ cheese, chicken and sausage gumbo (with a tofu option), BBQ jackfruit riblets, fried okra, jerk chicken and yams, shrimp grits (or tofu), chicken and waffles (with a vegetarian option), banana pudding, and biscuits. Themed décor added to the celebratory atmosphere.

(Photos: Kensuke Shimojo, Damian R. Wilson)



2025/2026 Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour Returns to Caltech

Abby Keebler
News

Join us on Tuesday, March 3rd for an unforgettable night at the Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour, brought to you by the Caltech Alpine Club! It’ll be a fun night of inspiring and

exhilarating outdoor adventure films. We’re also hosting a pre-show reception with free food and local outdoor adventure organizations and giving away incredible prizes donated by local sponsors at our raffle.

All proceeds from ticket revenue supports the Alpine Club’s

mission to make outdoor adventure accessible to all Caltech students. The Alpine Club purchases and maintains gear that you can rent for your own trips, as well as organizing regular outings. Grab your friends and come celebrate adventure, community, and the outdoors!

Scan the QR code for more details and to purchase tickets. (Credit: Paul Zizka)

Caltech Wildlife: Turtles and the Turtle Club

Jieyu Zheng
The Inside World

Finally, a column about the turtles! The turtles have been an integral part of the Caltech community, and much of this connection is made by the enthusiastic Caltech students themselves. This column collects information and legends about the turtles from Hannah Way, the current president of the Caltech Turtle Club. Through my interview with Hannah, I learned many surprising and fun facts about Caltech turtles. I hope you, the readers, will learn something new from this article as well.

The Caltech pond ecosystems (see the previous issue on this topic) now host roughly 130 turtles at their maximum carrying capacity. However, just a few decades ago, the ponds had very different residents. After the 1971 earthquake destroyed the former Throop Hall, the turtle pond, formally part of the Throop Memorial Garden, was constructed in 1973. The ponds were originally meant to be regular koi ponds, much like the water systems you'd see in

local gardens such as The Huntington Library or the LA Arboretum. Soon, the koi were replaced by crayfish, at one point by frogs, and only later did turtles begin to show up.

While a formal survey of the turtle population is still pending, it is safe to say that all the turtles in the Caltech ponds are pet releases or their descendants. The majority are red-eared sliders, the very turtles that inspired the iconic illustrations on the *California Tech* newspaper front pages. The “ethnic minorities” of the pond include one painted turtle, two razorback musk turtles, and two soft-shelled turtles named Pancake and Waffle. Sightings of these turtles are mysterious and unpredictable, and population counts have been pieced together solely through the spontaneous observations of various students – much like a criminal report assembled from collective evidence by many observant detectives. The Caltech Turtle Club has played a large role in this effort.

Like many fun and nerdy clubs at Caltech, the Caltech Turtle Club was founded by students with a pure love for

reptiles. The club's founder and current vice president, Rebecca Wipfler, along with President Hannah Way, are both graduate students in GPS. To spread their love for turtles, the club has run many educational programs for the public. These included a live stream of the turtle pond during Caltech Giving Day to share turtle joy with alumni, as well as outreach booths to answer questions from anyone strolling by the pond. Despite a modest annual budget of only \$200, the club managed to connect with the Tortoise Conservancy and the LA Natural History Museum to organize visits and outings for deeper learning about these reptiles.

“We would definitely benefit from a larger budget,” said President Hannah, already planning more events for the currently brumating club (brumation being the turtle equivalent of hibernation). The club has been fundraising by selling specially designed turtle shirts – an example can be seen in the photo of Vice President Rebecca next to this column. I've spotted this lovely shade of green around campus – in

the gym, at the cafeteria, and in classes. This is a symbol of the persistent love Caltech students share for these reptiles.

This love for turtles runs so deep that more than 600 students have signed a campaign to replace the Caltech mascot with turtles. While North American beavers are nowhere to be found in dry and sunny Southern California, turtles are far better everyday companions for students. Legend has it that stressed-out undergraduates will “claim” a turtle during the term as an emotional support animal, only to release it back to the pond at the end of the quarter before leaving for winter break. (Removing animals from the pond is not encouraged.) Clearly, turtles carry considerable weight in the hearts of Caltech students.

Rest assured, the turtles are well taken care of. A balanced pellet diet is provided daily by Caltech Facilities. According to Hannah, the pellets are placed on the pavement so turtles can carry their food back into the water, where they can moisten and enjoy it at leisure. Dumping human food into the pond, however, is unsafe. While tur-

tles may attempt to eat anything, uneaten food sinks to the bottom and degrades water quality. To keep the turtles healthy, it's best to refrain from feeding them.

The Turtle Club also offers guidance on how to interact with these beloved residents. If you see a turtle strolling in the middle of the road, it is usually fine on its own—even if it looks slow and clueless to human eyes. In springtime, female turtles often leave the pond to lay eggs, and it's best not to disturb them. Touching turtles with bare hands can transmit bacteria such as salmonella to humans, not to mention risking a turtle bite. Their beaks are powerful clamps, capable of breaking down food—and any perceived threats. If you do encounter a turtle in a roadway and are concerned, you can always call Caltech Facilities for assistance.

Whether as candidate mascot, myth, or legendary emotional support animal, the turtles remain a constant presence on campus – unbothered, sun-bathing, and very much at home at Caltech.



A red-eared slider making slow and steady moves towards you. (Credit: Jieyu Zheng)



A cool sunbathing crowd on the shore of the pond. (Credit: Jieyu Zheng)



Caltech Turtle Club President Hannah Way in her uniform at the club outreach event. (Credit: Hannah Way)



Vice President and Founder Rebecca Wipfler in the iconic turtle T-shirt. (Credit: Rebecca Wipfler)

A Kiwi Adventure

Otis Otieno
News

All photos by Otis Otieno.

“I’m going on an adventure,” shouts Bilbo Baggins in the first moments of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, after accepting Gandalf’s request to join the dwarves.

A huge *Hobbit* fan, I’d never given the line much thought. It was simply part of the script. It couldn’t rival Smaug’s chilling soliloquy on the mountain of gold, or Bilbo’s emotional farewell after the Battle of the Five Armies. It couldn’t have been the most essential line ... until it was.

I stepped into a chilly Auckland from a pretty bumpy Fiji Airways flight, my own adventure beginning. Anxiety magnified those first few steps towards immigration. That was my first solo trip, in a land where I had no friends or family. Anxiety was only natural. Some quick truths however dulled my anxieties. To start with, I had a whole itinerary already in place which if I bailed out then, I would lose a lot both by time and finances. Secondly, it was a country that I had never been to and what was the worst thing that could happen? If I got to see and experience places and cultures I had planned, that would be awesome. Such experiences were guaranteed good stories. If I missed a bus, or I lost my phone or any other terrible thing was to happen, that would be awful but no doubt I was guaranteed awesome stories (unless of course, I somehow got killed). Either way, I had a story. I turned to Reddit, my oracle for diverse views. Redditors unanimously praised New Zealand’s safety record and spoke highly of their experiences as tourists. My fears were washed away.

The Uber ride to my accommodation was the chilliest ride I had ever been, gliding under Auckland fog-haloed lights. Of course, most sports billboards flurried with rugby players — my first true confirmation I was in New Zealand.

If you’re born a Kiwi, you’re born into a devotional, till-death-do-us-part rugby fandom. Naturally, my first full day would be spent understanding New Zealand’s obsession with rugby, beginning at the *All Blacks Experience* at Sky City Towers. The tour began with a historical perspective on rugby in New Zealand, from the time it was introduced by Charles Monro in his hometown of Nelson, to grassroots development, to its quick adoption by the Maori community and its use in addressing societal concerns. I took interest in its quick adoption by the Maori. The Maori, indigenous peoples of New Zealand (*Aotearoa*), were already known for their strength, agility and swift foot, important skills for any rugby player.

Beyond their physical prowess, the Maori are greatly attributed to have introduced the spiritual connection to the game. The Maoris had a traditional game called *Ki-o-rahi* which resembles rugby with more of handball touch. In *Ki-o-rahi*, players participate in a circular field which is divided in zones, working with their teammates, doing their best to avoid tackles when they’re in

possession and tackling when not in possession. The game symbolized and resonated with Maori spiritual beliefs such as dynamism, pursuit of excellence and communal success. It was therefore no surprise that when rugby was introduced to them, played in rectangular fields instead of circular zones, a game that employed the use of an ovate instead of a circular ball, the Maoris didn’t break a sweat in the process of learning it.

Still on the spiritual, the Maori’s integration into the *All Blacks* was enough reason for the haka to be performed during significant rugby matches like matches at their home stadium in Auckland. The tour’s climax was a simulated haka experience of the *All Blacks* at Eden Park. The loud cheers and louder hearts of the Kiwis crashed into my face. From my side, I was face to face with Sam Whitelock, a former New Zealand rugby player.

Their captain commanded a few phrases and on the screen, the team hit a sumo squat pose. Sam’s jarring height now levelled with mine and his eyes locked onto mine, staring down deep into my soul. I reminded myself that it was not real and if it was real, I was not his enemy. Then the smashing of the palms onto the thighs began followed by the stomping of the feet into the ground. All sensation of real or not real didn’t matter. I was there and if I had never gotten a spiritual awakening, they would give me one as a team. The thunderous stomping along with arm dynamism ushers the spirits in the famous lines from the *Kamate haka*:

Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora, ka ora!

It is death, it is death, it is life, it is life

Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora, ka ora!

It is death, it is death, it is life, it is life

Tēnei te tangata pūhuru-

ru
Or do I see a hairy man
Nāna nei i tiki mai
whakawhiti te rā

who brought back the Sun, so it can shine on me once more?

Ā, upane! ka upane!

Then I will put one foot in front of the other —

Ā, upane, ka upane —

one foot, then the other —

whiti te rā!

until the Sun shines on me!

After that simulation, I wanted to be done with the tour. Nevertheless, an opportunity to get an *All Blacks* jersey as a souvenir meant I had to stick around for a little longer. Trying on an *All Blacks* jersey afterwards was a heavenly charge. It was as though spirits powered my heart, with chills streaming from marrow, piercing every nerve— a heightened sense of things. I felt like a mini-Thanos, stretching out, feeling the power coursing through me like I had acquired the last of the six infinity stones.

