SpotLight

THE PEOPLE WHO DRIVE OUR SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Spring 2025

LAWRENCE LIVERMORE NATIONAL LABORATORY

ON THE COVER

Surrounded by his whimsical and captivating illustrations, Gabriel Haro Acosta shows how life at the Lab always leaves room for creativity.

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory

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Life at the Lab
Weston Cadena

Computing Scholar Graduate Intern, Center for Applied Scientific Computing

"I was introduced to LLNL by my professor and mentor, Roger Pearce, who helped guide my passion for high-performance computing. Working here has been incredibly rewarding and has accelerated my technical and professional growth."

The Adventure of a Lifetime

By Jeremy Thomas

Picture this: You're dropped off in the middle of a bustling European city with nothing but a backpack and 24 cans of Red Bull. No money, no phone and no idea where you'll be spending the night. The goal? Travel across Europe, reach designated checkpoints and complete a series of challenges — all within seven days — using only your provided energy drinks as currency.

This is the premise of Red Bull's "Can You Make It?" challenge, and last summer's Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory Computing Scholar Weston Cadena and his team of modern-day gladiators didn't just make it — they conquered it.

For those unfamiliar with the adrenaline-fueled event billed as "the ultimate adventure," think of it as a fusion of "The Amazing Race" and "Survivor," with a generous splash of Red Bull thrown in for good measure. Hundreds of teams from around the world compete, relying on their wits, charm and a knack for bartering to turn those cans into everything from plane tickets to gourmet meals. The challenge is global, with 270 teams competing, representing 80 different countries.

Cadena and his friends — fellow Texas A&M University students David Greek and Jacob Mathiasmeier — were already known around campus for their adventurous spirits (from escapades like backpacking through Europe and Northern Africa, skydiving and charity gladiator races) and penchant for pushing limits. When they decided to submit a video and were selected for the challenge, they knew they were in for a wild ride. But even they couldn't have anticipated the sheer intensity, the joy, the exhaustion and the life-changing experiences that awaited them. The challenge tested not just their physical stamina but their ingenuity and resilience.

"There's a lot of things that we have done that are pretty ambitious and borderline a little crazy," Cadena said. "So when somebody hears something like [this challenge], our names start to get associated with it. Our biggest thing was we are ultra-competitive, and it gave us a reason to get back together to do something really fun."

A leap into the unknown

The rules of the game were simple: starting at one of five assigned starting points in Europe (Milan, Copenhagen, Budapest, Barcelona or Amsterdam), cover as much distance as possible, visit mandatory checkpoints, complete quirky challenges and document the whole adventure on social media — all while trading cans of Red Bull for food, transportation and shelter. With Berlin marking the finish, the challenge included 60 checkpoint cities throughout Europe; at each one, your team is replenished with another pack of 24 Red Bulls to keep the adventure (and adrenaline) flowing. No personal phones are allowed, but each participant is given an event phone for selfies on the journey.

"We tried our best to get as mentally prepared as possible, but it was hard because they haven't done this challenge since 2018," he explains. "They also were very vague with their rules, because I think they wanted to keep it a surprise of what you're really doing. But on top of that, we sacrificed a lot of sleep to win this challenge."

The team's strategy? Stay positive, think creatively and embrace the chaos. And they found chaos.

Team Gladiators didn't find out where they'd start (Barcelona) until right before their flights. Another surprise came on Day 1: there was a grand prize at stake, a VIP experience at a Formula 1 race with hospitality provided by Red Bull. The team raced out of the starting gate, skateboards in hand, and from the get-go it was clear that Cadena's team had a secret weapon: charisma. Their strategy involved setting up camp at gas stations, where they used their Red Bull gear and gladiator helmets to stand out and catch rides.

"If somebody looked our way, we'd ask if we could hitchhike to wherever we wanted to go," Cadena said. "Most of the time, we were pitching ourselves and the competition and how they could contribute to the race. I think we only had about two trades where somebody was like, 'Wow, that is a lot of Red Bull.' It was about people wanting to be a part of a journey and help a team win."

> **I don't just like to travel or vacation, I like to adventure.**

The intrepid Gladiators' first hurdle was to trade their stash of drinks for train tickets to Germany. Unfortunately, the train was delayed several hours, so the team pivoted to bartering for a flight. With a limited supply of cans, they had to be strategic, but also practical. "To get the plane ticket, we traded 15 cans. We even drank a couple, so it was more like 13 cans," Cadena recounts with a chuckle.

