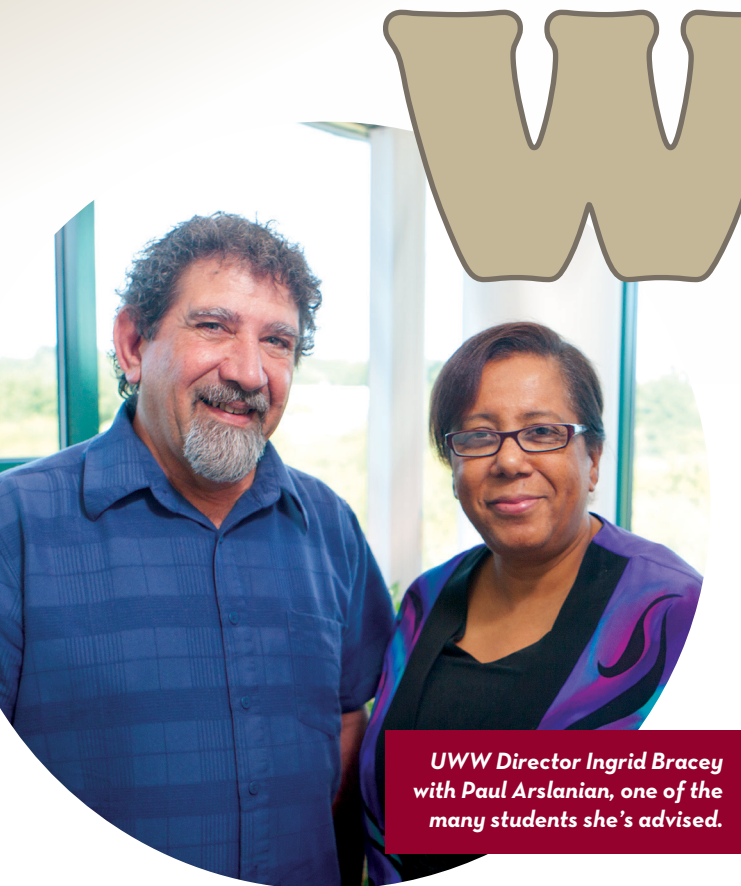


# NO WALLS

**But UWW has always had a rich tapestry of students.**

By Patricia Sullivan



*UWW Director Ingrid Bracey with Paul Arslanian, one of the many students she's advised.*

**WHEN THE University Without Walls staff put together its first promotional brochure back in 1971, they folded the piece into a triangle. The post office rejected it but, never mind; UWW had sent the message that it was willing to break with educational convention.**

low-income people well. Land-grant, flagship campuses, such as UMass Amherst, were the last to open their doors to non-traditional students.”

When UWW did open the doors (and tear down the walls), some of the first to stream in and take advantage of its flexibility were women who had left college for marriage and families and were motivated by the nascent women’s movement to return to school. “They decided it was their turn,” says Harris.

One early UWW grad, **Doris Dickinson ’74, ’77G**, raised five daughters and worked as a preschool director before coming to UWW’s first informational session. “I wanted a valid degree,” she says, “and I liked that this new program would give you credit for life experience.” Dickinson stayed on at UMass to earn a master’s degree in education and work for UWW for 13 years.

Like Dickinson, many students with rich life experience choose to complete their degrees through UWW because it is one of only a few institutions that leads students through a rigorous “prior learning assessment” through which they can earn as many as 30 academic credits. Advisors guide students in writing detailed portfolios that analyze what they’ve learned from life—whether it be through work or volunteerism, military service or vocational training.