Next, I sought the source of that spirit: Rotorua. Unlike Auckland’s crisp air, Rotorua greeted me with the pungent kiss of hydrogen sulfide—a smell locals wore like a second skin. Rotorua, originally *Te Rotorua-nui-a-Kahumatamomoe*, in Maori simply translates to “the second great lake.” It was named by the great Maori explorer *Ihenga*, after his uncle *Kahumatamomoe*. It’s a city known for its geothermal activ-

ity and is a central hub for the Maoris. My research had overlooked the city’s geothermal heart, a fact I regretted upon discovering my hostel bed was a bottom bunk atop a natural oven. For two nights, raw earth heat cooked me alive.

At *Te Puia* Maori village, I witnessed woodcarvings that preserved ancestry in totems, legendary figures crowned at the top. Most of the arts and designs centered around preserving stories. As I learned, ancestors from the past that had achieved legendary feats, making the community proud were given priority vertically and would have a resemblance of them carved at the top. The lineage followed straight down to the present members of the family or community. I later joined the community for a *Hangi*, traditional Maori dinner cooked with steam from the earth which was followed by a *Powhiri*, a Maori welcome ceremony.

A steady melodic wooden rattle permeated through the then silent crowd, and a tribesman clamored Maori chants at us. He approached us with a *taiaha* (a traditional Maori weapon made from bone or wood with a sharp edge), with movements that were so in sync that I thought it was another routine welcome from him. The closer he got, the more his tatted body revealed itself. Swinging the *taiaha* through the air, his eyes bulged out of their sockets as his tongue lolled in his mouth, struggling to balance his bated breaths and the welcome chant. One of the instructions given to us was not to mess around by either laughing, giggling or doing anything creepy. Otherwise, we’d find out. Of course, nothing would happen except from maybe being banned from the tribal lands. But still, we weren’t the ones holding the *taiaha*.

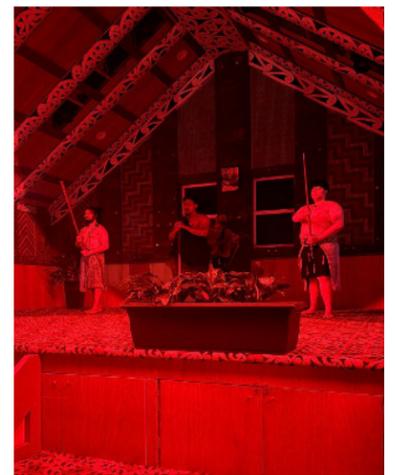
During the day, I met a Mexican guy called Sebastian. He was a giant and proudly Mexican; his entire upper body was draped in green, red and white. As the tribesman approached us, his steady storm of chants, swing of the *taiaha* and eyes of steel made Sebastian nervous. While in most regions of the world eye contact is translated as a sign of intimidation, for the Maoris, maintaining eye contact even during tense moments like a *Powhiri* is viewed as a sign of respect. The messenger locked eyes with Sebastian, and Sebastian looked to the side. Think about a 6’6” brick wall. That was Sebastian. So when they looked at each other eye to eye, it seemed as though Sebastian was looking at a little kid. The absurdity startled a giggle from me.

The tribesman pivoted to me. In one fluid jump, he was before me, the *taiaha* held aside. He ululated for five seconds, chanting Maori phrases and his eyes narrowed on mine. If I could describe the moment in words, it would sound something like this: *Boy oh boy! You will pay your respects or I will put the fear of God in you.* He turned away slowly and walked back to the homestead and alas, we were welcomed by the tribe.

“Sebastian, I think I almost pissed in my pants,” I said.

“Well, somebody had to find out,” he replied, and we laughed it off as we entered the hall.

That night, I learnt Maori culture through song, dance



At *Hobbiton* (left) and a Māori performance at a marae, or village (right).



At Milford Sound.



Display of the most famous *All Blacks* and Fern jerseys.

and games, plus the origin of the *Kamate Haka*. It was a war dance of defiance, composed by *Te Rauparaha* to celebrate his escape from enemies. It has become a unifying Maori and New Zealand anthem. When offered the chance to learn it, I threw myself in. After the final trial, my palms stung crimson, my feet felt light, and a restless energy hummed in my veins. Had war called, I was ready.

The rest of my journey was nature’s own high. Milford Sound was the climax to New Zealand’s beauty. Snowmelt falls hurled into the sea, with enthusiasm, letting rip clashes of water from above and water there below. Some falls didn’t make it so far below, but swirled with the swirly Tasman breezes, producing rainbows across the horizon. The snow-capped Alps extended their majesty in all directions to the Tasman sea and the sun watched over all like a king on the iron throne. Being there, at nature’s high, was a system reset I so needed.

Of course my itinerary included a visit to the Shire. In a world that prizes towering height, it was delightful to find a place where my stature was an advantage. The Swedish basketballer who was in front of me as we dived into the hobbit holes didn’t have so much fun. In Bag End, was a rocky chair, next to Bilbo’s chimney with a cup of ginger beer next to it. These were two good combinations. Naturally, I sat on the

chair and swung a bit, sniffing the cup of beer to see whether it was fresh or they hadn’t changed it since the filming of the trilogy. On the table, there lay a note, written in medieval font.

“The world is not in your books and maps, it’s out there,” the note insisted. Only then did I understand Bilbo’s thrill for adventure.

Last summer’s journey seeped into my bones. It quieted the relentless grind in my head, replacing it with mountain silences and the chatter of strange marketplaces. Alone, with no itinerary but my own curiosity, I learned to trust the turn in the road and the stranger’s smile. For the first time, the world wasn’t a concept—it was a vivid, breathing truth right before my eyes, breathtaking in its simplicity and scale.

So I write this to you, if that quiet longing for a bit of wander ever stirs: take that first step. Yes, it’s daunting (bring a friend if you must). You might not have the comfort of your own little Bag-End, and you definitely won’t slay any dragons. But I can promise you the unparalleled thrill of truly feeling alive. The world is out there. Seek it, and meet it.

Info from the FASA Office: [The SanPietro application window](#) is open and is due by March 10, 2026.

For more information, go to fasa.caltech.edu.

Innovating Through Irritation with Dr. Jordan Shlain

Damian R. Wilson
Science & Tech

Dr. Jordan Shlain, who presented to the Caltech Longevity Club on January 28, framed his work as a form of moral friction: a refusal, throughout his career, to accept incentives that reward sickness over health. A physician-entrepreneur and civic leader in San Francisco, Shlain has built his companies and philosophy around a single organizing principle: trust.

Shlain is the founder of Private Medical, a concierge-style primary care practice built on a “trust-first” model of personalized, preventive medicine. He previously founded HealthLoop, an early clinical engagement and workflow automation platform designed to track patients between visits and reduce post-discharge complications and hospital readmissions. Beyond medicine, he has worked to improve school nutrition through Eat Real, served in governance roles on San Francisco boards and commissions (including the Health Services Board and Entertainment Commission), and acted as Editor-in-Chief of *Tincture*, a digital publication covering health, science, technology, and policy.

His organizing principle is simple: if you want better outcomes, fix incentives — and start upstream.

Shlain’s critique begins with a structural shift in American healthcare. Decades ago, health insurance functioned like other forms of insurance: a hedge against catastrophic events. But as insurers evolved into “health plans,” primary care became the intake valve for a system that profits from complexity: surgeries, high-cost drugs, procedures, hospital readmissions.

The result? A primary care physician managing 3,500 to 5,000 patients, seeing thirty a day, with minutes per visit. “You can get through maybe a single issue,” Shlain explained in an interview with the *Tech*. “How can anybody manage that many people with any degree of consistency or quality?”

Concierge or direct primary care, in his view, attempts to reconstitute the doctor-patient relationship. Patients pay directly for a physician with a dramatically smaller panel. That time buys more than longer appointments: it buys context — family history, stressors, goals, preferences — and post-visit work (research, specialist calls, follow-ups) that traditional billing structures don’t reimburse.

The question shifts from “What’s the matter with you?” to “What matters to you?”

Shlain contends that this model improves population health within its cohort, lowers burnout among physicians, and — if practiced well — reduces total system costs by preventing downstream crises. The irony, he suggests, is that a system built to monetize transactions has little appetite for fewer transactions.

Trust as operating sys-

tem

Trust, operationally, requires eliminating supply-side moral hazard. At Private Medical, physicians do not profit from ordering tests, prescribing medications, or referring to specialists. Revenue is fixed annually. If patients get sicker, the workload rises without financial gain. Outcomes and incentives are on the same ledger.

Trust also emerges from culture. Hiring prioritizes what Shlain calls “natural healers,” or doctors drawn to medicine as a calling. Retention rates exceed 95% over two decades. Communication is architecturally encoded: phone, text, and email are available, but used within an implicit social contract. A 2 a.m. call signals urgency, not anxiety. Over time, doctor and patient develop rhythm and mutual respect.

“The 24/7 promise,” he clarified, “is really about trust, not availability.” Burnout, he argues, stems less from being needed than from being reduced to a billing code processor.

Prevention without the circus

Prevention, in Shlain’s framework, is strategic rather than performative. Foundational interventions such as sleep, exercise, diet, fiber intake, blood pressure, and lipid control remain the highest signal-to-noise moves for most healthy adults. (He quipped that fiber deserves more hype than protein; gut-produced short-chain fatty acids influence satiety and serotonin production.)

Risk assessment proceeds in layers: foundational metrics, then genetics and advanced imaging, then highly targeted intervention. Data informs strategy, but without replacing judgement.

Shlain is sharply critical of what he calls the “longevity circus”: unvalidated peptides, wellness IV drips (with potential nanoparticle contamination from plastic bags), aggressive over-testing, and biomarker maximalism. “Longevity is not a biomarker-deficiency syndrome,” he said. Quarterly lab panels often amplify false positives without improving outcomes.

More is not better. “Better is better.”

The key statistical concept is pretest probability. When the likelihood of disease is low and the false positive rate exceeds that baseline risk, testing can generate cascades of unnecessary interventions—what Shlain deems “medical safaris.” The quantified self, untethered from evidence, risks becoming a lifestyle of perpetual anxiety.

His counsel: don’t refuse access to data with expertise. Tacit knowledge, earned through training and pattern recognition, cannot be crowd-sourced from search engines or AI alone.

HealthLoop and the incentive problem

At HealthLoop, Shlain sought to improve post-operative follow-up and clinical communication. The platform reduced

hospital readmissions — by as much as 50% in certain contexts — via structuring check-ins and surfacing early warning signs.

But success collided with perverse incentives. Hospitals are reimbursed more for readmissions. Lowering complications, in a free-for-service paradigm, erodes revenue.

