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WHY WE GIVE:
REGINALD L. BROWN JR.

Wilder School *in Action*

Fall/Winter 2025



POLICY STARTS HERE

A national leader in
public problem solving



VCU L. Douglas Wilder School of
Government and Public Affairs



Wilder School in Action

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Letter from the dean

Dear Friends,

Public service is at its best when it listens, learns and leads with purpose. In this edition of *Wilder School in Action*, you’ll see that spirit at work — from the halls of the Virginia General Assembly to city streets, from cross-Atlantic classrooms to the green spaces that keep our communities thriving.

The cover story on our Center for Public Policy (CPP) shows why Virginia’s leaders turn to us when decisions matter most. Under the leadership of **Robyn McDougale**, associate dean of research and outreach, the CPP has become a national model for translating complex data into clear, actionable guidance. Whether informing statewide legislation, shaping local initiatives or advising federal partners, the center’s work is grounded in trust, rigor and a deep commitment to the public good. That same commitment drives the research of professor **William Pelfrey**, whose study of the Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement (ABLE) program demonstrates how courageous intervention can prevent harm, save lives and build community trust.

Our reach extends across borders through the Trans-Atlantic Seminar led by professor **John Accordino**, where students from Richmond and Germany confront “wicked problems” in urban planning together. These future leaders learn not only to solve problems but also to honor history, respect cultural heritage and imagine what’s possible when diverse perspectives meet.

In this issue, **Governor L. Douglas Wilder** shares his perspective on Virginia’s upcoming gubernatorial race and what recent Commonwealth Poll results reveal about Virginians’ priorities. His insights are a powerful reminder that good governance begins with listening — and that the Wilder School’s role in fostering excellence remains vital.



Our alumni and friends amplify this mission in remarkable ways. **Reginald L. Brown Jr.’s** leadership in launching the L. Douglas Wilder National Ovation Scholarship is spearheading new pathways for students at the Wilder School, Virginia Union University and Howard University. And alumni like **Giles Garrison**, whose stewardship of Richmond’s parks advances both environmental justice and community well-being, remind us that public service takes many forms — all of them essential.

These stories share a common thread: they show what happens when knowledge meets action and service meets resolve. Knowledge is powerful — but only when put to work. Thank you for being part of this mission. I invite you to read, reflect and see the role you can play in the important work that starts here — work that changes communities, shapes policy and ultimately defines the future we share.

Sincerely,

Susan T. Gooden, Ph.D.
Dean
L. Douglas Wilder School of Government
and Public Affairs

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at our news page: bit.ly/wilderschoolnews



@VCUWilderSchool

CONVERSATIONS WITH

GOVERNOR WILDER

Leadership and legacy: listen in

L. Douglas Wilder, Virginia’s 66th governor and the nation’s first elected African American governor, shares his experiences and reflections on current events and historic milestones.

bit.ly/wilderpod

The courage to intervene: Building trust in law enforcement

How William Pelfrey and the ABLE program are transforming officer intervention

BY LAUREN FLOYD

In notorious cases of police brutality, a common denominator is the lack of intervention from fellow officers who witness their peers use excessive force on a suspect. A refusal to intervene or apathy toward these actions repeatedly places suspects in grave danger and often leads to tragic results.

These crises are reframing mandatory ethics and peer intervention training for police departments across the nation. The New Orleans Police Department developed the Ethical Policing Is Courageous (EPIC) program, which includes a training extension called the Active Bystandership in Law Enforcement (ABLE) program, designed to teach officers intervention and de-escalation tactics.

Wilder School professor **William Pelfrey, Ph.D.**, of the criminal justice and homeland security and emergency preparedness programs, conducted the first published study on the ABLE program.

"A lot of the research I've done is around community policing and around use of force, particularly use-of-force training and policy, so I'm always looking for perspectives that will make the police better at their job," he explains.

The data has convinced Pelfrey that when police perform their job responsibly and safely, community trust is fostered and reinforced. When community members see law enforcement as a reliable public resource rather than an occupying army or the enemy, then they are more likely to engage in community policing, aid in investigations and share information with police.



When the ABLE program reached mid-Atlantic region police agencies, it offered Pelfrey a unique research opportunity to evaluate the program's efficacy. Utilizing a mixed methods approach, he gathered officer and administrator perspectives in the early and late phases of ABLE implementation.

Pelfrey recalls one particular technique using the code words "Sergeant Coffee

needs you," which instructs officers to step aside and let another officer take over. "The first officer cools off and regains their objectivity," he explains. "The intervening officer can then take over." The ABLE program teaches officers to intervene when they observe another

officer unnecessarily escalating a situation that is otherwise normal into a violent one. Sometimes that's difficult, especially when a junior officer is expected to intervene with a senior officer.



William Pelfrey, Ph.D.

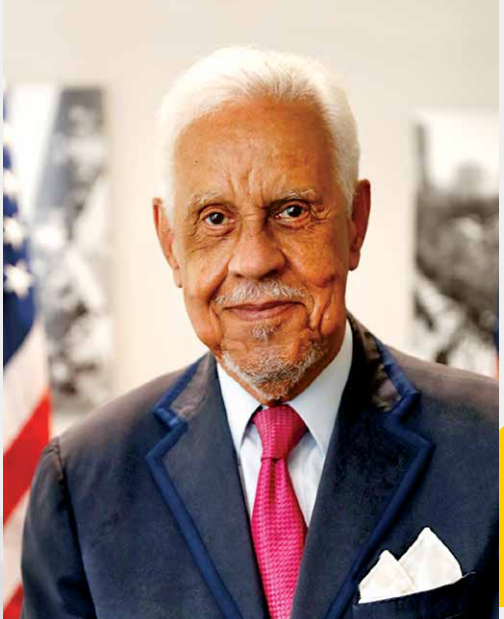
"A lot of the research I've done is around community policing and around use of force, particularly use-of-force training and policy, so I'm always looking for perspectives that will make the police better at their job."