With legions following along on social media, the team traversed Europe, swapping Red Bulls for bus tickets, catching rides with total strangers and sleeping wherever they could lay their heads, some nights only getting 2–3 hours of shut eye. But the competition wasn't just about reaching Berlin the fastest; they had to accrue the most points through various challenges and side quests, some requiring travel to remote towns in Eastern Europe.

Teams earned points by completing tasks such as posting vlogs, achieving milestones or participating in local-themed activities. Some challenges were easy, Cadena said, like getting groups of random people to shout out the team's name or recording their own rap song in a professional studio. Others were more physically demanding and geographically themed, like caving, wakeboarding or climbing a ship's mast. There were also points for traveling from checkpoint to checkpoint — with teams collecting one point (as the crow flies) for each kilometer.

When not on trains, their primary mode of transport within cities was a set of short, lightweight penny boards — an ingenious choice that helped them zip between the checkpoints. "Instead of running everywhere with our backpacks, we skated," Cadena explained. It was faster, and frankly, a lot more fun. But it wasn't all good times. Cadena and his team faced numerous setbacks along the way, but the team's ability to adapt and maintain a positive mindset was key to their success.

"There were multiple times where plans that we had or ideas we had would fall through, or we would think we could go to another city and realize that the train tickets were 80 euros, and that there's no way that we're going to get three people to buy us those tickets," Cadena said. "It could very easily just 100% change, and then you're trying to refigure out everything."

High risk, high reward in Hungary

At the heart of the team's success was their unique bond and synergy. Each member had a role, be it negotiator, navigator or planner. When one of the teammates felt the strain of the journey — both physically and mentally — the others rallied around.

"The motivation was in not letting our team down," Cadena said. "We all had a saying — 'I'm not going to be the reason why we lose this.'"

Cadena said his analytical approach to problem-solving, honed through his background in computer science, played a crucial role in several high-pressure situations where last-minute decision-making was vital. That quality came in play at a pivotal moment that set their path to victory in motion.

In Budapest, Hungary, with just 36 hours to go, the team was in a tight spot, fluctuating between first and fourth place. The pressure was mounting, and it became clear that to clinch the win, they needed to tackle several challenging "remote checkpoints" — high-value targets located on the edges of their provided maps. The decision proved audacious.

"We decided that we were going to have to take a risk and just try to hit two of them, which would literally leave us the furthest team away from Berlin," Cadena recalled. "It was a risk

Weston Cadena and his team sprint to the finish. (Photo: Marc Conzelmann/Red Bull Content Pool) that we took, and if we didn't take it, we wouldn't have won."

The team ended up in a hamlet in Croatia, with the daunting task of getting to Berlin in less than three days. Waiting for a rideshare that never showed up wasted precious time, and feeling a bit crestfallen, they returned to Zagreb and hitchhiked from there all the way to Prague in 24 hours.

"The best thing to do is to go to either a highway or a gas station on the highway where people are already stopping so you can have their attention," Cadena said about the team's hitchhiking strategy. At one point, a driver dropped them off in the middle of a highway, but they were quickly able to collect themselves and flag down another ride.

The team managed to hit four or five checkpoints on their way to Germany, but the final stretch was particularly grueling. In a race against time, they were mentally and physically exhausted, but they could feel the finish line.

"In the last 24 hours, the scoreboard goes away," Cadena explained, leaving the teams able to focus only on their own performance without knowing how others were faring. The Gladiators struggled through soccer and other athletic challenges and pushed themselves to maximize points until the final hours, keeping some challenges on reserve to surprise competitors.

"We were running on such a tight timeline that we couldn't just say we wanted to do things; we actually had to know, is it possible to do them?" Cadena said. "The checkpoint at Leipzig was very, very nerve-racking. On the bus ride from Leipzig to Berlin, it was like, 'how do we finish out this last four or five hours that we had and maximize as many points as we can?"

When the team finally crossed the finish line, "everything felt so worth it," he recalled. "Celebrating with friends who also competed was amazing."

Then the waiting began. They wouldn't know the results until five hours later.

This page and facing page: Cadena and his team celebrate winning the 2024 Red Bull Can You Make It? Challenge (Nady El-Tounsy/Red Bull Content Pool)

It's about the journey, not the destination

When the final points were tallied, the team's sandbagging strategy had worked, giving them the victory by the slimmest of margins — fewer than 150 points out of more than 18,000 separated them from the runners-up from Egypt. For Cadena, the moment was euphoric. It wasn't just a victory for the team; it was a triumph over every doubt, every trial and every moment of uncertainty.