Healthcare innovation, he argued, repeatedly “goes to die” at the payment layer. Federalism compounds that challenge: healthcare is not one national system, but fifty regulatory regimes. Add a workforce shortage in primary care and nursing, and “you can’t software your way out of a people problem.”

Two-Tier critique — and a rebuttal

Concierge medicine is often criticized as entrenching a two-tier system. Shlain’s steelman from our interview acknowledges the optics: if some can “power up” their care, inequities may widen.

His counterargument is comparative. Education, housing, transportation, and food already operate in tiered markets with baseline public access and optional private augmentation. Why, he asks, is healthcare uniquely expected to resist this structure? Provided a strong baseline exists for all, innovation at the high end can fund experimentation and eventually democratize improvements — much like early electric vehicles that began at luxury price points before scaling.

Still, he emphasizes support for AI and other tools to broaden access. The ethical guardrail, in his view, is whether better care for some comes at the expense of others.

AI: amplifier or eraser?

Shlain remains optimistic about AI, but wary.

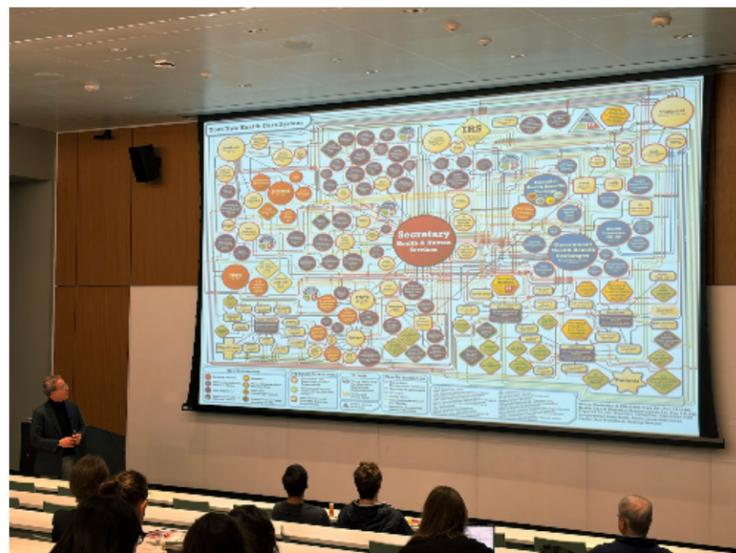
The risk is not that AI will replace physicians outright; it is that institutions will use AI to automate the relationship out of medicine. Insurers could deny claims faster. Pricing could grow more opaque. Information asymmetry could widen.

In response, Shlain has proposed a “[Hippocratic Oath for the AI era](#)”: a requirement that algorithms and institutions demonstrate, transparently and continuously, that they do no harm. The departures from Hippocrates are twofold: the oath binds not only individual physicians but also institutions, and it explicitly addresses the exploitation of patient data — which he describes as “an extension of the patient’s body and dignity,” such that treating it as a commodity constitutes a violation.

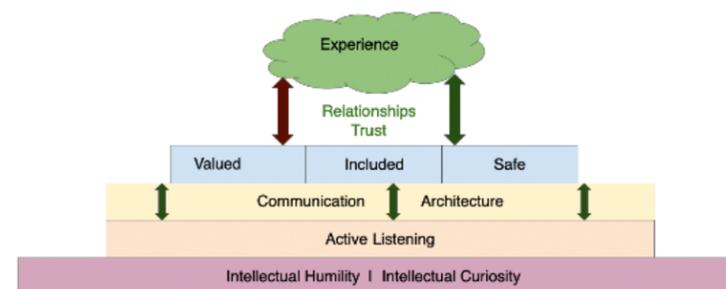
The technology exists to audit outcomes in real time. Whether the will exists to demand accountability remains open.

Irritation as innovation

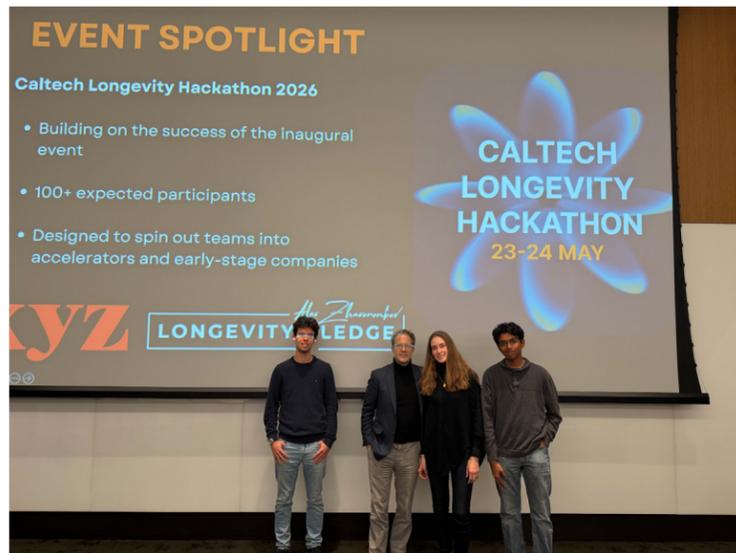
The talk’s title was less a slogan than a posture. It is the refusal to accept burnout as inevitable, to accept incentives misaligned with health, to accept that more data equals



Shlain presented as part of a speaker series for the Caltech Longevity Club, which is led by Andrea Olsen (CNS/BEM ‘27). Other club leaders include William Wang (BS ‘29) as Vice President and Team Members Mahi Ravi (ChemE ‘26, Lloyd) and João Pedro Bra Cardoso Ferreira Bastos (CS ‘26, Blacker). (Photo: Caltech Longevity Club)



The multiple levels of communication and trust architecture that define Shlain’s business practices. (Image: Jordan Shlain)



Caltech Longevity Club members with Dr. Jordan Shlain. Left to right: JP Bastos, Shlain, Andrea Olsen, and Ayush Natarajan. (Photo: Caltech Longevity Club)

more wisdom. It is irritation with a system that monetizes sickness — and belief that trust, properly engineered, can be scalable.

At Caltech, where STEM culture prizes first principles, Shlain’s message resonated as both structural critique and ethical invitation: if you redesign the incentives, the behavior follows. If you restore the relationship, prevention becomes possible.

And if you want to live well, don’t spend your life chasing biomarkers. Spend it doing what you’re great at.

In closing — book recs!

Jordan Shlain closed his talk with a plethora of book recommendations. These were:

- [Humility Is the New Smart](#) by Edward D. Hess & Katherine Ludwig

- [The Secret Life of Proteins](#) by James W. Pennebaker

- [Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect](#) by Matthew D. Lieberman

- [Ignorance: How It Drives Science](#) by Stuart Firestein

- [The Truth About Trust](#) by David DeSteno

- [Palaces for the People](#) by Eric Klinenberg

Together, they mirror the themes of Shlain’s talk: humility, language, social connection, uncertainty, trust, and the civic infrastructure that makes human flourishing possible.

Thank you, Dr. Shlain, for taking the time both to present on our campus and have a follow-up conversation for our newspaper. We appreciate it tremendously.

The Eyes That Search for Tomorrow — Part I

Camilla Fezzi

The Outside World

All names and identifying details in this narrative have been altered to protect privacy. The scenes represent composite experiences and reflections from critical care shadowing, not specific individuals or cases. Dialogue is paraphrased and not verbatim.

The fluorescent lights in intensive care units never sleep. Neither, it seems, do I anymore — not really. Not since I began shadowing in critical care, where the air itself feels heavier, saturated with the mechanical rhythm of ventilators breathing for those who cannot.

6:47 a.m. Morning Rounds.

The shift begins before sunrise. I scrubbed my hands for the third time this morning, wondering if I'm washing away yesterday's ghosts or preparing for today's. Through the glass partition, I can see her — a woman whose body has become a landscape of tubes. Her body has become a battlefield where medicine wages its most desperate war. The attending physician is already there, her voice low and steady as she explains severe infection and shock in a medically fragile patient. The words float past me — vasopressors, lactate levels, cytokine storms — but what I cannot stop staring at are the patient's eyes.

They're open. Just slightly. A sliver of white and a hint of iris visible between lids that can't quite close anymore. The pupils don't focus. But there's something there — some flicker of awareness, or maybe it's just the reflection of the monitor lights — that makes me wonder if she's trapped inside, screaming. If she can hear her family in the waiting room, making urgent phone calls. If she knows she's drowning from the inside out while machines breathe for her and push medicines through her veins that can't save her.

I've read about ICU delirium. About how sedation and illness create a hellscape of consciousness. But reading about it and seeing those half-open eyes that might be witnessing their own death in slow motion — that's different. That follows you home.

Her hand lies on the white sheet, perfectly still except for the faint tremor that comes with each mechanical breath the ventilator forces into her lungs. Someone has painted her nails a soft pink. Recently, I think. Maybe last week, before the infection. Before her eyes stopped seeing.

"The family is in the waiting room," the nurse says quietly. She's been here twelve hours already, her eyes carrying that particular exhaustion that comes not from physical tiredness but from witnessing too much. "They want to know if they should call their relatives."

9:23 a.m. family Conference Room.

The conference room is small, claustrophobic despite its generous size. The husband sits in a plastic chair that seems designed to make grief more uncomfortable. His daughter translates, her composure cracking at the edges like dried earth. A son appears on a video call screen, his face pixelated but his anguish crystal clear across the distance.

The attending physician —

whose calm presence somehow makes bad news slightly more bearable — explains worsening organ failure. The treatment that was supposed to save her has left her immune system in ruins; infection has become overwhelming.

But the daughter isn't listening to the explanation. Not really. I can see it in her eyes. Her pupils are dilated wide, darting between the physician and the monitor showing her mother's vital signs, looking for hope the way a drowning person looks for shore.

She asks about another medication, a different treatment, or something more aggressive. I can see on her phone that she's been researching frantically.

The physician answers gently: multiple therapies have been tried, and the body is now too fragile for more. He chooses words like someone walking through a minefield. I watch the physician's eyes, and I see something that will haunt me: the weight of being the person who has to say there are no options.

"I understand that you came here believing we could save her. And we tried. We have tried everything." He leans forward slightly. "But sometimes the disease is too far ahead. Sometimes the body is too tired."

This is the cruelest mathematics of critical care: the next thing is never the thing that works, but you can't know that until you try it. And trying it means more needles, more tubes, more days of drowning slowly, more false hope inflating and collapsing like damaged lungs.