Pelfrey hopes his research will influence police academies nationwide to begin teaching officer intervention, making it a common practice. He believes the ABLE program will enhance officer safety, reduce the number of injuries and deaths of suspects, and strengthen trust and respect between police and the community. He also hopes policymakers and community leaders will make ABLE and similar intervention training programs mandatory for all police departments.

Governor's voice

Listening is key to mobilizing voters

BY PAM COX



In November, Virginians will go to the polls to decide who will lead the commonwealth. It's a highly anticipated, off-cycle election that will make history and could also set the political tone for the rest of the country. We sat down with Governor L. Douglas Wilder to discuss the political high stakes.

Q Virginia is one of only two states holding statewide gubernatorial elections this November. Given the national spotlight, what are the potential advantages of Virginia choosing its leaders during an off-cycle election year?

A Virginia has always stood at the forefront of American history, and off-cycle elections give our citizens the most unique opportunities to lead, without being overshadowed by the national campaign. In these off-cycle elections, there is a tendency to encourage voters to focus on state issues, and every time you look at any of those issues, education would be at the top, and public safety and economic development closely behind, without the distractions of what some call "federal noise." It's a test of civic engagement and a chance to set the tone, not follow it. Virginians have the power to lead our nation by example.

Q With several competitive races for the Virginia House of Delegates, the results could directly impact proposed constitutional amendments on issues like reproductive rights, marriage equality and voting access. How critical is bipartisanship cooperation for the next governor in navigating these deeply divisive topics?

A During my administration, I constantly ignored the aisles of partisanship. I did things because that's what real leadership demands. The next governor must bridge this perceived divide to safeguard constitutional rights and lead with fairness and courage. Bipartisanship isn't a weakness — it is a strength — and on matters of fundamental rights, it is essential that you forget how you were elected and remember that you were elected to serve the people.

Q As Virginians prepare to head to the polls, what should they understand, not just for the state, but for the national political landscape, related to the broader significance of their vote?

A When I first became elected governor, everybody was speaking about "the first elected Black governor of any state." But the win wasn't just for me; it was a win for democracy. Every Virginian should understand the importance of their one vote. This election is about more than who occupies the Executive Mansion. It's about the kind of future we want to build for our children, our communities and our nation. Your vote carries a national echo. It reflects our values and defines our direction. Let it be heard everywhere, use it wisely and use it boldly.

"Virginia has always stood at the forefront of American history, and off-cycle elections give our citizens the most unique opportunities to lead, without being overshadowed by the national campaign."

— L. Douglas Wilder, 66th governor of Virginia



From Shockoe to Stuttgart:

How the Wilder School's Trans-Atlantic Seminar is shaping the next generation of planners

BY LAUREN FLOYD

A classroom without borders. A seminar with global stakes. That's the vision behind the Trans-Atlantic Seminar, a joint study-abroad program led by **John Accordino, Ph.D.**, professor of urban and regional planning at the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University. The program pairs Wilder School students in urban and regional studies and planning, as well as public administration, with peers from Rhineland-Palatinate Technical University in Germany to tackle complex urban planning challenges, together and in real time.

"If these were easy problems, someone would've solved them already," Accordino tells his students on day one. The seminar immerses them in what planners call "wicked problems," issues like historic preservation, climate adaptation and economic revitalization, across two very different societal contexts.

A global classroom tackling local problems

Launched in 2013, the seminar brings together a group of students from each university for a three-week, intensive summer experience spanning two countries, with one travel week in between. American

and German students are placed on mixed teams and collaborate from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily through site visits, lectures and applied group work.

Each seminar is organized around a shared planning theme. Students analyze how each country approaches the same issue, uncovering policy differences, cultural influences and opportunities for mutual learning. They keep daily learning logs, prepare analytical papers and present final group recommendations to a panel of professors and professionals.

In 2024, the theme was "Building Resilient Communities in the Face of Climate Change," using Richmond's Shockoe Bottom and Stuttgart, Germany, as case studies. Both cities face intensifying heat and flooding, and also carry the weight of history. In Shockoe, the former site of Lumpkin's Jail and a major slave market, preservation is sacred. In Stuttgart, centuries of heritage shape the urban core.

"You can't treat it like a greenfield site — it's not," Accordino says. "How do you respect that history appropriately and also deal with intense heat and water vulnerability? That's what planners call a wicked problem."

After preparatory study, walking tours and consultations with planners from the City of Richmond and Plan RVA, as well as planning practitioners in Stuttgart, student groups drafted resiliency strategies that accounted for both climate risk and cultural memory.

Earlier iterations of the seminar tackled economic revitalization. In 2013, students explored regional development through tourism, comparing Virginia's Crooked Road with Germany's Porcelain Road, each a cultural corridor once tied to a now-declining industry.

"The idea was for students to see how two societies use cultural heritage to spark development," Accordino says. "What are the structures behind it? Who manages the planning? What challenges do they face? What can they learn from each other?"

Breaking stereotypes, expanding perspectives

Beyond planning theories and case studies, the seminar is an exercise in cross-cultural humility.

"It has always made me very happy



Professor John Accordino, Ph.D., launched the Trans-Atlantic Seminar in 2013.

“
If these were easy problems, someone would've solved them already.
”
— John Accordino, Ph.D.

that we start out with stereotypes of the other, like Germans thinking Americans live in their cars," Accordino says. "But by the end, they realize, 'I can't learn everything about another culture from a newspaper. I have to be there.'"

For many students, it's a turning point. They don't just trade ideas. They also rethink how they see the world and their place in it. They learn that planning is never one-size-fits-all and that the best solutions come from listening first.

"The goal is not to teach students that one country's approach is better," Accordino says. "It's to sharpen their lens and expand their sense of what's possible."

Why Germany?

Germany's differences make it an ideal comparative partner. Its planning system is structured through integrated, national-state-local processes, in contrast to the more decentralized U.S. model. It's also more compact — the size of

Montana — but with a social market economy that offers useful contrasts for students raised in an American laissez-faire context.

"The two societies are very similar in many respects but different in key ways, and those differences are where the real learning happens," Accordino says.

For Accordino, the seminar has personal roots.

"I decided to become an urban planner after living and working in Germany for two years," he says. "It opened my eyes, not just to how cities elsewhere are set up, but to how little I knew about my own."

