

# OPPORTUNITY

# NEWS



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# NEWS FROM YOUR COLLEGE

## Instrumentation program earns state recognition

The Texas Skills Standards Board has recognized San Jacinto College for integrating industry-validated skill standards into its instrumentation technology program curriculum. The recognition places the program alongside the region's premier workforce-aligned training pathways.

San Jac is one of only two Texas colleges to receive this instrumentation recognition, and this is the first year the College has earned this distinction.

"This recognition demonstrates our commitment to preparing students with the exact skills employers demand," said Joseph Zwiercan, industrial technology department chair. "Our students leave San Jac ready to contribute from day one."

With this distinction, the program joins San Jac's process technology program, which previously earned acknowledgment for meeting chemical and refining process technician standards. Together, the programs produce highly skilled workers for the Gulf Coast's petrochemical sector.

Both programs are housed in the LyondellBasell Center for Petrochemical, Energy, & Technology — also known as CPET — at the Central Campus. The nation's largest petrochemical training facility, CPET also supports degree programs in electrical, inspection, and welding technology and environmental health and safety. Its 35 labs and 8,000-square-foot exterior glycol process unit provide hands-on learning for students and incumbent workers based on industry needs.

"This recognition reinforces the exceptional work our faculty and industry partners put into preparing students for the workforce," said Jim Griffin, CPET associate vice chancellor. "Having both instrumentation and process technology meet Texas Skills Standards Board standards demonstrates San Jac's

commitment to delivering workforce programs that meet the highest expectations."

## San Jac to offer AI certification

Beginning in fall 2026, San Jacinto College will launch an artificial intelligence foundations advanced technical certificate to help professionals build practical, industry-relevant AI skills applicable across a wide range of fields.

Designed for individuals with an associate degree or higher, the certificate focuses on foundational AI concepts, ethical and responsible use, and real-world implementation in organizational settings.

Coursework covers topics such as AI fundamentals, data governance, cybersecurity applications, policy and compliance considerations, and the

operational use of AI tools.

Students will also explore ethical and legal issues, including privacy, bias, and governance, preparing them to make informed decisions as AI becomes more embedded across industries.

Emphasizing hands-on learning and industry alignment, the program equips learners to communicate AI insights, design effective prompts, and apply AI solutions that improve efficiency, strengthen security, and support responsible innovation. Learn more at [sanjac.edu](http://sanjac.edu).

## San Jac to host Fleet Week VetConnect Day

San Jacinto College will host Fleet Week VetConnect Day – Fleet Week Edition on Monday, April 20,

as part of the inaugural Fleet Week Houston celebration.

The free event is open to the public from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Held at the LyondellBasell Center for Petrochemical, Energy, & Technology on the Central Campus, the event will connect veterans, service members, military spouses, and families with employers, career resources, and community support organizations.

Fleet Week Houston marks the first time Texas will host this U.S. Navy tradition, bringing national visibility, ship tours, demonstrations, and community events to the region while honoring military service.

VetConnect Day complements the weeklong celebration by focusing on workforce engagement and transition support for the military-connected community.



Pictured (from left) are O.V. Gamble, instrumentation technology adjunct faculty; Joseph Zwiercan, industrial technology department chair; and Jonathan Whitlock, instrumentation technology instructor. Photo by Courtney Morris, San Jacinto College

# LEWIS RISES THROUGH STEM TO BUILD BETTER PATIENT CARE

By Courtney Morris  
SAN JACINTO COLLEGE

During a night shift at a skilled nursing facility, certified nurse aide Lorenzo Lewis heard a resident screaming, “Help! Help!”

When no on-duty nurses made a move, he sprinted down the hall to find a diabetic patient had fallen out of her bed. What troubled him more was a nurse’s response afterward: “As you get into this field, you’re going to learn to detach emotions from the job.”

Dumbfounded, heart still pounding, Lewis determined he would never work with that attitude. But if he wanted to help build a more just health care system, he needed to rise higher in the field.

“You can make a change from the bottom, but if you want to continue to make changes, you have to elevate your position,” he said.

## Turning point

Lewis has spent 15 years working entry-level health care jobs through fast-track certificates. Work rather than higher education always took priority. Now in his mid-30s, he’s pursuing San Jacinto College’s natural science degree as the foundation for future biology and nursing studies.