"We can keep trying," the physician says carefully. "But you need to understand — we would be prolonging her dying, not her living."

The words hit like a physical blow.

The father starts to cry. Not the Hollywood kind of crying, but the terrible, silent convulsion of a man who has run out of sounds to make. His daughter puts her hand on his shoulder, and I see in her eyes the moment she decides: she will keep hoping because he cannot. She will search for solutions that don't exist because the alternative — accepting that her mother is leaving — is unacceptable.

"We'll keep trying," she says, her voice steady now, hardened into determination. "We didn't come here to give up." On the screen, the distant family member's face disappears as he turns away from the camera. The room fills with the specific silence that comes when everyone knows the truth but not everyone can admit it yet.

11:15 a.m. Bedside.

The patient's eyes are still half-open, still not seeing. But now her husband is here, standing beside the bed, holding her hand — the one with the pink nails — and talking to her softly.

Her eyes don't respond. But his do. I watch tears roll down his face while he smiles at her, and his eyes say everything: I see you. I'm here with you. I won't leave. The daughter stands on the other side of the bed, her phone in her hand, asking about newer therapies she's read about.

The monitor alarm screams. A clinician moves quickly, adjusting settings. The machine makes an obscene sucking sound. The oxygen saturation

drops further — and doesn't recover as quickly this time. I watch the daughter's eyes track the numbers on the monitor, see her face go pale, see hope and terror fighting for dominance. She looks at her mother's face, at those half-open eyes that might be aware of everything, might be already gone.

"Mom?" she whispers. "Mama, can you hear me?"

Nothing. Just the mechanical rise and fall of the ventilator. Just the numbers on the screen doing their slow, inevitable decline.

2:47 p.m. Another Room.

A young man. Admitted days ago with serious complications of a major illness and its treatment. His wife sits in the chair beside his bed, visibly pregnant, clutching his hand.

She has not left since he was intubated. She just sits there, watching his face, her eyes red and swollen but still open wide, as if blinking might mean missing something important.

I a.m. holding his chart, pretending to read his labs, but really I a.m. watching his wife. The way her eyes never leave his face. The way she studies every twitch, every tiny muscle movement, looking for signs of consciousness, of recognition, of hope.

"His oxygen is at 94%," she says suddenly. "This morning it was 91%. So that's an improvement, right? That means he's getting better." The nurse practitioner comes in to examine him. She says nothing about the oxygen saturation, but I can see in her eyes what she's not saying: that his blood pressure is dropping despite maximum support. That his kidneys are shutting down. That the three-point improvement in oxygen saturation is like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

But the wife is clinging to that 94% like a life raft. Her eyes are bright with it, desperate with it.

"And his heart rate is better too, see? It was higher this morning. That's better, right?" She looks up at the nurse practitioner, her eyes begging for confirmation, for someone to tell her that these tiny numbers mean everything, mean he's going to live, mean their baby will have a father.

The nurse practitioner sits down. Actually sits right there on the floor beside the chair, so she's looking up at the wife instead of down. Her eyes are kind but honest — that terrible combination that means bad news delivered with compassion.

"Those small changes," she says carefully, "they can happen hour to hour. They don't always mean what we want them to mean."

"But they could mean that, right?" The wife's voice is pleading. "They could mean he's fighting back. He's strong. Everyone says how strong he is. His doctor said he had a good attitude, that attitude matters. He wants to meet our baby. He's not giving up."

"I know he's fighting," the nurse practitioner says. "I can see that. We're all seeing that. But sometimes —" She pauses, choosing her words like someone defusing a bomb. "Sometimes the body can't fight anymore, no matter how strong the spirit is." The wife's eyes flash. "Are you giving up on him?"

"No. We're not giving up. We're doing everything we can."

"Then why are you talking

like he's dying?"

The question hangs in the air. Because he IS dying. Everyone in this room can see it except her, or maybe she can see it too but refuses to look directly at it. I a.m. beginning to understand the language of dying in the ICU: it is written in numbers that trend in the wrong direction, in medications that reach their limits, in organs that shut down like lights going out in a house, one room at a time.

"I'm talking," the nurse practitioner says gently, "like someone who wants to make sure you understand how serious this is. So that you can be prepared. So that you can say the things you need to say."

The wife's eyes are wild with hope and desperation and denial all fighting each other. She pulls out her phone. "Look," she says, shoving the phone toward the nurse practitioner. "This person recovered. It happens. You're not gods. You can't know for sure that he won't —" "You're right," the nurse practitioner says. "We can't know with 100% certainty. Medicine isn't like that."

The wife's eyes light up. "So there's a chance."

"There's always a chance," the nurse practitioner says, but her eyes are sad, and I understand what she's doing: she's giving this woman permission to hope because taking away all hope would be too cruel, even if holding onto false hope might be crueler in the long run.

The wife nods fiercely and turns back to her husband, back to monitoring every number on every screen, back to believing that if she just hopes hard enough, she can find the solution that doesn't exist.

I have to leave the room. I make it to the hallway before my vision blurs, before the weight of witnessing that kind of hope — that beautiful, terrible, futile hope — becomes too much to carry while standing upright.

4:15 p.m. Medication Room.

I find the nurse in the medication room, preparing medications. Her hands are steady, but her eyes are exhausted — that deep, soul-level exhaustion that comes from watching people search for solutions to unsolvable problems.

"How do you do it?" I ask. "How do you watch them hope when you know — when you know —"

"That hope is all they have left?" She doesn't look up from her work. "Because sometimes I'm wrong. Not often, but sometimes. And because even when I'm not wrong, their hope isn't for me to take away. It's theirs. It's the only thing they have left that feels like control."

"But it's false hope," I say. "It's cruel, isn't it? Letting them believe —"

"Is it more cruel than taking it away?" She finally looks at me.

"We walk a line. We tell the truth, but we don't take their hope by force. We let them come to it themselves, in their own time. Even if that time is hours before death. Even if they never come to it at all and their person dies while they're still searching for miracles." She pauses. "Is that cruel? Maybe. But I haven't found a better way yet. If you do, let me know."

5:33 p.m. Comfort Care.

There is a patient whose name I never learn. An older adult with advanced illness. He is here for comfort care while

they try to stabilize him enough to go home to die.

He is awake. Lucid. Pain-medication-softened around the edges, but present. His grown children rotate through the room in shifts because only limited visitors are allowed at a time. They have brought pictures, which they've taped to the walls: him on a boat, him at a celebration, him holding a grandchild.

When I walk in, his daughter is sitting beside him, laptop open, reading something intently. She looks up when she sees me, and her eyes are red from crying but also burning with that familiar desperation.

"I'm reading about new treatments," she says to me, to him, to the room. "There's a clinical trial across the country. And there's this new therapy that just got approved internationally —"

"Sweetie," the man says, his voice hoarse but gentle, "I'm not going."

"But if we could just —"

"I'm not going," he repeats, and his eyes are clear, calm, already somewhere beyond desperate hope. "I'm going home. Or I'm going from here to wherever comes next. But I'm not chasing treatments anymore."

His daughter's face crumples. "But there might be something. There might be a way to —"

"There isn't." He says it with such certainty, such peace, that it feels almost violent in contrast to her frantic searching. "Baby girl, I need you to hear me. I'm dying. Not because we didn't try hard enough. Not because we gave up. Just because this is what happens. This is how life ends."

"How?" she whispers. "How do you just accept it?"

"I don't accept it," he says. "I'm angry as hell about it. I wanted to see my grandchildren grow up. I wanted to retire and enjoy every day. I wanted twenty more years, but wanting doesn't change what is. And I'm tired, baby. I'm so tired of fighting. I want to rest."

His daughter is sobbing now, and he reaches out with a shaking hand to touch her face. "You can keep searching if you need to," he says gently. "You can research every clinical trial in the world. You can hope for miracles. That's your right. But I'm done searching. I'm done hoping for different endings. I'm ready for this ending."

She nods, but I can see in her eyes that she's not done searching. Maybe she'll never be done. Maybe she'll spend the rest of her life wondering what if — what if they'd found that trial sooner, what if they'd tried that treatment, what if she'd just searched a little harder, read a little more, found the solution that was hiding just out of reach.

The man catches my eye. "You're new," he says. His voice is hoarse but strong enough to carry truth.

"I'm shadowing," I manage. "Learning."

He makes a sound that might be a laugh. "Hell of a classroom." He pauses, winces, waits for a wave of pain to pass. His daughter immediately reaches for her laptop, as if the answer to his pain might be in the next article, the next study, the next page of search results.

"What are you learning?" he asks me.

It is a genuine question. He actually wants to know. And suddenly, standing in this room that smells like antiseptic and

approaching death, with this man who will probably not see next week and his daughter who is still desperately searching for ways to save him, I find I cannot give him the answer I'm supposed to give.
"I'm learning," I say slowly, "that there's a difference between hope and acceptance.

And that sometimes the kindest thing we can do is stop searching and just... be present."
His eyes soften. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah. And you know what else?"
"What?"
"Sometimes the solution they're looking for —" he nods toward his daughter, who's

wiping her eyes and opening a new browser tab," — isn't a cure. Sometimes the solution is just permission. Permission to stop fighting, to say I did my best and it wasn't enough and that's okay."
His daughter makes a small sound, and he takes her hand. "I'm giving you permission

too," he tells her. "Permission to stop searching. You didn't fail. Medicine didn't fail. Sometimes disease just wins. That's not your fault."
She shakes her head, and her eyes go back to the screen, back to searching, back to hoping because accepting is impossible.
I stay for another moment,

watching them — the man who's ready and the daughter who's not, the peace and the desperation existing side by side, impossible to reconcile. Then quietly, I slip out.

2026 San Gabriel Valley Food Passport

Victoria Davis
Column

Time to review a few more restaurants featured in the 2026 SGV Food Passport! Last issue, I reviewed Lee's Hoagie House and Paris Baguette. This time, I have explored two other places featured in the passport. *All photos by Victoria Davis.*

Taco Libre

Passport description: "Teddy Bedjakian brings bold flavors to Old Pasadena with Taco Libre, offering a modern twist on tacos in a lively alley setting."