He encourages all students to explore the dozens of international opportunities offered through VCU's Global Education Office, where travel scholarships and support are available. 📍



Why we give:

Reginald L. Brown Jr.

When Reginald L. Brown Jr. received an important call from Governor L. Douglas Wilder, he was offered an opportunity he couldn't refuse.

BY DAVID SLIPHER

Reginald L. Brown Jr. was invited to head a fundraising committee to launch an unprecedented scholarship program joining the Wilder School with Governor Wilder's alma maters, Virginia Union University and Howard University. The National Ovation to L. Douglas Wilder Scholarships would build a bridge to both VCU undergraduate

students whose primary major is a degree program in the Wilder School and Wilder School students enrolled in a master's degree who earned an undergraduate degree from Virginia Union University or Howard University.

Brown's and Wilder's is a powerful relationship spanning 70 years and multiple generations of familial connections. Wilder was a childhood classmate of Brown's uncle, and as a young boy, Brown recalls visits from the future public service trailblazer. His parents encouraged him to emulate Wilder as a role model. Brown took the directive to heart, and his aspiration to mirror Wilder's character and ethos continues to this day.

As a powerhouse in corporate sales, marketing and operations, Brown possessed the strategic acumen and extensive networks that made him the ideal facilitator to break scholarship fundraising records at the Wilder School. Together with a dedicated team, which included Wilder School members **Stevan Dozier**, senior director of development and **Pam Cox**, senior special projects and communications manager, as well as numerous volunteers and donors, they successfully raised nearly **\$1 million** for the remarkable National Ovation to L. Douglas Wilder Gala. The inaugural Wilder National Ovation Scholars were announced on April 30, 2025.

Each recipient embodies the values of leadership, integrity and commitment to community. Ever the businessman, Brown approached the value proposition of fundraising as a function of meeting the customer's needs. In this case, the



"(Left to right): Wilder School Dean Susan Gooden and scholarship recipients Tamere Cooper, Rayelle Jackson-Sutton and Joseph Earl Levy III.

customer was the student. The value was a full-cycle process whereby educational investments in talented Wilder School students led to impactful careers. These alumni then close the loop by becoming benefactors of their own, passing on their momentum through mentorship and giving. "Success is predicated on momentum" is an adage Brown holds dear.

"Everything you do, you defer to the customer," Brown shares. "Is it beneficial to the student or not beneficial to the student? VCU and Governor Wilder have such tremendous credibility."

Brown also recognizes that timing is everything. Highly publicized reports on the systemic underfunding of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) made for a ripe opportunity for support.

"How do you say no to Governor Wilder?" asks Brown. "How do you say no to HBCUs? How do you say no to the enhancement of education among HBCU students?"

"It was an honor," says Brown. 🏛️

Support the National Ovation to L. Douglas Wilder Scholarship



bit.ly/natov25

GRATITUDE ABOUNDS

"This scholarship not only lightened the load financially, but it strengthened my belief that intentional, equity-focused leadership can change systems. Your support fuels my purpose and confirms that change is possible."

—Rayelle Jackson-Sutton, graduate student, public administration

"One moment I felt especially proud to represent this scholarship was volunteering at a back-to-school drive for local students. Being recognized by this national scholarship gave me the platform to step up and lead."

—Tamere Cooper, undergraduate student, criminal justice

"When Governor Wilder looked me in the eye and said, 'Have any of the other schools you're considering had someone whose name is on a building sit down with you and ask you about attending?' his words made me realize the weight of legacy and the opportunity I was being offered."

—Joseph Earl Levy III, undergraduate student, criminal justice and homeland security and emergency preparedness

Remembering Dr. Xueming "Jimmy" Chen: A legacy of scholarship, leadership and care

From a founder to the future, scholarship supports a duty to public service.

BY TIFF MURRAY-ROBERTSON

Xueming "Jimmy" Chen, Ph.D., professor of urban and regional studies and planning at the Wilder School, died this summer, leaving behind not only a record of academic excellence but a legacy of kindness, quiet leadership and unwavering optimism.

Chen joined the Wilder School as an associate professor in 2007, bringing with him deep expertise in transportation planning, public transit systems and geographic information systems. He earned tenure in 2011 and was promoted to professor in 2021. Most recently, he served as chair of the urban and regional studies and planning programs, where he provided steady leadership, championed enrollment efforts and helped connect program needs with schoolwide priorities.

"Jimmy was more than a colleague — he was a true friend," says **Ivan Suen, Ph.D.**, a fellow planning faculty member and longtime collaborator who worked closely with Chen on research and program development. "He was present, thoughtful and deeply invested in others. You always felt he was listening — and that he genuinely cared."

Over his 18 years at VCU, Chen built a research portfolio focused on applied planning challenges. His work explored public transit systems, bus rapid transit ridership and land use — often linking transportation dynamics to broader questions of urban development. He was also a recognized expert in GIS applications and brought that technical knowledge into both his teaching and scholarship.



"Jimmy once told me, 'the only thing that lives on after us is our work — our papers and our books.'"

— Ivan Suen, Ph.D.

One of his most visible collaborations was a 2023 study on pharmacy deserts, co-authored with Suen, which examined how pharmacy closures affected underserved neighborhoods. The paper drew interest from the VCU School of Pharmacy, the Virginia Pharmacists Association and advocacy groups working to improve access to care.

Chen's scholarship extended internationally. He served as a former chair of the International Chinese

Planning Society and was active in the Global Planning Educators Interest Group, advancing planning education across borders.

He was most recently developing a textbook that used Virginia-based data sets to teach planning concepts through a regional lens — an effort that reflected both his technical expertise and his belief in applied, place-based learning. "Jimmy once told me, 'the only thing that lives on after us is our work — our papers and our books,'" Suen says.

Chen was a treasured member of the Wilder School community, admired for his academic rigor, humility and quiet generosity. He is survived by his wife, Ying Wang, and family. Though his presence is deeply missed, his influence endures in his students, his scholarship and the relationships he nurtured with care. 🏛️



Chernoh Wurie examines a fingerprint analysis with M. J. Benedict.