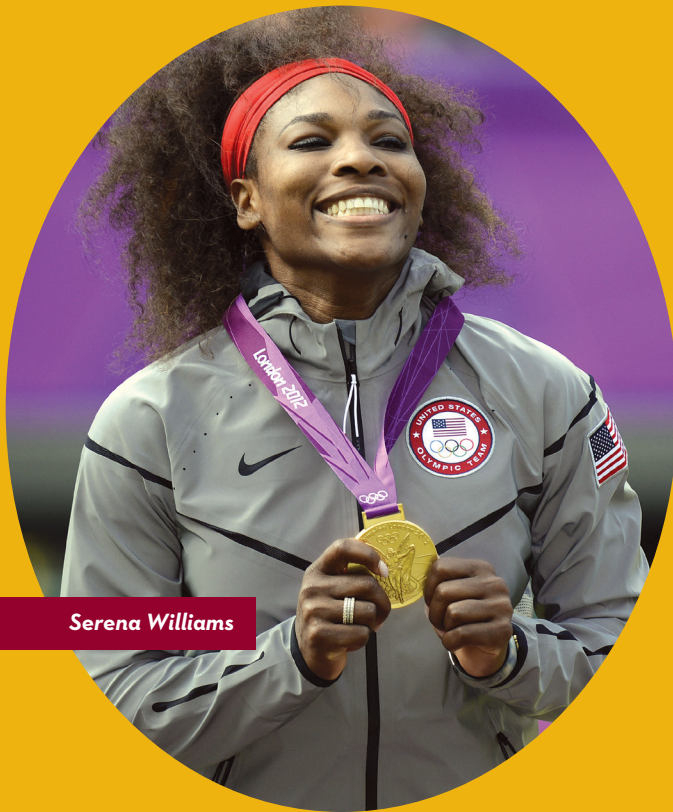
Writing the portfolio “is an incredibly complicated and transformative process,” says **Cindy Suopis ’02G**, a UWW faculty advisor for 10 years. “Students must be dedicated in order to reflect on what they’ve done and go through an intense process of critical thinking.”

For many, critical thinking becomes a habit and they discover they want to further their education still more: UWW has a long history of success in preparing students for graduate school.

As UWW celebrates a 40-year tradition of helping returning students complete bachelor’s degrees in nontraditional ways, that first brochure hangs on the office wall of UWW Director **Ingrid Bracey ’84G**. “We’re a determined lot,” she says. “Over the years UWW has shown resilience and persistence. The students just keep coming.”

To date, more than 3,000 students have completed bachelor’s degrees through UWW and more than 800 are currently enrolled. **Ed Harris ’77G**, who helped launch UWW as a graduate student and served as its director for twenty years, says, “UWW was born of the reform energy of the late 1960s, and the demands for significant social and institutional change.” It was part of a national movement funded by the federal government and the Ford Foundation. The UMass Amherst program is one of just a few of the original 17 University Without Walls nationwide still going strong.

As Harris recalls, “Aside from welcoming returning veterans after World War II under the GI Bill, higher education had not served adults, women, African Americans, Latinos, or



**Serena Williams**

## GOLD MEDAL STUDENT

**P**ROFESSIONAL ATHLETES who leave or delay college to maximize their playing opportunities during their physical peak find UWW fits them like custom-molded insoles.

UWW's most famous current student is tennis great **Serena Williams**, who enrolled in fall 2011 to complete her bachelor's degree. Like UWW grad Julius Erving before her, Williams champions the importance of education. She has supported schools in Africa and, as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador last year, helped kick off a campaign to promote schools in Asia.

This past summer Williams, age 31, had her best season ever. She won the U.S. Open and Wimbledon singles title and two Olympic gold medals—one in singles, and with her sister Venus, her third gold in doubles. She now holds 15 major singles titles and has earned more prize money than any other female athlete.

**Jocelyn Providence '13**, who plays tennis for the Minutewomen, speaks for many students when she says: "Serena Williams is a UMass student! That's crazy! She was my idol growing up. I love that she's so passionate about everything she does and I think it's amazing that she wants to continue her education at UMass."

**Ana-Maria Campos '98, '02G** studied computing and the arts while a UWW student and then earned an MFA. She is now director of computer resources for the New York City department of parks and recreation. "The portfolio process opened up my eyes to what I had done and what I was capable of," says Campos, who had worked as a graphic designer before UWW.