Passport benefit: Buy 1 Get 1 Taco + Free Fountain Drink
Kayane and I visited Taco Libre. Not too many people were here, but we decided to dine in. The restaurant has a fun atmosphere, with a mural painted on the walls. Kayane ordered the carnitas burrito. It was a good size, perfect for

leftovers! Per the passport benefit, I ordered two soft tacos (one birria, one carnitas) and a Dr Pepper. I also ordered a crispy potato taco, as the tacos were fairly small. Kayane and I were so hungry, I forgot to take a picture of the food before we ate! Kayane felt the burrito was good. I liked the birria taco and the crispy potato taco a lot, but the carnitas taco was pretty mid. Overall, I probably wouldn't come back here for tacos again. I know many more LA locations for excellent tacos that make these pale in comparison.

Savvy's Coffee Shop

Passport description: "Savvy's Café, by Teddy Bedjakian and daughter Savannah, serves hand-crafted drinks and pastries in Old Pasadena"
Passport benefit: Buy Any Drink, Get One Free (equal or lesser value)
Shockingly, Savvy's is right next to Taco Libre! So



Kayane and I stopped in after lunch to grab coffee. This coffee shop is owned by the same guy who owns Taco Libre too! He also owns Edwin Mills, which is also in the same alley

as Savvy's and Taco Libre. The coffee here was excellent. I ordered an Iced Mocha and Kayane got a free Iced White Mocha. They were so good. We also really liked the aesthetics

of the coffee shop. We'd definitely stop here again in the future. They had solid drinks; I also want to try some of their specialty drinks next time I am here.

Taco Libre

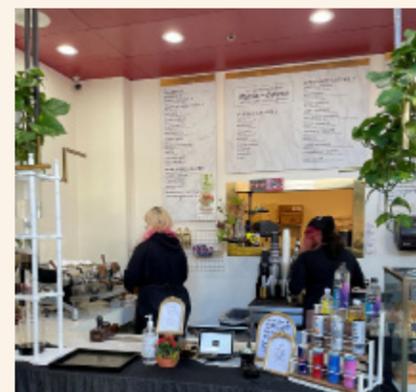


Exterior and interior of Taco Libre.



Carnitas Burrito and Crispy Potato Taco by Taco Libre.

Savvy's Coffee Shop



Exterior and interior of Savvy's Coffee Shop.



Iced Mocha and Iced White Mocha Lattes by Savvy's Coffee Shop.

Editor's Note: We want to hear your perspective!

We strive to represent every voice in the Caltech Community with fairness, accuracy, and impartiality in our news reporting. If you think we missed something, or just want to share your thoughts about a topic we've reported on, I encourage you to submit a Letter to the Editor!

Send submissions or contact the Tech editorial team at

tech@caltech.edu

Submissions are due at 12 p.m. on the Saturday before each biweekly Tuesday publication.

The Return of *Tomodachi Life*

Clare Wu
News

Tomodachi Life was released in Japan in 2013. A year later, it hit Western markets a month after being promoted by the *Tomodachi Life* Direct. In this Direct, Nintendo legends Reggie Fils-Aimé, Bill Trinen, and Satoru Iwata appeared as Miis to explain gameplay and Mii customization. Additional promotion included television ads showing children putting family members in the game and enjoying the wacky disconnect between in-game representations and real life. Celebrities also joined in, with custom Miis of Christina Aguilera and Shaquille O'Neal available through the American Tomodachi Life website.

Now, 12 years later, we finally see the return of *Tomodachi Life*. In a way, it's almost a miracle.

Miis were always most strongly associated with the Nintendo Wii, Nintendo's fifth home console, which was produced from 2006 to 2013. The Wii was already special for its innovation of motion controls and unique marketing. At a time when video games were the center of a moral panic surrounding violence and occult imagery, the Wii stood out because of its focus on family-friendly fun with a "healthy" fitness aspect. Miis were a part of this marketing tactic, and soon they were everywhere—even in non-Nintendo franchises. 81 games on the Wii incorporated Miis, mainly as save icons, but several let one play as their Mii. The most famous of these was, of course, *Wii Sports Resort* (Miis were featured also in *Wii Sports*, although the game was admittedly less popular).

Because of this deep tie between *Wii Sports Resort* and Miis, it was a shock when Nintendo released *Nintendo Switch Sports*. It was expected to be the successor to *Wii Sports*. To many people's horror it came with "Sportsmates" on the box. Sure one could import Miis into the game, but both the marketing and the option to import them seemed to be buried. The option to make Miis was also on the Nintendo Switch, but only if you were seeking it—unlike the Wii where you were encouraged.

In general, it felt indicative of a shift in Nintendo's perception with the new console. While the previous home console differentiated itself through a fitness focused perspective and featured entertaining Nintendo property games as a bonus, the new Switch was more interested in becoming an actual gaming console. There was a strong sentiment that Nintendo was becoming more serious and losing its general goofiness. The last Mii-centric game had been *Miitopia* in 2017, and while it was remastered for the Switch in 2021, it was more to market to those who had already

played the game. Miis seemed on their way out.

However, Miis are back with *Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream*; the affiliated Direct gives some hope for this new entry in the franchise. In this article, I cover all the new and interesting mechanics introduced.

Mii Creation

Along with the traditional method of creating Miis through selection of facial features and their coordinates, Nintendo has added a "Get help" option. Here, instead of having to choose the appearance, the player answers questions about a person's appearance. While the actual process was not shown, I imagine it could generate a face and then give "similar" faces to select from. They could continue to generate "similar" faces until the player is happy, a feature that existed in the old Mii makers on the Wii.

We've also seen an improvement in Mii customization from the previous *Tomodachi Life*, though there aren't as many options as the Mii maker in *Miitopia*. One can control face shape, skin color, hair style and color, eyebrows, eye shape, nose shape, mouth shape, ears, glasses, makeup, and it seems like there's an option for face paint. There are also sliders for height and body type, but I see those being somewhat limiting. The biggest innovation I saw was the potential for multi-colored hair and hair style combinations. However, I do wonder if they will bring back the option to scan in other people's Miis like in *Miitopia*. It's inevitable that someone will try to put Sans or Obama on their island.

Perhaps the best new addition was the addition of a non-binary option to the gender select screen. In past games, Miis were limited to just male or female and could only fall in love with the opposite gender, but now you can select "dating preferences" and have your Mii be interested in multiple genders or even none. The best returning feature is also in Mii creation with the *Tomodachi Life* personality test. With only five scales to rank your Mii on, the personality test often returns a surprisingly accurate personality type from its 16 options.

Another small detail I noticed is that the first Mii you create is no longer intended to be your stand-in. Previously, the player would be addressed as the first Mii's "look-alike." However, it's shown in the Direct that you are no longer someone's "look-alike" but instead the island's "Leader." This reflects a change in what *Tomodachi Life* is supposed to represent. Previously, it was meant to be populated with real acquaintances, so you could laugh at how they performed in-game compared to real life. However, many ignored that aspect to create fictional characters or import fic-



Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream is the third entry in the franchise, following *Tomodachi Collection* (2009) and *Tomodachi Life* (2013). (Image: Nintendo)

tional characters from popular media. It seems that Nintendo is adapting to cater more to that style of play than the original intention, which I think is a good move. It makes sense to prioritize catering to those who played the game over newcomers, as the premise itself of *Tomodachi Life* is one of the weirder concepts out there. One could compare it to *The Sims*, but it has more of a focus on interpersonal relationships than on simulating daily life.

Overall, the new Mii creation reflects how time has passed: customization is better, graphics have improved, and there's more acceptance of alternate genders and sexualities. In a time where so many denounce these things, it's so nice to see a major company like Nintendo embrace them.

Mii Interactions

To begin with, Mii interactions start out very simple, at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The first complaint that you resolve is always that a Mii is hungry. Each Mii will have a favorite and least favorite food that you have to find, so experimentation with food is encouraged. How much a Mii is fed depends on how much they like the food. The player can also customize their outfits and room by purchasing pre-made options from the associated stores as commonly requested. Players have even more influence by giving phrases or poses for the Miis to adopt, making each character even more unique.

We also see an increase in more physical interactions with Miis. *Tomodachi Life* on the 3DS essentially limited interactions with a Mii to their apartment space, where one would talk to their Mii and maybe poke or prod. Outside of that, you couldn't really interact with them unless they had a request. Now, they've introduced a drag-and-drop mechanic where you can force Miis together to interact or even comfort each other around the island. Depending on the situations you force them into, their relationships and feelings can change. Then based on interpersonal relationships, Miis will naturally

interact on their own.

Buildings

There are some classic returning buildings and some exciting new ones. From the old games, we have the food market (Fresh Kingdom), clothes store (Where & Wear), news (News Station), photo studio (Foto-tomo), and rooms store (T&C Reno). Markets also make a return, but instead of being a limited time event they've been given a permanent location at the Marketplace where you can gamble on mystery bags. The new buildings include an island decoration shop (Quik-Build) and some other buildings seen around the island that were not showcased.

Perhaps the most exciting new building though is the Palette House. Here you can draw custom pets, TV shows, or clothes. You can also change the exterior design of houses and introduce themes to your island. I hope to see some inspiration from *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* here as well where players could use a similar feature to make custom designs and share them freely with codes. Otherwise, I could see this going underutilized by those who don't have the time to design things on their own.

Island Customization

Previously, Miis all lived in one big apartment building, with each Mii getting a singular room. In *Living the Dream*, it seems like they're taking a more *Animal Crossing* approach, with each Mii getting their own small house by default. However, they can also move into a large building together that the player can control the layout of to include common areas and activities for the Miis to gather around. Still, regardless of residence, each Mii seems to only get one room. However, their buildings can be moved around.

The 3DS release of *Tomodachi Life* had a set layout for the island. No matter what, each building had a set location that could not be changed. However, it seems that Nintendo took note of how much players enjoyed the decorating aspect of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and decided to give a lot

more creative control to players in decorating the island. Additionally, unlike *Animal Crossing*, you can actually change the shape of your island. It's a little off-putting how there are no round edges and the island must be laid out on a grid system, but I can understand that it might be necessary for gameplay reasons. This is because you can actually build custom areas to facilitate interactions between Miis.

One example they showed in the Direct is the construction of a hangout area with a vending machine and picnic table. Instead of being a prepackaged "hangout" area, the individual components are placed separately but maintain synergy between each other. More examples shown briefly include water fountains, a water sprinkler, and flowers. Miis can even request island decorations to be added, indicating that there is some awareness of Miis of the island outside of their own rooms.