Hands-on learning: A crime scene in the classroom

Assistant professor Chernoh Wurie, Ph.D., guides undergraduates through a step-by-step course in violent crime scene investigation.

BY MAE OETJENS

“I love the students and what they take away from it — their enthusiasm for the crime scene and their enthusiasm for learning and asking questions.”

– Jessica Bourne ('15 B.S.)

When students walked into assistant professor **Chernoh Wurie's** Violent Crime Scene Investigation class (CRJS 425), they were more than surprised.

“I walked into the room, and I saw a person just lying there. I thought it was an actual person. It was not,” jokes **Kaelon Thompson**, an undergraduate student majoring in criminal justice and homeland security and emergency preparedness.

The “person” was a mannequin staged by Wurie, who built an artificial crime scene for students to investigate utilizing skills and knowledge from their semester studies. With the help of criminal justice alumna **Jessica Bourne** ('15 B.S.), a forensic technician at the Richmond Police Department, Wurie created a scenario similar to one students may encounter in the professional field.

“We came in and were given information on the case and had to come up with our idea of how to go about the investigation,” says undergraduate **M. J. Benedict**. “We got to do things like taking fingerprints and footwear impressions and using alternative light sources. It was really great to take what we’ve learned and actually get a chance to do it physically.”

Inquisitive yet confident, students roamed the classroom in groups, taking measurements, photographing evidence and putting the pieces together.

“I love the students and what they take away from it — their enthusiasm for the crime scene and their enthusiasm for learning and asking questions,” shares Bourne, who serves as a guest instructor during the course. “Whether it’s going through cases with them, packaging evidence or going to crime scenes, they can take this experience and go

with their future and their careers.”

The cases presented throughout the senior-level course were neither abstract nor random, but grounded in reality. Wurie shows pictures of actual crime scenes he worked on as a police officer and crime scene technician with the Prince William County Police Department. His students are perpetually enthralled as he explains, step by step, how he conducted his investigative process.

“You don’t really think about the process unless you’re doing it,” says Thompson. “I really want to be able to put what was from the book into my hands and work with something.”

Wurie prioritizes valuable classroom experiences as essential for preparation to enter the workforce with a solid foundation of essential skills.

“We also expose them to police department labs and crime scene labs so they can see what goes on behind the scenes,” says Wurie. “It’s not just fieldwork; they also can see the science behind the crime scenes.”

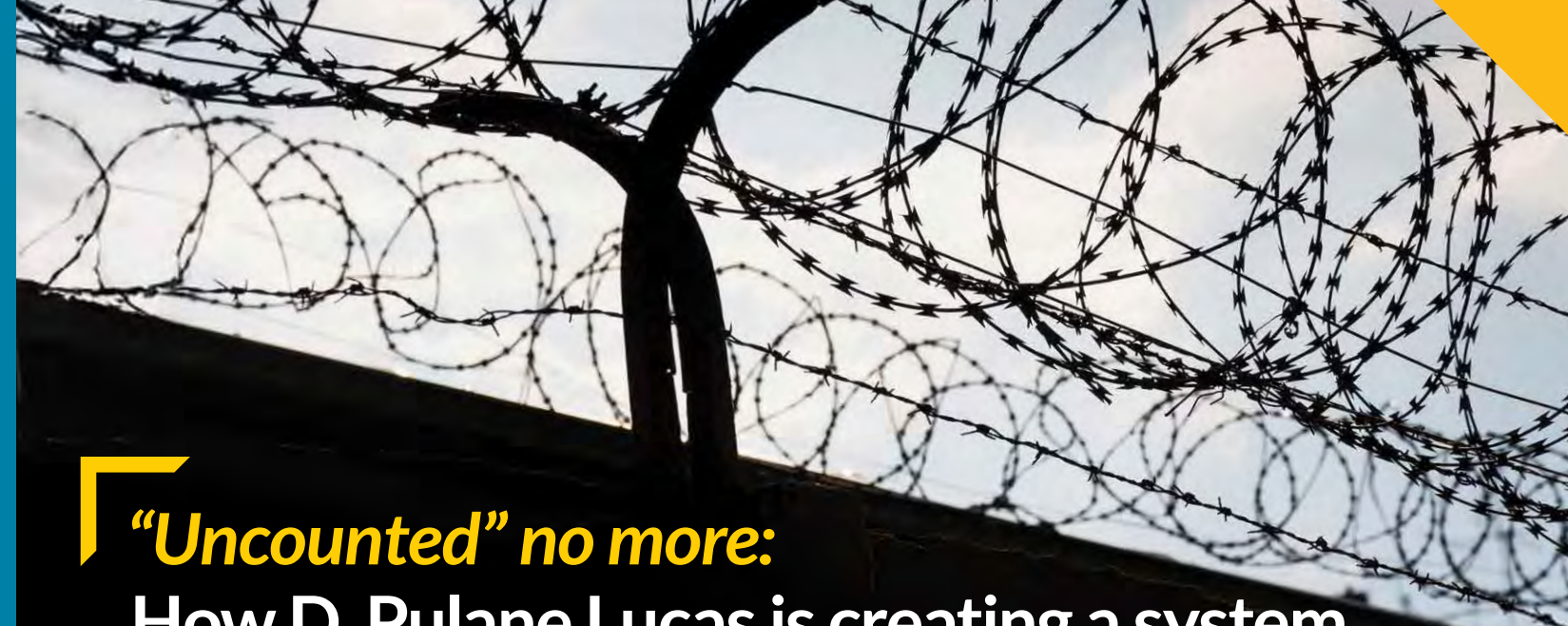


Alumna Jessica Bourne thrives on educating students with real-world experiences.

▶ Watch the full video



bit.ly/wildercsi



“Uncounted” no more: How D. Pulane Lucas is creating a system of accountability and empowering citizens to report in-custody deaths in the classroom

The tragic in-custody death of her son, Stanley Wilson Jr., catalyzed Lucas to create *Uncounted*, the first national civilian-led database for reporting in-custody deaths.