His turning point came after moving from California to Houston in 2023. The question he kept asking himself was “What do I want out of my life?” And the answer was stability, purpose, and a career helping others.

When Lewis first saw San Jac’s

North Campus — with mission-style architecture that reminded him of his hometown in San Bernardino County — he told a friend, “That’s going to be my school.”

And he meant it.

## Clearer focus

Enrolling at San Jac in fall 2025, Lewis immediately found inspiration in North Campus math professor Dr. Christopher Miller, who expected 110% from his students. Returning to school after almost two decades, Lewis doubted himself, but Miller’s elementary statistics class shifted something.

“I realized that was kind of my lane — answering why, when, what, and how,” he said. “That’s my personality: ‘Where’s your proof?’”

Statistics also deepened his resolve to serve those who are overlooked or unable to advocate for themselves.

“Statistics taught me to look deeper, to ask questions,” he said. “Nursing requires that — interpreting vital signs in patient trends, recognizing health disparities, making evidence-based decisions. It gave me confidence in critical thinking.”

Once reserved, Lewis has transformed as an adult student. He pursues tutoring, attends campus events, raises his hand in the classroom, and even talks to his professors after class.

“Don’t let age or doubt convince you you’re behind,” he said. “A lot of people are afraid to start over. You’re not starting over. You’re starting from experience.”

## Bold future

What’s next for Lewis? He’ll complete his natural science degree, then pursue nursing studies to become a forensic nurse who helps assault victims and collects and evaluates evidence.

The merging of technology and science fascinates him, along with the opportunity to make an impact.

“I’m not just studying nursing — I’m preparing to stand at the intersection of science, compassion, and justice, using both data and empathy to protect patients and give a voice to those who need it most,” he said.

Scan the QR code to learn more about San Jac’s **natural science program**.



FREE EVENT

# FLOCK TO THE BLOCK

2026

FOOD

GAMES

FREE  
MENINGITIS  
SHOTS

BOUNCE  
HOUSE

SATURDAY  
APRIL 18  
10 A.M. - 2 P.M.

JOIN SAN JACINTO  
COLLEGE FOR A DAY OF  
FREE FAMILY FUN!

FINANCIAL AID (FAFSA)  
ASSISTANCE WILL BE  
THERE!

SAN JACINTO COLLEGE CENTRAL CAMPUS  
8060 SPENCER HWY., PASADENA, TX 77505



Photo by Courtney Morris, San Jacinto College

# OTA OR PTA? FOUR THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE CHOOSING YOUR PATH

By **Courtney Morris**  
SAN JACINTO COLLEGE

A woman with tongue cancer comes out of reconstructive surgery. Her cell phone rings. She instinctively answers — only to realize she can't speak.

A 4-year-old survives a rattlesnake bite on his lower leg. As he begins to run again, his foot drags on the ground — foot drop from nerve damage.

Some recoveries are smooth, and others painstakingly slow. That's where occupational and physical therapy professionals step up, helping patients regain their independence and mobility.

If this work speaks to you, San Jacinto College's occupational therapy assistant and physical therapist assistant programs — OTA and PTA for short — can prepare you for these rewarding, hands-on health care fields.

Here's what you should know before choosing between an OTA or PTA career.



Photos by Courtney Morris, San Jacinto College

## 1. Same goal, different focus.

OTAs and PTAs both help people function better in their daily lives, but they reach that goal differently.

"We both ensure an individual will be able to function as they go about their day," Dr. Kira Beal, interim OTA program director, said.

OTAs focus on daily living skills, such as dressing, bathing, cooking, driving, and using technology. PTAs focus on movement, from strength and balance to pain reduction and mobility.

An OTA might help a patient relearn how to button a shirt or safely prepare a meal. A PTA might help that same patient stand, walk, or climb stairs again.

"PTAs help people move better, while OTAs help patients live better more meaningful lives within their daily routines," Dr. Kathryn Reeves, PTA program director, said.

## 2. No two days look the same.

Both OTAs and PTAs work

with patients of all ages in settings from hospitals and rehabilitation centers to outpatient clinics, schools, and home health. Although they don't evaluate patients, they conduct full interventions.

OTAs treat a wide range of physical, cognitive, and neurological challenges throughout the day. PTAs guide patients through therapeutic exercise, functional movement, and recovery following surgery, injury, stroke, chronic illness, and more.