A Moment of Silence

Of course with the new game we've seemed to have lost some of the old mechanics. A moment of silence for the rankings board, compatibility tester, and job diagnosis buildings. They might come back, but it's not for certain. One of the biggest omissions from the Direct is the Concert Hall, which would've allowed Miis to sing songs with lyrics written by the players. This is also probably one of the most well-known eccentricities of *Tomodachi Life*, as Miis would cheerfully sing lyrics regardless of content. One could theorize that the lack of control over lyric content posed a problem to Nintendo's image and so they had to get rid of the building. A similar concern could've been raised surrounding the Question Hall/Judgement Bay where Miis would randomly vote between two options created by the player. As it stands neither of these iconic features will be brought back.

Release Date

The new *Tomodachi Life* will be released for both the Switch and Switch 2 on April 16, 2026 for \$60.

Why You Shouldn't Buy *GTA VI*

Clare Wu
Opinion

The sixth *Grand Theft Auto* game has been highly anticipated ever since it was announced in 2023, even winning the Most Anticipated Game at The Game Awards in 2025. It's set to be published by Rockstar Games on Nov. 19, 2026 and is projected to earn hundreds of millions of dollars. It will undoubtedly be the most anticipated game release of the year.

You shouldn't buy it. The projected \$80 price tag is egregious enough, with some rumors claiming that it will even be \$100. More importantly, you shouldn't buy it because Rockstar Games is a terrible company.

Toward the end of Oct. 2025, Rockstar Games [fired over 30 employees in the United Kingdom and Canada](#). In a Bloomberg report, they claim that it was over "gross misconduct, and for no other reason." The Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB) calls it "one of the most blatant and ruthless acts of union busting in the history of the game industry." According to a spokesperson for the IWGB, [all fired employees were either members of the union or attempting to organize](#).

On Nov. 6, People Make Games (PMG) was invited to the scene of an IWGB protest outside of Rockstar North. They report that the Rockstar Games Workers' Union had just recruited 10% of the UK Rockstar Games workforce. This major milestone represents a key step toward the union's application for statutory recognition which would have forced the company to recognize the union whether they wanted to or not. PMG shares an email from one of the union organizers who stated that of the "roughly 40 employees" fired all were members of the union "including the majority of the organizing committee" and were "let go from Rockstar without warning, without proper due course or any reasonable process." PMG declines to share their name but maintains they were in contact with this source before the incident.

In an interview with PMG, Bran, who worked at Rockstar Games for three years and is a union organizer, explains how damaging this firing was beyond a simple loss of a job. She states, "If I have gross misconduct on my CV, on my resume for the rest of my life, that is a huge detriment to any future career prospects. Something important to notice as well is you feel shame to be kicked out

of work this way. Like all of us still want to be here." Rockstar has not only disrespectfully let over 30 employees go, but has also sabotaged their chances at finding another job in the industry.

The more official reason given by Rockstar for this round of firings is the claim that those let go leaked "highly confidential information, including relating to game features from upcoming and unannounced titles, in an insecure and public social channel." While all employees let go were in a Discord server together, the IWGB claims it was a private trade union chat group dedicated to union matters. Alex Marshall, the IWGB president, does clarify in an interview with PMG that the server did also contain some IWGB representatives who were not a part of Rockstar Games, there as resources to advise on unionizing. However, he claims that there was no discussion of any company secrets and instead just the legal discussion of people's "material conditions at the company."

PMG further expands on this suspected Discord server using recreated screenshots shared by an anonymous employee at the studio, who was not even a member of the union. While there was a general channel for all Rockstar employees who were invited to the server to chat and view, there were several channels locked for non-union members. The employee recalls no instance of any confidential game details being shared.

PMG's source further theorizes that the investigation into this Discord server was kick-started by Rockstar's change in Slack policy in the second week of Oct. 2025. In an attempt to decrease distractions, Rockstar allegedly called for the removal of Slack channels used for non-work related discussions, sources of "poor conduct." PMG notes that one of these channels was used to share industry news, such as news surrounding mass layoffs where union workers could subtly show support for the union and those that were laid off. Changes to the Slack policy were communicated via email, with one email being sent after 5 pm, prompting members of the server to share this internal email with colleagues who were off work. It seems that from there, one member of the server went to management to share concerns surrounding the discussions being had. At the end of the month, 34 union members were fired.

On Nov. 12, 2025, the IWGB issued legal claims against Rockstar Games. Their legal

team states that "Despite our representation and attempts to meet with Rockstar to resolve the matter through negotiation, Rockstar have declined and persisted to terminate members of the union in a manner that is unacceptable and unlawful. Accordingly, we have now issued formal legal claims against Rockstar on behalf of the Claimants. Our members allege that Rockstar's conduct constitutes trade union victimization and blacklisting."

The legal battle continued on Jan. 5, 2026, when [a preliminary hearing was held](#) at the Glasgow Tribunals Centre where the IWGB [made a case for the fired Rockstar workers](#). The main focus of this case was that they should be granted interim relief which would provide the fired employees with support while they wait for a hearing. If granted, workers would once again be on Rockstar's payroll and allow some to keep their work visas. However, [the verdict was dealt on Jan. 13](#) in favor of Rockstar Games. Judge Frances Eccles noted that "[t]here was no evidence of the respondent having suffered any adverse consequences as a result of these postings."

While this trial did not go in favor of the union, the BBC notes that "the judge said it was not possible to conclude whether union membership was the 'principal reason' for the workers' sackings," meaning that a verdict of union-busting is still on the table. They also report that "[s]taff were also not informed of the comments regarded as gross misconduct until about six weeks after their dismissal, [Eccles] added," indicating that, at the time of the firings, employees were not properly informed of the reason behind their dismissal. In response to the ruling, Alex Marshall claims that they are "more confident than ever that a full and substantive tribunal will find Rockstar's calculated attempt to crush a union to be not only unjust, but unlawful," keeping in mind that securing interim relief was an "incredibly high bar" to clear.

The case continues to escalate with the involvement of U.K. prime minister Keir Starmer declaring that the government will look into Rockstar's dismissal of 31 union members (three of the fired employees were in Canada) as it is "deeply concerning." He continues, "Every worker has the right to join a trade union and we're determined to strengthen workers rights and ensure they don't face unfair consequences for being part of a union."

MP Chris Murray, who brought the case to Starmer's



Grand Theft Auto VI, long awaited by fans since its announcement four years ago, has become mired in controversy. (Image: Rockstar Games)

attention, recalls that in an attempt to meet with Rockstar along with MPs Tracy Gilbert and Scott Arthur that "[they] as MPs [were] refused entry unless an NDA was signed, a request [Rockstar] eventually withdrew after being made clear this would not be signed." Furthermore, in his statement to IGN, he reports that "[t]he meeting only entrenched my concerns about the process Rockstar used to dismiss so many of their staff members. I was not assured their process paid robust attention to UK employment law, I was not convinced that this course of action was necessary, and alarmingly, I did not leave informed on exactly what these 31 people had done to warrant their immediate dismissal."

One might observe that if these leak accusations are real, they should be well known. The public is thirsty for any information they can get about *GTA VI*. It's hard to believe that such information coming from a number of confirmed Rockstar employees would not be immediately reported by any game journalism outlet. In a statement to IGN, Rockstar Games claims that the "channel contained at least 25 non-Rockstar employees, including employees of competitor game developers, a video games industry journalist, as well as dozens of anonymous, unidentifiable members."

With their defense of "a zero-tolerance approach to unauthorized releases of information," Rockstar has tried to refute the IWGB's accusations. IGN states that Rockstar believes "that if the comments in question were leaked they would have been big gaming news and might even have affected Take-Two's [their parent company's] share price." It's understandable that Rockstar might be hesitant to share such proof as it would inevitably be

covered in the legal case and thus likely make its way to the public. Until then, it seems more and more likely that this was in fact a case of union busting.

I keep thinking about Rockstar's vagueness in their initial reason for firing: "gross misconduct, and for no other reason." No other reason than what, exactly? It's suspicious how vague they are. It does not seem like the response of an innocent party. In a company that has been known to profit from crunch culture, profit from having developers work under undesirable conditions, it makes sense to try and quell any opposition to this successful model.

While reports from last year do note that the conditions of *GTA VI*'s development were better than the initial scandal of *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s development in 2018, old habits die hard. The more the release date gets pushed back, the more pressure developers feel as fans grow impatient. We can even see the studio possibly feeling that pressure in the alleged Slack policy change.

If you care about workers' rights, you should not buy *GTA VI*. If this all ends with Rockstar being innocent, then spend away. Until then, hold onto your money. Rockstar believes that they can get away with this swift firing because they have calculated that their bottom line will be okay. They believe that you, their consumer, do not care about the people who make your games as long as you can play them. They will continue to be uncooperative and unaccountable until their hand is forced.

People Make Games (YouTube). "The Messages Rockstar Saw Before Firing 34 Union Members." Uploaded Nov. 24, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TvWNFBFWuY&t=619s>

Editor's Note: We want to hear your perspective!

We strive to represent every voice in the Caltech Community with fairness, accuracy, and impartiality in our news reporting. If you think we missed something, or just want to share your thoughts about a topic we've reported on, I encourage you to submit a Letter to the Editor!

Send submissions or contact the Tech editorial team at

tech@caltech.edu

Submissions are due at 12 p.m. on the Saturday before each biweekly Tuesday publication.

Campus Isn't Safe Enough: A Proposal to Eliminate Liability (and House Culture)

A Jaded Upperclassman Humor

Disclaimer: This is satire. If you feel the need to send a malicious email to anyone after reading this, consider taking a walk by the Turtle Pond instead. Also, this isn't a dig at our Chief Student Affairs Officer, who's been genuinely engaged with students in the six months he's been here. It applies only to the people undergrads already know it applies to.

Changes to make the campus safer and more inclusive have been profoundly successful in the past several years. We have come a long way since the days when women were severely outnumbered and every house tradition was a Title IX violation. However, even though house events are now extremely opt-in and respectful, and house leadership invite productive feedback, we actually need more interventions for our safety, well-being, and sense of community. I hereby propose several solutions.

1) More Housing Walk-Throughs

We need more housing walk-throughs to identify labeled luggage outside someone's door and umbrellas drying in the hallway. They are fire hazards that we were never going to move unless the entire house was sent an email. What other

imminent safety threats might still be lurking in plain sight that the last walk-through missed?

2) Ban All Events Organized By Students (i.e. That May Have Alcohol)

Everyone knows our friends at Stanford and MIT don't think we're lame enough. While our undergraduates at peer institutions have, in addition to free time, parties that may or may not harbor questionable substances, we may have (gasp) alcohol, a safety-first culture, and Orange Watch. Rather than have students be a proven, safe resource at our events, why don't we have them scrambling for funding instead?