BY MAE OETJENS

“How do we study those who are uncounted? Those who are not included in the databases that we have access to?” asks **D. Pulane Lucas, Ph.D.** ('18 GIS Cert., '13 Ph.D.), a Wilder School alumna, adjunct faculty member and public policy scholar. “My son, Stanley Wilson Jr., is uncounted.”

Lucas, founding president and CEO of the nonprofit Policy Pathways, Inc., turns injustice and tragedy into

action with her civilian-led approach to in-custody death transparency. During a recent Lunch and Learn presentation, she shared the heart-wrenching story of her son's death and her initiative with *Uncounted*.

In November 2022, a judge ruled her son, **Stanley Wilson Jr.**, a Stanford University graduate and former NFL player, incompetent to stand trial and ordered that he receive mental health treatment. Wilson died on Feb. 1, 2023, while allegedly being transferred from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Twin Towers Correctional Facility to Metropolitan State Mental Health Hospital in Norwalk, Calif. Neither facility claimed custodial responsibility for Wilson's body at the time of his death.

Because both the sheriff's department and the hospital abdicated custodial responsibility, Wilson became one

among thousands of “uncounted” individuals not officially reported as an in-custody civilian death.

“No one uploaded Stanley's information onto the appropriate

online in-custody-death databases,” she says. “There was no internal affairs investigation. No one immediately pulled the video cameras, interviewed those who were there at the time of his passing or investigated the scene around his death.”

“Stanley's case is unique because he is uncounted, but we know he's uncounted,” Lucas says. “The question is, ‘how many more are uncounted that we don't know about?’”



D. Pulane Lucas, Ph.D.

Learn more and watch the complete video



bit.ly/plucasuncounted



POLICY STARTS HERE

A NATIONAL LEADER IN PUBLIC PROBLEM SOLVING

BY DAVID SLIPHER

When they need clarity to make high-stakes decisions, Virginia leaders turn to the Wilder School Center for Public Policy (CPP). Driven by purpose, the CPP has become a national model for academic-led public service research. For more than three decades, the CPP has continued to deliver nonpartisan, data-informed solutions that empower policymakers and strengthen communities across Virginia and beyond.

ROOTED IN PUBLIC SERVICE AND TRUST

As the premier public policy consulting and research center for state, regional and local leaders, the CPP operates with a shared mission grounded in public service and impact. Backed by more than 30 years of applied research, the CPP is a proven catalyst for informing decision-making and driving meaningful change for the public good.

Guided by the core values of evidence and actionable insight, CPP practitioners cultivate trust and relationships across sectors, and provide nonpartisan expert analysis to help stakeholders navigate complex policy issues.

“We have trust in twofold,” says **Robyn McDougale, Ph.D.**, Wilder School associate dean of research and outreach and leader of the CPP. “We have confidence in the administration to hire us, and legislators from both parties trust that the work we do is reliable. They know it is founded in good science, good data and best practices.”

From consulting projects and customized research to executive leadership training, the CPP is a cornerstone of informed policymaking in

the commonwealth. Many of its research reports and targeted recommendations are made public, translating complex data into practical guidance for legislators, nonprofits and other community groups.

As one of the few centers in the nation that houses full-time policy researchers within an academic institution, the CPP has developed deep agency relationships across Virginia. Its team speaks legislators’ language, providing actionable summaries while upholding the highest standards of confidentiality and integrity.

Gina Barber, (’19 MPA), director of administration and senior consultant, attributes the CPP’s success to three key strengths: mission alignment, customized project scopes and uncompromising research standards. “What separates us from other firms is that we understand the ethics and the protection of the client and their participants and their stakeholders around this work,” Barber explains. “We understand the big picture to such an extent that we can prevent the client from stepping into a pothole that they didn’t see coming. And so our clients will rely on us for that.”



Robyn McDougale, Ph.D.



Gina Barber, MPA

**THE CPP FORMULA:
WHY IT WORKS**

When organizations engage with the CPP, McDougle and her team begin with a thorough needs assessment that clarifies both the research methodology and a strategic plan for achieving measurable goals. It's not just about meeting a legislative deadline — it's also about delivering quality policy analysis that holds up under scrutiny.

The CPP team is flexible but firm on standards, only taking projects that align with their research principles. “We refine our scope to make sure we’re meeting the client’s objectives while keeping our standards intact,” McDougle shares. “If a project doesn’t fit within our principles, we’re not afraid to say it might not be the right match.” The CPP’s research process is meticulous and people-driven. The

team prioritizes focus groups over shortcuts and never relies on AI tools for substantive work. The CPP draws on Wilder School faculty for their subject matter expertise to meet the demands of complex projects. “We never slight what is the best practice,” McDougle says, and her long-standing partners respect this rigor. “Policymakers take what we say seriously. They know they’re accountable to their constituents. They want to ensure our recommendations are grounded in fact and will stand the test of time. They’re not willing to gamble with the future of Virginians.” The CPP’s portfolio includes research in healthcare, public safety, education, workforce development, housing security and human trafficking. Its high rate of returning clients speaks to the impact and reliability of its work.

CATALYZING TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACTS



Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services – Safer Communities
With a 2024 General Assembly budget appropriation, the CPP is working with the DCJS and localities to provide strategic initiative planning and evaluation services to improve public sector response to community violence. The CPP will evaluate four Safer Communities grantee sites and develop training tools and resources for DCJS grantees.

Virginia Latino Advisory Board – Economic Impact
The Office of the Chief Transformation Officer requested an analysis of education, workforce and entrepreneurship trends pertaining to Virginia’s Latino community. The CPP will inform future state planning and investment decisions by collecting data from stakeholders and reporting findings to the governor and the General Assembly.

Office of the Attorney General – Improving Outcomes for Child and Youth Victims of Human Trafficking
The CPP and OAG were awarded an Office for Victims of Crime grant to assess human trafficking of boys, and youth and labor trafficking. The CPP is conducting surveys and focus groups and developing area risk maps, as well as recommendations and toolkits for engaging with trafficked youth.