The experience had a lingering and profound impact on Cadena. It made him "think outside the box" and influenced his problem-solving skills. For Cadena, the challenge wasn't just mental and physical; it was also emotional. Despite the occasional bump in the road, it proved a testament to human kindness.

"[Kindness] became like a part of your day-to-day life," he explains. "It really showed me how most of the population in this world is willing to help you. If I'm ever on the receiving end of a crazy ask like this, I'm 100% going to help whoever comes up to me."

In total, Team Gladiators hit 14 checkpoints, covering nearly 5,000 kilometers and 10 countries, participated in over 50 challenges and traded 150 cans of Red Bull to survive and win. Since their victory, Cadena and his team have enjoyed some exciting rewards, including being Red Bull's guests of honor at the British Grand Prix. However, the most enduring legacy of the challenge is the lasting connections they've made by joining a virtual global network ready to share stories, offer a couch for the night or plan the next big adventure.

"There's a group chat that everyone is in and it's funny, because people will say 'Hey, I'm in Barcelona this week. Is anyone in Barcelona?' And then somebody will be like, 'Yeah, come stay with me,'" Cadena laughed. "It's pretty cool to see there's this whole Red Bull Challenge community that's formed from it."

While he continues pursuing his master's degree back at College Station, Cadena and his team's success has also led to new opportunities. They recently filmed an application video for The Amazing Race and are eyeing other Red Bull challenges in the future, such as Flugtag, where teams build their own aircraft and see how far they can fly.

"It was literally the adventure of a lifetime, and so I'm thinking 'how are we going to try and replicate this?' he said. "I enjoyed it so much. I've realized I don't just like to travel, or just vacation — I like to adventure. And so, my motivations have changed a lot."

As Cadena and his team reflect on the experience, their journey not only brought them victory but also lifelong memories, proving that sometimes the greatest rewards come from taking the boldest risks. ■

Life at the Lab
Gabriel Haro Acosta

Administrative Specialist, Strategic Deterrence Directorate

"The most fulfilling part for me is using my computer-science skills to manipulate documents and create standard work procedures. I find a unique harmony between my professional skills and my artistic pursuits, both of which involve problem-solving and creativity."

(Photos: Blaise Douros/LLNL)

Illustrating Dreams

By Paul Rhien

Gabriel Haro Acosta's life is a canvas painted with creativity and resilience. Growing up with health issues that kept him indoors, Acosta found an escape in the pages of library books and the strokes of his own drawings. Now, alongside his wife, he immerses himself in the world of children's book illustration, bringing whimsical stories to life for their young daughters and blending a rich family heritage of artistry with his own modern touch.

A family of artists

Acosta's journey into illustration began with the rich artistic legacy of his family. His grandfather, an artisan in Mexico, painted murals in government buildings without any formal education. Acosta's uncles, skilled carpenters, created furniture and artistic pieces imbued with cultural significance. Growing up in Tracy, California, Acosta found solace in the library due to health issues that limited his outdoor activities. The library became his sanctuary, and books his best friends.

"I wasn't really allowed to be outdoors much, but the library was my escape," Acosta said. "The best time of the year for me was the Scholastic book fairs. My parents did their best to buy me as many books as they could, and they encouraged me to do art."

Discovering inspiration and fulfillment in illustration

Acosta's love for books and art flourished in elementary school, where a teacher introduced him to bookmaking and storytelling. This early encouragement led him to explore graphic design in high school and junior college, where he honed his skills in computer design.

"I started graphic designing a little bit in high school and then took it into college," Acosta said. "During COVID, I had my biggest growth because I could concentrate more on my designs."

Acosta's enthusiasm for illustration found a new dimension when he met his wife, who shares his love for children's books. Together, they began creating storybooks for their daughters.

"My wife loves kids and children's books. She comes up with the storyboards and I do all the illustrations," Acosta said. They have several books in progress, focusing on themes like the seasons, the alphabet, and the first day of school.