"Every patient is different, and no two days are alike, which keeps the work engaging and meaningful," Reeves said.

## 3. Challenging work builds confidence.

These are not desk jobs. Both careers require physical stamina, critical thinking, empathy, and clear communication.

"We are health care providers and can see trauma cases just like physicians and nurses in the emergency room," Beal said.

Students study body mechanics, safe patient handling, and ergonomics to protect themselves and their patients. Over time, they also develop clinical judgment and professional confidence.

"Some students are surprised by the depth of science, anatomy, and professionalism required — and by how impactful the role truly is," Reeves said. "Through their education and clinical training, they develop a profound sense of autonomy to make decisions."

## 4. San Jac is a great place to start.

Both San Jac programs

emphasize hands-on learning from day one.

OTA students participate in weekly fieldwork experiences during their second, third, and fourth semesters, working with real clients in community settings.

"This sets us apart ... students gain experience by working with clients after learning concepts, better preparing them to enter the workforce after graduation," Beal said.

PTA students practice skills in the lab that mirror clinic environments, then complete clinical rotations that prepare them for actual patient care.

"Graduates are prepared not only to pass the licensure board exam but to thrive and excel in the industry," Reeves said.

## Conclusion:

If you're seeking a rewarding health care career that supports work/life balance and offers advancement opportunities, OTA and PTA careers are worth a closer look.

With low tuition, only two years of study, and high employment rates, San Jac's programs offer "a great return on investment," Reeves said.

"And the entry-level salaries do not disappoint," she added.

Scan the QR codes to learn more about San Jac's **OTA and PTA programs.**



## Quick Comparison

Located at the South Campus, San Jac's OTA and PTA programs offer two-year Associate of Applied Science degrees.

### Occupational Therapy Assistant

- Length: 60 credit hours (five terms)
- Median salary: \$78,038\*
- Program outcomes: 100% national certification exam pass rate and employment rate

### Physical Therapist Assistant

- Length: 62 credit hours (five terms)
- Median salary: \$77,378\*
- Program outcomes: 95% board exam pass rate and employment rate

\*Gulf Coast region, [texaswages.com](http://texaswages.com)

# SAN JAC GRAD FINDS HER CALLING IN PLUMBING TRADE

By **Melissa Trevizo**  
SAN JACINTO COLLEGE

Cleaning a drain was all it took to inspire Paloma Armenta's career path. Now, at 26, she's building a future in one of the most in-demand trades in the country.

After completing San Jacinto College's plumbing program at the North Campus, Armenta now works as an apprentice at Abacus Plumbing, Air Conditioning, and Electrical, where no two days are the same.

"We go from helping to set up and install a water heater to putting in a toilet or unclogging drain lines," Armenta said. "We stay busy, which is great, and I continue to learn every day."

At San Jac, Armenta learned plumbing fundamentals and hands-on training for real-world experience. Students who weren't familiar with tools had the opportunity to learn, and projects included plumbing toilets and sinks.

"The instructors were great, and it's even better that they were actual master plumbers," Armenta said. "Listening

to their experiences really helped me understand the different scenarios I would encounter in the field."

Upon completing the program, she earned an occupational certificate in plumbing technology. She got her apprentice license early, which prepared her to enter the workforce.

After taking time off after her son's birth, Armenta found work about a year after finishing the program.

She chose Abacus in part because the company helped make the plumbing class available at San Jac. To help launch the program in fall 2023, Abacus and one of its longtime suppliers, National Wholesale Supply, donated tools, equipment, piping, hardware, and other materials to outfit the hands-on training lab.

"I had people tell me it was a great place to work, and it is," she said.

Her San Jac training applies to her daily work in multiple ways, from knowing which tools and parts to use to problem-solving on the job. The challenges she faces test her knowledge of plumbing codes — knowledge she gained in the classroom.

"It's something I can look back on and say, 'Oh, I know that' or 'That doesn't look right,'" she said.

What does she love the most about a career in plumbing?

"I love working with my hands and going to different places to help people," she said. "I'm not stuck in one area all the time."

For anyone considering San Jac's plumbing program, Armenta has simple advice.

"Go for it," she said. "If you like to stay busy and work with your hands, and most importantly, if you like helping people, then this might be for you."

Scan the QR code to learn more about San Jac's **plumbing technology program**.