City of Richmond – Richmond People’s Budget
The Richmond City Council tasked the CPP to conduct an evaluation of Richmond’s participatory budgeting program. The CPP is conducting surveys, focus groups and interviews to determine how program goals are met and how to enhance relationships between residents and local government.

Virginia Department of Health – Ryan White Data Management Program
Since 1990, the CPP has securely tracked identifying data for patients who receive services funded under Part B of the United States Code. The Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program Services Report, a crucial data collection system, informs funding decisions and monitors program effectiveness to combat the HIV epidemic.



The CPP staff collaborates across a range of expertise areas to inform policymaking.

“I see the public good in all the work we do. We collaborate with agencies at all levels, providing our skill sets to analyze, interpret and plan their data, providing the information we need to collectively serve the citizens of the commonwealth.”

—Robyn McDougle, Ph.D.

In addition to producing detailed reports, CPP facilitators create executive summaries that cut through complexity and deliver clear, actionable findings for agency heads and legislators. In an environment of ever-changing political leadership, CPP research stands above the fray. Its nonpartisan credibility and consistent quality make it a trusted partner to both sides of the aisle.

A NATIONAL MODEL FOR POLICY RESEARCH
The CPP’s growing influence now extends to federal partnerships that shape state funding and program design. For example, under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), CPP researchers facilitate biennial planning for Virginia’s workforce development ecosystem, identifying research pathways that unlock education and job opportunities across state agencies. Ongoing collaborations like the Safer Communities program with the Department of Justice highlight the CPP’s expertise and underscore its critical role in crafting evidence-based, scalable policies that address national issues. These partnerships demonstrate the CPP’s ability to influence public policy on both the state and federal levels. “CPP serves as a playbook for states that want to turn data into action, helping accelerate policy progress and deliver results,” McDougle says. The center’s success stems from early and continued investment by Wilder

School leadership, beginning with founding CPP director **Robert Holsworth, Ph.D.**, who envisioned a research hub that could elevate the school’s policy relevance and impact. Today, that vision is carried forward under the leadership of Wilder School dean **Susan Gooden, Ph.D.**, who sees the CPP as both a strategic asset and a model of mission-driven public service. “We’ve made intentional investments in the Center for Public Policy because its work aligns with the Wilder School’s mission: advancing evidence-based research that strengthens communities and promotes better decision-making,” says Gooden. “CPP stands as a national model for how universities can lead with purpose, partnering with policymakers to deliver actionable insights that drive meaningful change.”

INNOVATING AGENCY LEADERSHIP TRAINING

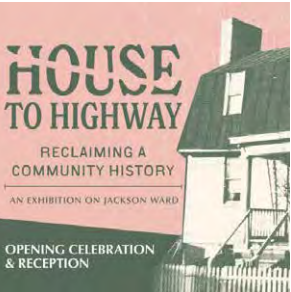


In August, 33 leaders from 21 state government agencies gathered at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture for a dynamic summit focused on navigating and embracing change. Drawing on their shared knowledge, experience and leadership, participants co-created an inspiring agenda addressing the most pressing challenges facing agency leaders today. The participant-led format fostered candid conversations, actionable insights and new opportunities for collaboration. Attendees also received practical, high-level tools to help coach and prepare their teams for change. The summit concluded with a networking reception that further encouraged connection and idea exchange. “The summit broke from traditional norms by inviting participants to set their own agenda for the afternoon,” says summit facilitator **Sarah Jackson**. “As a result, everyone had the conversations they wanted to have with the people they most wanted to talk to. Many shared that they left the event feeling less alone in preparing for change and inspired to collaborate in the future.”

Faculty and alumni achievements

The Wilder School creates transformative impacts through leadership and service — locally and nationally.

▲ Professor **Sarah Jane Brubaker, Ph.D.**, was announced as president-elect for the Society for the Study of Social Problems. Brubaker will lead the SSSP’s 76th annual meeting in August 2026 in New York City. Her leadership topic will be “Resisting Colonization of Lifeworlds,” which she hopes will answer the question, “How can we work together to recreate and elevate the logic of lifeworlds in resistance to the forces of colonization?”



▲ Alumna **Sesha Joi Moon** (’09 Cert, ’08 M.S., ’05 B.A.), is the co-founder of the JXN Project, a nonprofit driven to accurately recapture the pivotal role of Richmond, Virginia, in the evolution of the Black American experience. She participated to help promote the opening of the Jackson Ward exhibit, “From House to Highway.” The project explores Abraham Peyton Skipwith, the first Black homeowner in the Jackson Ward area, along with the eventual displacement of his home for the construction of the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike.

▲ Associate professor **Elsie Harper-Anderson, Ph.D.**, will begin her role as the Southeast region representative for the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. The ACSP works to connect planners and scholars with education and research opportunities.

▲ **Keith C. Rogers Jr.** (’10 MPA, ’08 B.S.) joins Charles City County as its new county administrator. Rogers brings to his role a passion for public service and more than 15 years of experience managing local government in Virginia and North Carolina. In addition to his city management background, he served as an adjunct faculty member at the Wilder School. “I am pleased to have the privilege of returning to my home state to serve the citizens of Charles City County,” Rogers says.



▲ **RaJade M. Berry-James, Ph.D.**, senior associate dean of faculty and academic affairs, assistant professor **Anthony Starke, Ph.D.**, and assistant professor **Lindsey Evans, Ph.D.**, (’17 Ph.D., ’08 MPA, ’08 Cert.), collaborated with several other scholars on their paper “Threats to Democracy: A Danger to Social Justice for All,” recently published in the *Journal of Social Equity and Public Administration*. Their essay discusses threats to democracy and how they impact the social justice movement.

▲ This summer, professor **Amy Cook, Ph.D.**, and several criminal justice students immersed themselves at the American College of Greece in Athens to study comprehensive harm reduction services for substance use. The students engaged with Greek professionals helping drug users by providing essential services such as medical care, mental health counseling, housing and food. A highlight of the experience was visiting a supervised drug consumption room, a rare and progressive public health intervention. Research consistently shows that comprehensive harm reduction strategies are practical tools for meeting people where they are, encouraging safer drug use practices through access to sterile equipment and reducing reliance on punitive approaches within the criminal justice system. Greece stands out as a compelling model, with harm reduction deeply integrated into community-based care.