For Acosta, the process of illustrating is a deeply immersive experience. "The moment I get on the computer and start designing, the world stops. I can sit there for hours, just drawing and perfecting my work," he said. His inspirations include Alvin Schwartz's *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* and the Maurice Sendak classic *Where the Wild Things Are.*

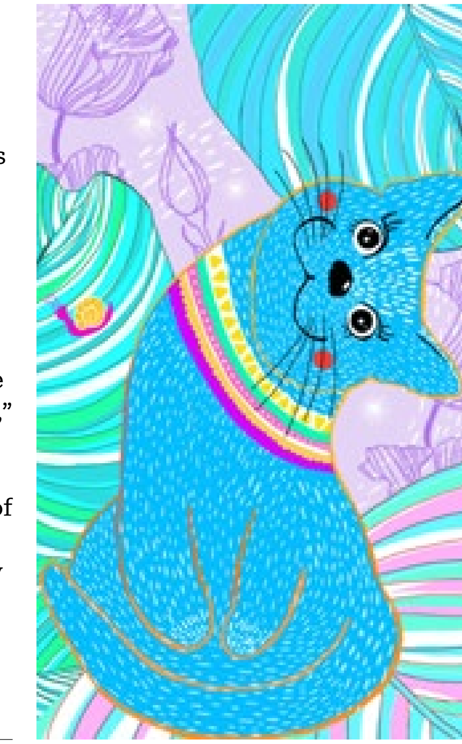
A future in children's literature

Acosta and his wife aspire to self-publish their children's books, driven by a desire to create something positive and inspiring for young readers.

"We want to do something that can brighten up someone's day," Acosta said. Their journey speaks to the power of having a creative outlet and the importance of following one's interests, no matter where they lead.

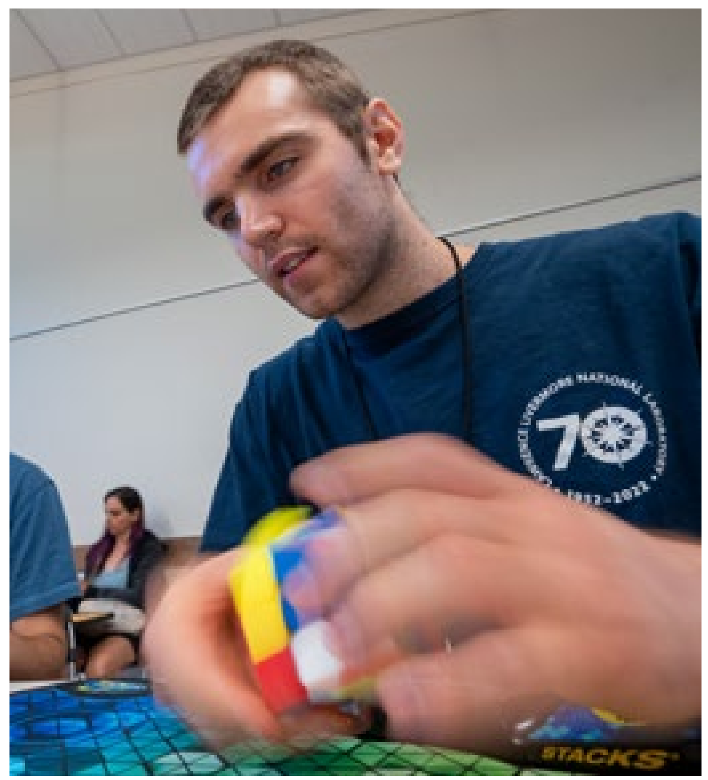
His artistic journey is intertwined with his family's support and shared interests. His wife paints alongside him, and their daughters are growing up surrounded by creativity. "It's easier to teach our children with little finger paints and keep them engaged," Acosta said.

In every illustration, Acosta captures not just a story, but a piece of himself. Through the power of imagination, he invites us all to find beauty in the unexpected and to dream without limits. His work encourages us to see the world through a lens of wonder and possibility. ■



SCRAMBLING FOR SOLUTIONS

By Anne Stark



Life at the Lab
Jimmy Kingston

Grad student, physics.
Physical and Life Sciences Directorate, Nuclear and Chemical Science Division

"The number of resources at the Lab is kind of mind-blowing. I wasn't expecting this when I first arrived. I didn't realize how great the mentorship program is. You're kind of spoiled because the mentorship, learning and resources are incredible. I've benefited from that immensely."

At competitions held by the World Cube Association, Jimmy Kingston tests his Rubik's mettle against the best on the globe. (Photos: Blaise Douros/LLNL)

Jimmy Kingston can learn new skills. On the one hand, he is diving into the world of dark-matter research, but when he's not working on that, he has a passion for a 3x3x3 cube that can unlock his ingenuity in solving some of the most difficult scrambles.