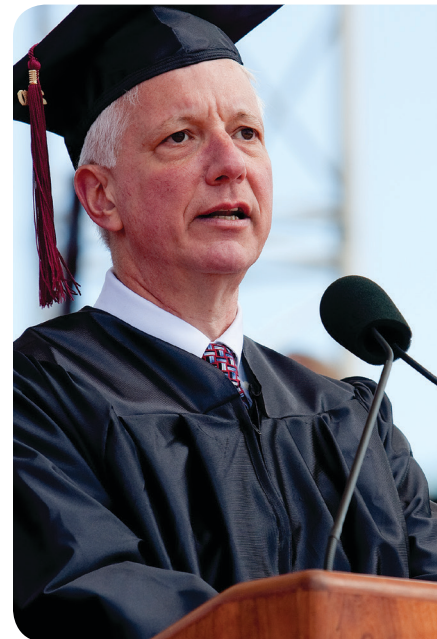
During its 40-year run, UWW has exerted a pull on particular groups of students—besides women, people interested in labor studies, politicians, and veterans have found UWW works especially well for them. **Deirdre Yasutomo '12** came to UWW after six years of active Coast Guard duty, experience she applied to portfolio work on gender issues in the military. She worked full time as a police detective while studying for her bachelor's degree. "It was extremely challenging and very time consuming, but 100 percent worth it in the end," she says.

Others who have long benefited from UWW's flexibility are artists. When he enrolled at UWW at age 40, jazz pianist and composer **Paul Arslanian '90** already had a flourishing career leading ensembles and working with jazz luminaries. He found that his education validated what he had learned as a musician. UWW suits artists, Arslanian believes, because "a lot of the important learning that we do toward our craft we have to do in a nonacademic situation—through performing and through working with masters—and so artists sometimes find conventional academics frustrating." He found UWW satisfying, however, because it crystallized what he knew while expanding his horizons: he enjoyed interacting with younger students in a biology lab and exploring music beyond jazz with courses in classical music and composition.

As a lecturer in dance and accompanist for the UMass dance department, Arslanian is one of dozens of UMass faculty and staff with UWW degrees. Now, with the option of attending

UWW 100 percent online, more students come from further afield; nearly one-third are from out of state. **Rory Blank '12**, for example, worked on a goat farm in Hawaii while studying nonprofit administration and social justice.

Other students find their way back to UMass through UWW. **Mark Cerasuolo '10**, of Redmond, Washington, dropped out in 1974 to take a job and after three successful decades working in consumer electronics, re-enrolled. As a speaker at the 2010 commencement, he joked, "I never intended to take 62 semesters off." Cerasuolo spoke about how he initially didn't think he had much to learn from college and was interested mainly in getting a diploma, but came to realize that, as much as his vast experience informed him, the lack of a theoretical foundation for his work limited his vision.



**Mark Cerasuolo left UMass Amherst in 1974 and completed his degree in 2010.**

For Director Ingrid Bracey, who became a UWW instructor in 1989, working with a rich tapestry of students like Cerasuolo has been the best part of the job. “I’ve lived vicariously through politicians, business people, artists, nuns, single mothers, a software developer, a chef, and so many others,” says Bracey.

Currently, the biggest challenge for Bracey and for UWW is the lack of state funding, which was eliminated in 2007. “UWW is now completely self-supporting and, in fact, contributes revenue to the university,” Bracey explains. “We

have survived due to our ability to adapt to the times.” In the works are partnerships with the YMCA of Greater Springfield and the Boston Ballet, whose employees are ideal candidates for flexible UWW educations.

Above all, Bracey says, “high-touch advising” led to UWW’s success. University Without Walls graduates—from its first intrepid homemakers to Julius Erving to today’s multitaskers—agree. “Tell Ingrid I said ‘hi,’” says Ana-Maria Campos. “She made a huge difference in my life.” **UM**

## Dr. J Today

**U**NIVERSITY WITHOUT WALLS graduate **Julius Erving '86, '86G(Hon)** came to campus in 1968 and left as a basketball legend. In his two seasons playing for UMass, he set scoring and rebounding records and gave thousands thrilling memories of his acrobatics at the Curry Hicks Cage. After his junior year, when UMass went 23-4 and students lined up for hours for a chance to see number 32, he joined the American Basketball Association, playing for the Virginia Squires and then the New York Nets. Dr. J went on to 11 stellar seasons with the Philadelphia 76ers in the NBA, including a championship season in 1983, and became one of the undisputed greatest basketball players of all time.