The ideal scenario would be having the RAs go door to door every Friday and Saturday night to search for and confiscate alcohol. That way, students can make the trek to USC or UCLA for reprieve (which are definitely not as problematic as the Caltech houses) and our safety is no longer the Institute's problem! I don't know why someone from the mythical administration hasn't said it yet, but that's obviously the most optimal scenario. Why stumble down Olive Walk and run into a friend of a friend on Orange Watch (to the horror of Institute staff), when you can stumble down 28th Street and run into a brother from [insert Greek letters you recognize from physics]? (For clarity: this is the opposite of advice.)

3) Don't Question Anything

While most of us understand the importance of oversight from people who are not "adolescent," some of you need to stop acting like it's reasonable to ask why your house has to stop doing something it has been doing for years without lawsuits.

If our Institute-mandated, horizon-broadening hums have taught us anything, it is that blind obedience to authority is the peak of civic virtue. We should know better than to seek an explanation; that's the reason we come to Caltech. Don't ask why, don't propose solutions, and certainly don't try to push back if you think something doesn't make sense. In case you didn't know, "adolescence" clouds our judgment and is the sole hindrance to productive dialogue.

4) Stop Having Personalities

Fellow students, this is the easiest way you can play your part. Have you ever considered acting like a robot? That way, the Institute will not have to worry about being liable for anything at all. Then, certain people will stop viewing some of us as delinquents (because Caltech is such an attractive school for people who want to engage in nefarious activities).

We cannot be delinquent if we're doing our problem sets every night. Burnout? That

is so pre-SFE/OSE/[insert next year's acronym]. Since its establishment, our sense of community and well-being has skyrocketed. Burnout has definitely been addressed and is not an issue anymore. Our passion for science is as strong as the day we arrived! There is still so much light in our eyes!

5) Reappropriate More of Tom Mannion's Funding Without Student Input

We need more funding for residential experience initiatives and staff. Why hire another mental health counselor when appointments are booked full, when we can buy more Twinkle Tea so students show up to events? You may be asking, where would the Institute get more money? Tom Mannion, of course.

Why would Tom, the backbone of student-administration relations (e.g., he actively worked to help find a solution to keep the Fleming Cannon firing), have sustained funding? Why don't we let this universally beloved man, who feeds us regularly and can be seen leaving his office well late into the night (even on Sundays), pay even more out of pocket?

Residential experience events totally generate more enthusiasm than whatever Tom hosts. Since we already don't have any more pies for Pi Day (because why would Caltech even celebrate that), why don't we reappropriate the money for

cooking class as well?

6) Rotate Every Frosh Into Bechtel

How do we ensure that incoming students are not negatively influenced by the delinquency of house culture? Simple. During house sorting, we need to ensure that as many frosh as possible are funneled into Bechtel, especially the students who aren't part of a sports team and have a scant support system. That way, they will be integrated into the undergraduate community by rarely being seen. I have never heard any whispers about Bechtel being socially isolating. None whatsoever. (Residential experience events surely fix any social isolation.)

7) Last But Certainly Not Least, Destroy House Culture

Think about it logically. It is of paramount importance that our undergraduate experience is centered around minimizing possibilities for lawsuits as much as possible. Therefore, people who have no idea about what it's like to be a student here are obviously the best to lead that. We need to support the quietly loud push to dismantle house culture entirely. That way, the mythical administration can redirect their time and money to other aspects of our undergraduate education that they care about, like turning course registration into a signature scavenger hunt.

The Zephyr

Nima Ghaderi
Culture

Oh gentle wind,
Tell me so.

From how far,
How you have come to know.

Of the sun and the moon,
And the chirpings.

The lily on ponds,
Towing hopes from beyond.

Stay if you may,
And be the breeze.

Of high hopes,
And gentle dreams.

The Shape of Canadian Quixotry: A Note on Alberta Separatism

Damian R. Wilson
Opinion

Thanks to a certain U.S. president, the new year has seen a curiously Canadian topic [readmitted to the news cycle](#): Alberta separatism. A topic that appears intermittently in the papers and the international conversation, but is seldom ascribed any discursive weight. For there is only one figure, of course, who is clownish and callow, yet commanding enough to carry it to the front of the collective mind, where it is approached at last with the anxiety it deserves. From your Editor-in-Chief and dually loyal Canadian-American, a word about our dissident Canucks. (Who knew that wasn't an oxymoron.)

Alberta has always believed in the authority of geography: in a horizon that makes promises and then demands you work to keep them. The sky here is not decorative; it's instructional. The blue teaches you early that abundance comes from effort and risk: drilling deeper than planned, planting before the frost is done with you, placing trust in a weather system with no reason to reciprocate. From within that logic, the meddling of political agents in Ottawa can feel less like governance than high-minded miscalculation.

So from it accrues the story these Albertans tell themselves: that they have done everything right. They built wealth from scratch. They paid their taxes. They powered the country. And

yet, when the moral weather shifted, when carbon acquired a conscience, Alberta found itself cast as the problem child of the federation. Left to writhe in the humiliation of being told that the thing which made you indispensable has made you obsolete.

And so, separatism emerges. Not in the form of barricades or declarations, which belong to Canada's louder North American twin, but as a recurring thought experiment: a politics in which justification may be deferred, money imagined as staying put, and rules envisioned by people not only conversant in frost lines and boom cycles but required to live by them.

And so, the myth-making follows. Alberta as a nation-in-waiting; fiscally responsible, energetically sovereign, morally misunderstood. The rhetoric borrows from older Canadian anxieties (regional alienation, Western grievance) but sharpens them with a twenty-first-century edge. Equalization not policy but parable. Environmental regulation, a test of loyalty. Federalism, a long marriage in which one partner suspects they're being gaslit.

And yet, for all its bravado, Alberta separatism is wonderfully self-aware. It knows, on some level, that it is less a blueprint than a provocation. The talk flares when oil prices fall or elections disappoint, then recedes when prosperity returns. Hence this histrionics of conditional exit: *We're serious, unless things improve.*

Alberta, as represented by its



The southern Alberta sky — the kind some people are desperate to fight for. (Photo: Flickr)

separatists, is indeed a child. Fed-up, starved for attention, wanting only to be seen. To be recognized not as a caricature (redneck petrostate, climate villain) but as a complex place with a long memory and a short fuse. Speaking separatistically to say: *You are not listening to me.*

Canadian treasure Margaret Atwood might remind us that nations, like people, are stories we agree to keep telling. Alberta's separatist story is compelling because it projects to the world these provinces as both hero and exile, pioneer and martyr. (When else are non-citizens narrativizing those places.) But it is also incomplete. It understates how deeply entangled Alberta already is: in supply chains, in migration, in shared mythologies of Canadian decency and quiet compromise. Leaving wouldn't prove escape so much as revision,

which is never as clean as one hopes.

Alberta separatism, then, is about authorial consent. About who decides, who pays, who apologizes, who gets to feel proud without irony. It surfaces when that consent feels thin. It fades when the balance of recognition and resentment tilts back toward tolerable.

This is no coming rupture. More a recurring line in the national margin, underlined sometimes in anger, sometimes for emphasis. A reminder that federation is not a finished work, but a draft continually revised by regions that would like, just once, to hold the pen. In this century, newly fluent in fight and frontier, even Canada finds itself rehearsing old myths of manifest destiny: asking us all, once again, to believe it when it says it stands on guard.

Maybe we should listen.

A Call for Transparency and Stewardship at 1364 E. Green Street

Building a Better Pasadena

Letter to the Administration & Faculty

Presidents Rosenbaum and Jayawardhana, Provost Tirrell, and members of the Caltech Faculty,

For over a century, the California Institute of Technology and the community of Pasadena have grown side by side. We are a city that takes immense pride and joy in your mission and success. We are your neighbors, your alumni, your faculty, and your students.

We write to you today as Building a Better Pasadena — a coalition of hundreds of residents and advocates — because we believe that a single project now risks damaging the deep trust that has existed for generations.

We support and applaud Caltech's revered mission of scientific discovery. Yet, the proposed "Innovation Center" on the corner of Green Street and Holliston Avenue raises troubling questions about stewardship, transparency, and the influence of outside commercial interests.

An Abandonment of Community Responsibility

It is a matter of public record that the project developer, Trammell Crow, submitted conceptual plans that failed to adequately acknowledge the

project's immediate adjacency to the St. Philip the Apostle School, its historic Church, and the PCC Child Development Center.

By presenting this 79-foot high, 93,539-square-foot structure proposed on a mere 41,573 square feet as "contextual," while omitting the existence of the children playing just feet from its walls, the developer has done a disservice to Caltech's reputation and may put at risk the well-being of the youngest and most vulnerable.

The decision to seek a CEQA exclusion, thereby exempting this project from a full environmental impact assessment, represents a rejection of the rigorous inquiry for which Caltech stands.

Why avoid a comprehensive review of the possible safety impacts of a large, multi-lab building on the hundreds of young children directly next door? The City of Pasadena previously signaled that R&D uses were not appropriate for residential neighborhoods when it declined to pursue them on vacant Pasadena Unified School District school sites. Should St Philip — a school serving 550 children, where 20% of students are on financial aid — be treated differently?

On the Influence of Commercial Interests

The community is also concerned by the apparent commercial nature of this project. Though marketed as an R&D

facility to support and house startup ventures emerging from Caltech labs, in reality that use will represent only a minority of the building's occupancy. It has not escaped public notice that the proposed principal tenant will be a large biotechnology company, raising concerns about the project's true purpose.

We must ask: Is the safety of 550 schoolchildren being traded for a real estate development serving commercial gain? By choosing to place a high-density commercial laboratory in a sensitive school and residential area, Caltech is prioritizing commercial convenience over community safety and transparency. Put simply, is this "profits over children"?

Caltech's core mission is "to expand human knowledge and benefit society through research integrated with education." Prioritizing the requirements of an external biotechnology company over the local community does not square with that mission.

A Path Forward

This letter is not an act of opposition to science, but rather a request for more science — a common-sense appeal for a thorough environmental impact study. As a data-driven institute, you understand why such analysis is essential.

We urge you to pause. We call on Caltech to voluntarily commission a Full Environmental Impact Report (EIR) to restore



The building, under development by Trammell Crow Company, is being planned to support, house, and foster local start-ups in biotechnology. (Image: Caltech Planning, Design & Construction)

transparency and the respect that your historic role in the Pasadena community deserves. A project that has drawn opposition from over 1,400 petitioners and hundreds of official letters is not a "categorical exemption" — it is a community crisis.