Kingston is a master in solving the Rubik's Cube, the 3D combination puzzle that was developed in 1974, 21 years before he was born.

Much like the early 20th-century avant-garde cubist art movement in which subjects are analyzed, broken up and reassembled in an abstract form so the subject is depicted from multiple perspectives, the Rubik's Cube has many solutions.

In a Rubik's Cube, an internal pivot mechanism enables each of six faces to turn independently, thus mixing up the colors. For the puzzle to be solved, each face must be returned to have only one color. It has various numbers of sides, dimensions and mechanisms.

Although the Rubik's Cube reached its height of mainstream popularity in the 1980s, it is still widely known and used by many to this day. Kingston is one of those people, specifically calling himself a speedcuber for achieving fast-paced solutions.

He really had two starts to cubing. As an undergrad at UC Berkeley, he and a group of three other friends would play Dungeons and Dragons. In between turns, two friends would be solving their cubes. At one point, his friend loaned him a cube to solve for himself. He went online and learned how to solve it and wound up playing around with it too, until 2017.

Fast forward to 2022: he was visiting his mother in Southern California, and she found a Rubik's Cube from the 1990s that she had lying around. She asked Kingston to solve it for her.

"I think she remembered I would play with it as an undergrad, but at this point I had no clue how to solve it," Kingston said. "I told myself 'I don't know what to do with it'. I told her I would come back in a few months and have it solved."

The worldwide association of cubing

Not remembering how to solve it, Kingston again went online and watched a tutorial. But he learned something new about the Rubik's Cube world that he never knew when he first picked it up.

"I wanted to learn how to do it fast," he said. "When I was looking all this up online, I found out that apparently there's a whole world of cubing out there."

In fact, the World Cube Association (WCA) is the worldwide nonprofit organization that regulates and holds competitions for mechanical puzzles that are operated by twisting groups of pieces, commonly known as twisty puzzles (a subcategory of combination puzzles). The most famous of those puzzles is the Rubik's Cube. Since the start of the WCA, there have been more than 10,000 competitions.

The goal of the association is to have "more competitions in more countries with more people and more fun, under fair and equal conditions."

For Kingston, WCA competitions are an environment where he could show off his talent for solving the cube, where he has solved it officially in 17.52 seconds and even solved it blindfolded in 41.90 seconds.

"These are competitions, but they're also social events," he said. "It's where people meet to exchange ideas, including tricks and algorithms and see each other's progress, and just talk about the sport in general.

"There are a lot of ways to improve. And the competitive aspect of it makes it really fun. It's a very lively community where people are always getting better. I feel like it draws me to it, so I spend most of my free time practicing to get faster."

The art of solving the cube

But speedcubing isn't just about figuring out how to turn the cube. Once you've intuitively solved the first two layers, there are sequences of moves called algorithms for swiftly solving the last layer of the cube. Once you've memorized those, Kingston said, the rest of the solve is pattern recognition and muscle memory.

Learning all the algorithms for every puzzle isn't easy. For example, the optimal way to solve the cube blindfolded is a technique called "3-style," where each scramble requires executing around 10 algorithms back-to-back perfectly from a set of nearly 850 algorithms. Kingston has memorized them all.

He uses this analogy to memorize algorithms: say you're entering a password for a website. Once you start entering the characters, it feels automatic. But if you had to say out loud what your password is, you don't remember it. But when you start to type it, your fingers know what to do.

"It's kind of similar for cubing when you learn algorithms for solving the cube," Kingston said. "If you asked me to tell you the sequence of moves for a certain algorithm, most of the time, I wouldn't know it. But my fingers do."

> **I feel like my ability to learn has improved a lot. I can learn new things; it's never too late.**

Though learning so many algorithms wasn't easy, he said he just gave himself some time and was patient. And that talent not only helped his cubing, but also his life.

"I feel like my ability to learn has improved a lot," he said. "It gave me confidence with work, too. I'm giving myself the time just to be patient with myself and learn new skills. And it's happening all the time. I feel like I have that mentality in many aspects of my life. I can learn new things; it's never too late." ■

The Animal Whisperer

By Maryem Torabi

Life at the Lab
Amy Weldon

Communications Specialist, Technical Information Department

"Working at the Lab has been amazing; not just because of the incredible science, but for the fascinating people I've met. My mid-career transition from animal care to science communications doesn't feel out of place here, surrounded by brilliant, hardworking people, all with unique backstories and nontraditional paths that led them to LLNL."