▲ The Fall 2024 cohort of the **Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute’s Virginia Executive Institute** collaborated to study youth mental health issues through their capstone project, “Improving Student Well-Being Through Mental Health First Aid Training.” The team presented evidence to demonstrate that expanding mental health first aid training created a safer school environment. Policymakers took notice during this General Assembly’s session, and new legislation was passed to increase mental health first aid training. It went into effect on July 1. “VEI is designed to cultivate exactly this type of impact,” says **Nancy Calkins**, senior consultant and training facilitator at GEHLI.

▲ **Ben Teresa, Ph.D.**, associate professor of urban and regional planning and studies, joined four other VCU faculty members at Yale University to participate in a four-day program on behalf of the Yale National Initiative to strengthen teaching in public schools and professional development for K-12 teachers. In this extensive session, VCU faculty members collaborated with Richmond Public Schools National Fellows.



Shining a light on student mobility



Charity Scott, Ph.D., Wilder School assistant professor of public policy and administration, is the recipient of this year’s Oak Ridge Associated Universities (ORAU) Ralph E. Powe Junior Faculty Enhancement Award, a grant given to junior faculty to support early-career research and professional growth.

A former teacher, Scott is

recognized for her research on student mobility and its impact on students’ social, psychological and academic outcomes. She examined a collection of policies in her home state of Indiana that could explain why K-12 students frequently change schools. With this grant, Scott looks forward to providing experiential learning opportunities for graduate students.

Explore Scott’s research



bit.ly/charityscott

Engineering global excellence in urban planning

Niraj Verma, Ph.D., professor and former dean at the VCU Wilder School, is the recipient of the 2025 Distinguished Alumnus Award for Excellence in Teaching and Research in Engineering and Technology. The award, given by BIT Mesra (Ranchi), India, recognizes and honors impactful alumni who bring laurels to their alma mater. Verma’s contributions span more than 40 years, combining engineering technology in urban planning, institutional analysis and public management. Verma’s research focuses on crucial aspects that are frequently overlooked when establishing systems and institutions.

“That’s how I think of my work today, using ideas that have been left over, marginalized or discarded



and trying to see if reintegrating them into the research enterprise in a systematic way helps power our thinking better and makes our solutions more comprehensive,” Verma says.

Verma hopes that his numerous published books and articles will inspire colleagues to continue expanding upon his research at a pragmatic level.

Explore Verma’s extensive career



bit.ly/nirajverma

Class of 2025: U.S. Navy veteran Mitchell Watkins honed his experiences with a degree in homeland security and emergency preparedness

Watkins served as the Wilder School's Class of 2025 Spring Commencement student speaker.

BY LAUREN FLOYD

Given his passion for defense, security and public service, there was no chance U.S. Navy veteran **Mitchell Watkins ('25 B.S.)** would end his learning when he left the military. More awaited the cryptologic technician: an opportunity to build upon his tactical skills and leadership in the homeland security and emergency preparedness environment.

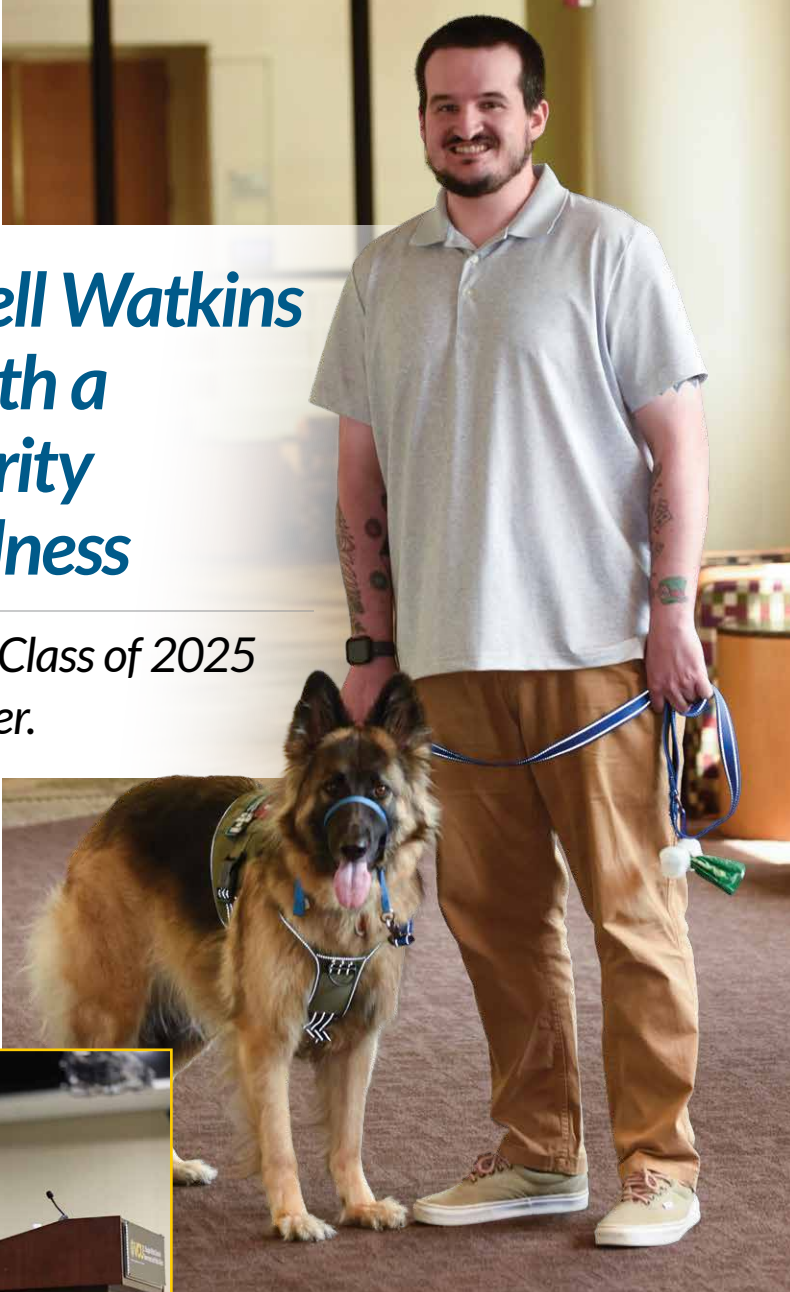
"Especially after I got out of the Navy, I wanted to continue to serve," Watkins says. "I was medically retired, so I didn't really have a choice. Even if I wanted to stay, the Navy wasn't going to let me, so I wanted to continue to serve our country, even after the fact."