Let us ensure that our shared future is built on collaboration, respect, and safety so that both important communities continue to thrive for decades to come.

With hope for our shared future, Building a Better Pasadena Representing neighbors, alumni, faculty, staff, students, and 1,400+ petitioners (abetterpasadena.org).

Note: The Pasadena City Council will hold a public hear-

ing and vote on the 1364 E. Green Street project on March 2nd at 6pm in Pasadena City Hall (Council Chamber Room S249, 100 N. Garfield Ave). Members of the public are welcome to attend. Learn more at: abetterpasadena.org/take-action.




Interested in attending the Out to Innovate Summit this year?

Out to Innovate Summit for LGBTQ+ People in STEMM and Allies

When: March 7, 2026 / Time: 8:30am -6pm
 Time with travel: Bus Departs Caltech at 7:30am / Bus Departs USC at 6:30pm to Return to Caltech
 Location: University of Southern California, University Park Campus in Los Angeles, CA.

- 1 VISIT THE SUMMIT WEBSITE
- 2 REGISTER FOR FREE
- 3 UPLOAD YOUR TRAVEL WAIVER TO THE JOTFORM

Scan the QR Code to Complete the steps above



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CCID & CAIE programming, support structures, and campus organizations are open to anyone in the campus community, regardless of race, national origin, sex, gender identity, sexual identity, and/or any other protected characteristic.

CALTECH ORCHESTRA
 DR. GLENN D. PRICE, CONDUCTOR

By Request

Finlandia	Jean Sibelius
Symphony No. 8 "Unfinished"	Franz Schubert
Peer Gynt Suite No. 1	Edvard Grieg
Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2	Franz Liszt

Saturday, February 28, 2026 - 8:00 pm
 Sunday, March 1, 2026 - 3:00 pm
 Ramo Auditorium

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PMA STUDENT PROGRAMS, IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE STUDENT ADVISORY BOARDS PRESENTS:

PMA GAME NIGHT

FRIDAY, MARCH 6TH, 7:00-10:30PM

RSVP encouraged but not required

LOCATION TBD



UNDERGRADS & GRADS WELCOME
 FOOD & BEVERAGES PROVIDED

The California Tech Journalistic Principles

The News-Opinion divide

All articles shall be clearly and explicitly labeled as either News or Opinion/Editorial.

News articles report on topics that have been thoroughly researched by Tech staff writers, and should be impartial to any one point of view. In a News article, the writer shall not insert their own personal feelings on the matter; the purpose is to let the facts speak for themselves. The Tech assumes full responsibility for all content published as News.

In contrast, Opinion articles (including Letters to the Editor) may be written and submitted by anyone on any topic; while the Tech will edit all published Opinions to ensure no wrong or misleading information, we do not otherwise interfere. Again, the role of the Tech here is to help the whole campus communicate their ideas and share their stories, not promote specific ones. Content published as Opinions do not necessarily represent the values of the Tech or our staff.

An exception to this is Editorials, which are written by Tech staff and represent official opinions of the Tech. Any information and sources in Editorials shall be held to the same standard as News reports, but there is no promise or expectation of impartial coverage.

Fair Reporting

All facts of major significance and relevance to an article shall be sought out and included.

If an assertion is made by a source about a specific person or organization, they shall be contacted and given a reasonable amount of time to respond before publication. In other words, no second-hand information or hearsay shall stand on its own.

Quotes and Attribution of Information

Facts and quotes that were not collected directly by Tech reporters shall be attributed. Articles shall clearly differentiate between what a reporter saw and heard first-hand vs. what a reporter obtained from other sources.

Sources' opinions are just that — opinions. Expert opinions are certainly given more weight, as are witness opinions. But whenever possible, the Tech shall report facts, or at least corroborate the opinions. A reporter's observations at a scene are considered facts for the purposes of a story.

Sources

All sources shall be treated with respect and integrity. When speaking with sources, we shall identify ourselves as Tech reporters and clarify why we would like to hold an interview. Sources for the Tech will never be surprised to see their name published.

In published content, we shall put our sources' quotes into context, and — as appropriate — clarify what question was being answered.

We always ask that a source speak with us on the record for the sake of journalistic integrity. We want our audience to receive information that is credible and useful to them. Named sources are more trustworthy than unnamed sources because, by definition, unnamed sources will not publicly stand by their statements.

That being said, we realize that some sources are unwilling to reveal their identities publicly when it could jeopardize their safety or livelihood. Even in those cases, it is essential that the Tech Editor-in-Chief knows the identity of the source in question. Otherwise, there can be no certainty about whether the source and their quotes were falsified. This also applies for Letters to the Editor and Opinion submissions to the Tech. If the author requests that their piece is published anonymously, they must provide a reason, and we shall consider it in appropriate circumstances. No truly anonymous submissions shall be published. Conversely, no submissions shall be published with the author's name without their consent.

When we choose not to identify a source by their full name, the article shall explain to readers why.

Corrections Policy

We strive for promptness in correcting all errors in all published content. We shall tell readers, as clearly and quickly as possible, what was wrong and what is correct.

Corrections to articles will be immediately updated on the online version of the Tech at tech.caltech.edu. If appropriate, corrections will also be published in the following Tech print issue.

Honor Code Applies

In any remaining absence of clarity, the Honor Code is the guiding principle.

The California Tech

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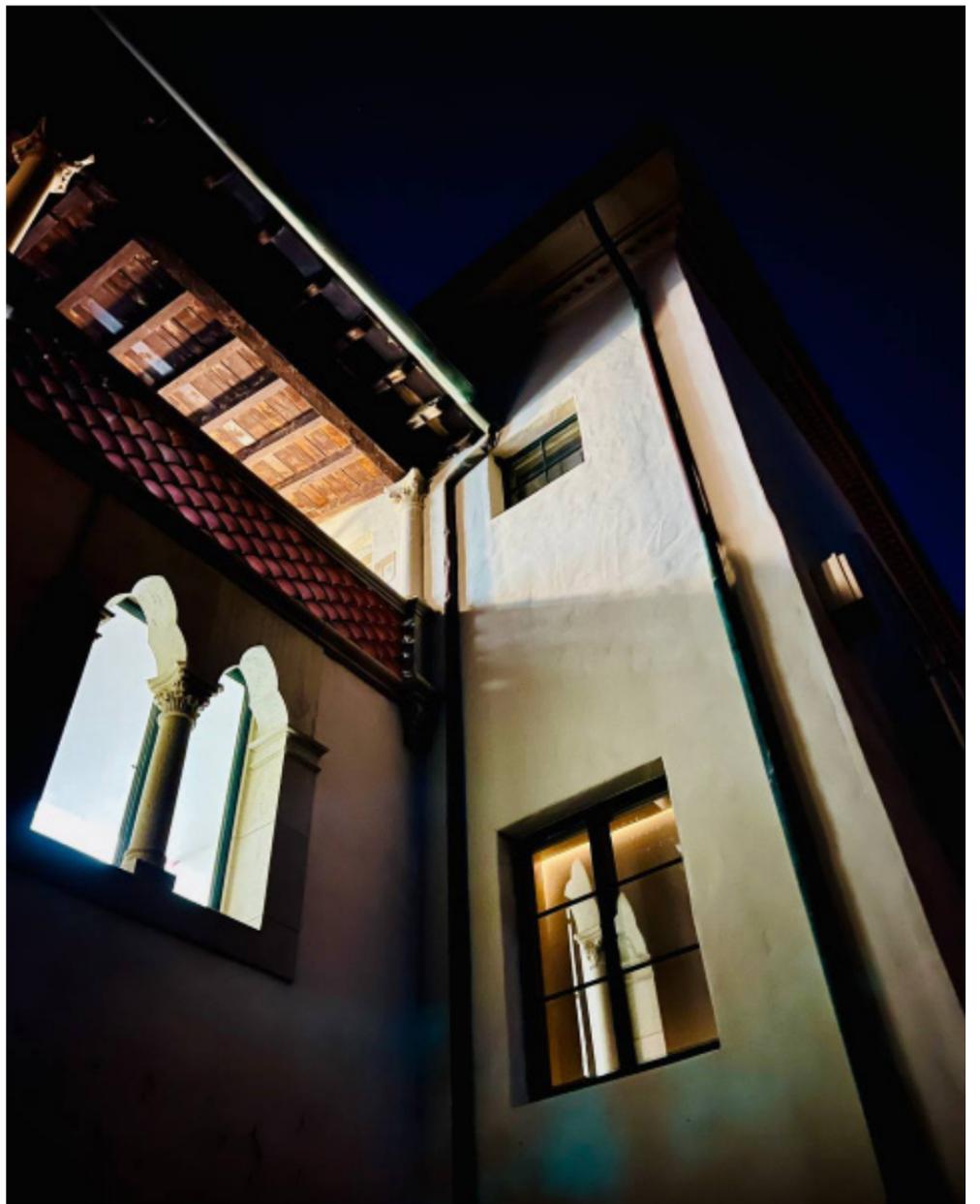
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The California Tech #31 CalGuesser



Every issue we'll show you a different location on campus. Find the place and find the QR code hidden there to sign the log book and **win a fabulous prize, actually this time! Gift cards sponsored by CalGuesser Benefactor Kevin Kan, but only if you find it before he does!!!**

"On campus" is defined as the convex hull of the buildings shown on caltech.edu/map/campus.

The QR code will be hidden somewhere within the pictured area.

TECH EDITOR'S CORNER



The memorial to Parker in the CCID Lounge.
(Photo: Ashlyn Roice)

From "Lofticries"

BY PURITY RING

Bring, bring the thunder
And the loud, loud rain
Lead our woes asunder
'Neath the proud, proud veins

Of traits that bleed the gunmen
Of our pumping, earthly hearts
Ween our joys in plunder
Feel our shining teeth
Bet our hold on happiness

Bead-weighted chests with lofticries
Lofticries with trembling thighs
Weepy chests with weepy sighs
Weepy skin with trembling thighs

You must be hovering over yourself
Watching us drip on each other's sides
Dear brother, collect all the liquids off of the floor
Use your oily fingers
Make a paste, let it form

Let it seep through your sockets and ear holes
Into your precious, fractured skull
Let it seep, let it keep you from us
Patiently heal you
Patiently unreal you