He completed his bachelor’s degree through University Without Walls a year before his 1987 retirement from pro basketball, impressing his UWW advisor with his work ethic, writing ability, and critical thinking. Now age 62, he lives in Atlanta and has been lauded for his community service and charitable work. He serves as a strategic advisor to the 76ers, applies his business education to entrepreneurial interests, brings his expertise to corporate boards, and encourages college athletes to focus on education.

After a big apology for being a little late because of a workout (“My trainer is so torturous that I know why I forgot”) Dr. J spoke with *UMass Amherst* magazine about his days on campus, UWW, and the importance of education.

### **On completing his degree:**

I always viewed myself as a student athlete and that was one of the reasons why I chose UMass over other colleges. I went with the idea of matriculating for a degree. When circumstances allowed me the opportunity to leave school early I did make a promise to my mother that I was going to get my degree. First and foremost, I wanted to own up to that promise. I also felt that completing my degree would add credibility to my conversations with the young people who I wanted to impress with the advantages of getting an education to better prepare themselves for the challenges of life and how to be a better citizen in America.

### **On University Without Walls:**

UWW and I were a good fit, but it wasn’t easy; nothing worth doing comes easy. The focus of my UWW work was on mentoring—on evolving from being mentored, to becoming a mentor, and then a more senior and recognized mentor. When I look at the long time it took me to complete my degree, it was very gratifying to march with the class of 1986. And, yes, my mother was there.

### **On UMass days:**

In college, basketball was an extracurricular activity for me. I was definitely a student athlete and I enjoyed it. I didn’t even think about going pro until after my sophomore year. In those

days celebrity was different, it wasn’t 24/7; you were a celebrity during the season and off-season you were just one of the guys. During the season, people wanted tickets or to hear the post-game report. Off-season it wasn’t like that.

### **On campus life:**

I wanted to leave New York and I wanted the big campus experience. On campus, I lived in Hills, then I moved up to Grayson, then I went to Southwest. I did the best job that I could of blending in and I always had a job. In New England everybody shovels snow; so of course I shoveled snow. I cleaned up a local dentist’s office; I did basketball camps with [legendary head coach] Jack Leaman. I used to babysit [assistant coach] Ray Wilson’s two sons. I’d do my homework babysitting those kids.

### **On his UMass mentors and friends:**

I had a great experience and met wonderful people. It was on the UMass campus that I met **Bill Cosby '72G, '76G, '86G(Hon)**. I met Bill Russell who I actually made friends with; they were very inspirational people in my life. Coach Leaman’s influence was huge, as well as **Dr. Randolph Bromery '79G(Hon)** [chancellor from 1971 to 1979]. Playthell Benjamin [an early member of the Afro-American Studies department] has been down here to Atlanta to visit me.

One of my best friends today is a former UMass student who started





*Julius Erving in Springfield in September and in Curry Hicks in 1970.*

there with me—Leon Saunders. We both went to the same high school, we went to UMass together, and he's my golf nemesis now. He's the guy who gave me my nickname, "the doctor," and I gave him "the professor." We still smile about how we gave each other nicknames that stuck.

**On the value of education:**

Your judgment is sharpened by being in an educational environment. You can make informed decisions, which is so much better than needing others around you to explain things, but you have the confidence to welcome a

second opinion. Education is fundamental to being able to find your happiness in life, to find yourself in life. An educated person is employable. An educated person is capable of employing someone. Education and employment combined lead to empowerment. We all need some kind of outlet to survive down here. Plus, the network that you build and the friends that you make are very important.

**Advice to young people:**

I don't think college should be the best time of your life. I think it should be a dedicated time in which you are

preparing yourself for the best times of your life so that you'll be able to receive those things with an understanding of why it happened when it's happening. Success is so much more gratifying when you have ground it out and given it everything.

**For older people:**

I'm working on an autobiography and it's been interesting to reflect back on my life. I don't live in the past, but the past is definitely part of our foundation. I'm very content—60 is the new 40, you know!