In his nine years of naval service, Watkins found his niche in signals and electronic intelligence. He trained in missile defense, mastered time management skills, wrote technical documents and presented complex solutions. As a cryptologic technician, he performed a variety of tasks — from jamming enemy radar signals to analyzing encrypted data — in support of national intelligence efforts.

Watkins' experience in surveillance and strategic guidance meshed well with the Wilder School's No. 6 nationally ranked homeland security and emergency preparedness (HSEP) program. He was drawn explicitly to its human trafficking, terrorism and counterterrorism courses.

He spent a year as an undergraduate research assistant working closely with faculty members **Christopher Whyte, Ph.D.**, and **David Webber, Ph.D.**, on an innovative, grant-funded project that used machine learning to detect hate-based white supremacist language in social chats on a variety of platforms. The work was vital in helping those vulnerable to online recruitment and deradicalizing extremist individuals.

Watkins remained diligent in expanding his knowledge



and connections in homeland security outside of his studies. He participated in the Wilder School's Virginia Capitol Semester program, where he worked as a legislative assistant to **Delegate Marcia Price** of Newport News, Virginia. There, he developed a Structured Query Language (SQL)-based program to enhance multiple office functions, including data management

that significantly improved a malfunctioning awards process. Watkins also conducted policy research and attended legislative meetings in the new General Assembly Building.

His dedication to service extends well beyond his studies and internships. After graduation, Watkins began work as a cybersecurity analyst for Huntington Ingalls Industries while finishing his MPA program with the Wilder School online. He remembers to carry a selfless mindset, put kindness first, stress the importance of connections and stay rooted in his passion for security intelligence. "The important aspect of making connections, whether it's with peers, professors or recruiters at a job fair, is just, you know, be kind," he says. 🐾

How Giles Garrison is working toward a greener Richmond

At the intersection of community
building and environmental justice

BY MAE OETJENS

Giles Garrison ('10 MURP) grew up around two of Richmond's most storied parks, Forest Hill Park and the James River Park System. After graduating from the Wilder School's urban and regional planning program, she began working with the city to develop, preserve and enhance our shared green spaces.

Garrison is a programs and operations manager for the City of Richmond Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities, and her work is rooted in a belief that parks are essential to the health, environment and identity of Virginia's capital city.

"There's that side of parks as spaces that engage communities and make people feel connected and interconnected," Garrison says. "Parks are sort of the lungs of the city."

Her team's work is grounded in data and community engagement. Tools like the American Community Survey help her team understand park usage patterns, identify opportunities to improve recreational access and plan accordingly.

"We can see how diverse park usership is, and use data to improve

access and reduce environmental impacts like erosion and trash," shares Garrison.

Garrison, who began working for the city in 2019, has long been drawn to the intersection of community development and environmental justice. She is confident that Richmond's parks not only foster community, but also serve as vital urban infrastructure, facilitating environmental preservation, heat mitigation and storm protection.

"Parks are a place where we have biodiversity, which is essential to not only the flourishing of human beings, but also all the plants and animals and insects that we share this habitat with. We are in an urban habitat, but it's still a habitat," she says.

Garrison is proud of her push for economic justice within her department and was initially drawn to working for the city in a workforce development role.

"I've been able to advocate for more full-time jobs in our maintenance division," she says. "I believe that economic justice and getting people into jobs that help them attain a solid quality of life is really important."

"We have to make sure we're



“There’s that side of parks as spaces that engage communities and make people feel connected and interconnected. Parks are sort of the lungs of the city.”

— Giles Garrison ('10 MURP)

replenishing our trees to keep the city cool, but also to clean the air and to provide all the other benefits to people and to animals and to species of all different kinds," she adds.

Looking ahead, Garrison and her team are focused on maintaining and expanding Richmond's parklands, public trails and park facilities, and urban canopy, ensuring future generations inherit a city that is not just liveable, but thriving. 🌳



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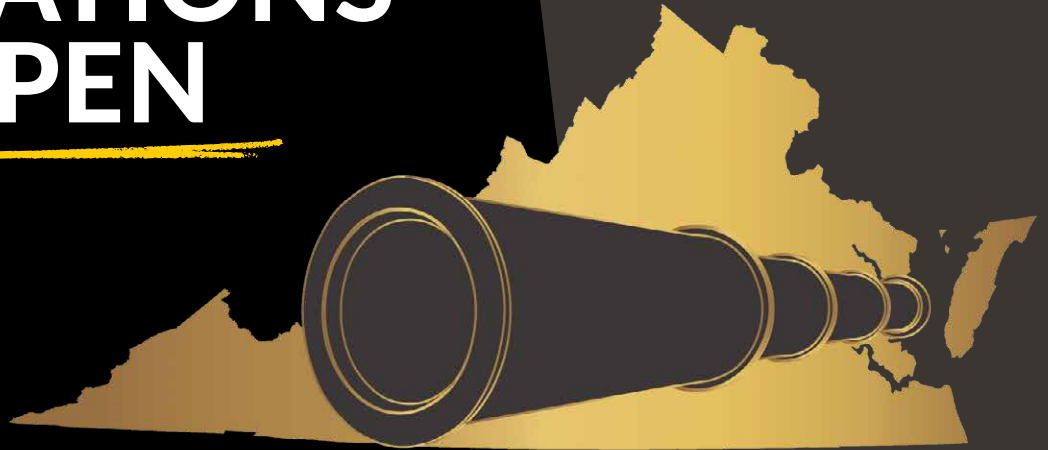
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