(Photos: Blaise Douros/LLNL)

From a young age, Amy Weldon, a communications specialist at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, felt a magnetic pull towards animals. This fascination blossomed into a lifelong journey, rich with experiences and lessons that not only shaped her early career but continues to ignite her passion for animal care today.

Inspired by her aunt, a devoted park ranger and wildlife rehabilitator, Weldon grew up immersed in a world filled with animals. While she was growing up, her household embraced living creatures with curiosity and admiration, instilling a deep respect for wildlife.

"I vividly remember a garden spider with a bright, highlighter-green thorax that resembled a Halloween decoration. My mom insisted it stay undisturbed in its web, even encouraging us to feed it 'dinner,'" Weldon says.

This early exposure sparked her lifelong passion for the natural world. While pursuing her bachelor's degree in animal behavior, Weldon began her journey in animal care as an intern at the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore with the Animal Embassy, caring for its education animal collection, including African penguins, serval cats, raptors, parrots, reptiles and other small animals.

Those early days were filled with wonder and hard work as she learned the ropes of animal care. By 2007, Weldon had moved to the National Aquarium in Baltimore, where she immersed herself in the vibrant world of marine life. Whether she was performing medical procedures, scrubbing tanks or preparing animal diets, her dedication was unwavering. While working with creatures like rainbow lorikeets and freshwater crocodiles, she discovered the joy of forming stronger connections with animals.

"When you spend time with the animals, you get to observe their intricacies and appreciate their individual personalities. While they might share similarities, each animal is unique in its own way," Weldon said.

As her career progressed, Weldon became a trainer for ambassador animals, including macaws and a two-toed sloth, before joining the care team for Atlantic bottlenose dolphins. Marine-mammal trainers not only shape beloved behaviors like jumps and flips but also oversee the animals' physical and mental well-being. Weldon trained the dolphins for health checks and assisted researchers in studying dolphin cognition through observations of their interactions with mirrors. She also played a crucial role in shifting the dolphin-training approach from scripted shows to informal presentations that showcased the dolphins' natural behaviors and personalities.

In this capacity, Weldon appeared on local and national news and spoke to audiences of up to 1,500 guests, including elected officials and celebrities. She had the chance to meet many of Baltimore's professional athletes and help fulfill dolphin dreams for children and adults alike. Notably, some of her most meaningful moments came from sharing these remarkable

animals with disadvantaged children, inspiring many to pursue careers in animal and science fields.

Working with dolphins provided Weldon with valuable insights into the importance of engaging with people on issues like conservation and climate change. Her regular interactions with the public highlighted the critical need for effective science communicators. In 2015, she shifted from animal care and training to communications, ultimately earning a master's degree in science communications and public engagement. With her science background, Weldon is committed to helping scientists advocate for their vital work in fields that affect everyday lives.

After years of experience at various educational institutions and organizations, Weldon relocated to California to take on her current role as a communications specialist at the Lab.

With a desire to work with animals and find community again, Weldon joined the East Bay Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in 2023 as an enrichment and companionship volunteer. Here, she found joy in providing care and comfort to dogs, each with its own needs. Adopting her husky, Hiccup, from the SPCA added a new dimension to her understanding of animal behavior.

"Dogs are far more complex than we realize, and it's both humbling and fascinating to apply what I'm learning as a volunteer to being a pet owner. Ultimately, this has allowed me to quickly build a remarkably strong bond and positive relationship with Hiccup," Weldon said.

What sets the East Bay SPCA apart for Weldon is their adoption of animal-management techniques from zoos and aquariums. This approach aligns with her background in caring for exotic species, emphasizing quiet observation and respect, and offering animals as much choice as possible.

While a dream job for many, working in animal care presents its own unique challenges. She recognizes that despite her formal education and extensive experience, there is always more to learn, especially when it comes to understanding dogs.

"It requires hard work and dedication to succeed in this field. The job demands significant physical, mental and emotional effort, especially in shelters and rescues where staff work tirelessly, even on weekends and holidays, to ensure the best lives

...it's both humbling and fascinating to apply what I'm learning as a volunteer to being a pet owner.

for animals before adoption. During my time as an animal-care worker, volunteers were invaluable, and I'm excited to give back now as a volunteer myself," Weldon said.

Working with dogs — particularly shelter dogs — can be challenging, she said, but she finds the work incredibly rewarding.

"I look forward to coming in each week to talk with the staff and hear about who has been adopted. Knowing that any dog — especially one I've worked with — has found a loving home fills me with immense happiness. It's also lovely to be welcomed back into the animal-care community, which I've missed so much," Weldon said.

Looking ahead, Weldon intends to enroll in additional specialized training courses offered by the SPCA to deepen her knowledge and strengthen her bond with Hiccup. She also looks forward to connecting with fellow animal enthusiasts and exploring new ways to support the shelter and the wider community.

"My experiences with animals have profoundly shaped who I am, teaching me the importance of listening, observing and being present to cherish special moments," she said. "The most valuable lessons I've gained from caring for them include the significance of hard work, the acceptance of getting dirty and the understanding that there is always more to learn. Animals have a unique way of reminding us not to take ourselves too seriously." ■

Above: Amy Weldon with Atlantic bottlenose dolphins. Top right: Weldon with a scarlet macaw. Bottom right: Weldon with a hyacinth macaw (Courtesy photos)

Freedom on Wheels

By Zachary Ardzrooni

Life at the Lab
Randy Wong

Photographer, Technical Information Department

"Working at LLNL has afforded me unique opportunities to photograph people, places and things that few other photographers would ever have access to. I love photography so it is difficult to consider creating images here at the Lab as 'work'."

Since the 1990s, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory photographer Randy Wong has felt the freedom of the open rink beneath his wheels. His enthusiasm for roller skating has played a strong role in shaping who he is.

"I would actually bring lights and cameras to the rink and photograph the people while they skate. I used to post those photos to Facebook and that was enjoyable," he said.

It all started in high school for Wong. Ever since he began skating, he hasn't taken the skates off, allowing him to roll himself all around the country. It has been a way of life for Wong, who is a member of the Lab's Technical Information Department. It has served as an outlet of expression, as a place where he can feel free, and it is also a way for him to take care of his body.

"Once your wheels touch the floor and you hear the music, you just get reinvigorated, and you can go skate two and a half hours without even thinking about it," he said.

Wong has been passionately roller skating since 1994 and has consistently visited skate rinks ever since. At one point, his enthusiasm for the sport led him to take over a pro shop at a rink in Milpitas, where he sold skates for several years.

"It's the feeling of it that keeps me coming back. You just get out there: it's the music, it's the gliding, it just takes all of your cares away," he said.

While the gliding has brought him joy purely from a skating perspective, skating has also had other profound affects on his life.

One evening at the rink, someone approached Wong, asking if he could teach her how to skate backwards. Eventually, this started as lessons before skating sessions and soon turned into something more, and over time, their connection deepened. Now, they are in a relationship.

This is not the only way that skating has affected his life; Wong also is able to stay in shape due to his frequency at the rink. Skating is not always perfect, however. Like all physical activities, there is risk of injury involved.

"It's usually just overuse and going left all the time," he said. "I have a very good personal trainer I'm able to work out any minor injuries with."

While roller skating has played a large role in Wong's life, he also emphasizes that when you are a part of the skating community, you are a part of something bigger than yourself. Wong has taken it upon himself to share the world of roller skating with others around him.

It's knowing that you share in the excitement with everyone who dons a pair of skates.

"It's knowing that you share in the excitement with everyone who dons a pair of skates. Whether a beginner or veteran, regardless of background or circumstance. I've taken several friends, and they don't understand why I love it so much," he said. "But once they feel it, they understand its freedom. You're just gliding, with no one stopping you!"

For him, it's refreshing to share his hobby, which has declined in popularity, with people he interacts with daily. His goal is to spark curiosity for others to engage in the activity.

Throughout his time skating, Wong has had the opportunity to travel with friends to different rinks around the country. As they fly from rink to rink, Wong and his peers have found comfort in caring for their equipment.

"When my friends and I travel, we refuse to check our skates because they're kind of like that old comfortable chair that if you lose it and buy another one, it's not the same," he said. One day, Wong hopes to visit more world-famous roller rinks around the country in places such as Atlanta.

Today, Wong skates three days a week, maintaining his passion for the rink. His joy and love for skating at the rink is contagious and makes it hard for others not to join in. For Wong, this is more than just a hobby; it's who he is. That lets him feel free and positively impact everyone around him. ■

SpotLight

THE PEOPLE WHO DRIVE OUR SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

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