## Plumbing technology program at a glance

### Fast Facts:

- 16 credits over two semesters
- Hands-on training in water supply systems, blueprint reading, plumbing codes, and installation
- Qualifies you to take state exam for tradesman plumber license

### Career Opportunities:

- Residential and commercial plumbing
- Industrial and maintenance work
- Independent business owner or contractor

### Job Outlook:

- 22% growth rate projected in Texas over the next 10 years
- Median wages in Gulf Coast region: \$60,220\*

\*texaswages.com



Photo by Melissa Trevizo, San Jacinto College

## SAN JAC HAPPENINGS

| DATE        | EVENT   | TIME           | SITE  |
|-------------|---|----------------|---|
| April 16-19 | "Kentucky Cycle: Tall Tales and Fire in the Hole" | Varies         | Tickets: \$10   Central Campus, Powell Arena Theatre (C13)  |
| April 18    | Flock to the Block                                | 10 a.m.-2 p.m. | Free, family-friendly event with bounce houses, program info, resources, and more   Central Campus Interactive Learning Center (C1) |
| April 20    | Fleet Week VetConnect Day                         | 10 a.m.-3 p.m. | Free veteran employment and resource event   Central Campus, LyondellBasell Center for Petrochemical, Energy, & Technology (C45)    |
| April 24    | Spill the Beans                                   | 8:30-10 a.m.   | Center for Entrepreneurship networking event for community   Generation Park Campus   |
| May 1-2     | Kaleidoscope Spring Dance Concert                 | 7 p.m.         | South Campus, Flickinger Fine Arts Center, Proscenium Theatre (S15.151)   |

All times and event schedules listed are subject to change. For more information, visit [sanjac.edu/calendar](http://sanjac.edu/calendar).

# JERI RAE VENEGAS: FROM COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT TO LUXURY BRAND ILLUSTRATOR

By **Melissa Trevizo**  
SAN JACINTO COLLEGE

Jeri Rae Venegas never imagined her pet portrait paintings would lead to collaborations with luxury brands like Marc Jacobs and David Yurman. Now based in Austin, the San Jacinto College alumna balances commissioned work with her own artistic projects.

**Q: How did you get started in art?**

**A:** I grew up mostly in Friendswood and attended San Jac for about four years, taking only a few classes at a time because of health issues and balancing work. At first, I wanted to study biology. Growing up with lupus made me deeply interested in health and medicine, but then I took an art

appreciation class with Jeff McGee [South Campus fine arts department chair]. His art career inspired me to pursue my own, since I've always loved drawing and creating.

**Q: Describe your education.**

**A:** I finished my associate degree in fine arts at San Jac in 2017, then started at the Savannah College of Art and Design that fall. I graduated from SCAD in 2020 with a degree in illustration.

**Q: How did San Jac prepare you for art school?**

**A:** San Jac gave me a solid foundation. I carried the tools and techniques I learned there with me to SCAD. Plus, taking all my basics at community college saved me a lot of money. All my credits transferred, and

I graduated from SCAD with less debt than a lot of my classmates. Having done my basics at San Jac did leave me to take studio classes my entire time at SCAD, which was very challenging, but I would still recommend it.

**Q: How did you build your freelance career?**

**A:** I started hustling while I was still at San Jac — doing pet portraits, wedding invites, whatever people would pay me for. Instagram has been huge for getting freelance work. I had a bit of a lull in freelance work for a few years while I was working my graphic design job. It's had some highs and lows, but once I decided to take the risk to go part time there, freelancing immediately picked up again with regular posting on socials.

**Q: How did your collaboration with Marc Jacobs begin, and what has that experience been like?**

**A:** Someone reached out on Instagram about my pet portraits, asking if I wanted to work for Marc Jacobs. I painted a sample bag at the Houston Galleria store, and I was in. They were launching their Bark Jacobs campaign and needed live illustrators to paint customers' pets on handbags.

It was intense but rewarding. I was working 18-hour weekends at Marc Jacobs while also working 35 hours a week at my day job and driving between Austin and Houston. It led to other opportunities like working with David Yurman, Nordstrom, and AWAY Travel, and there are some coming up that I'm excited to share soon.

**Q: What work are you doing now, and what projects would you love to work on in the future?**

**A:** I'm still taking commissions from people who see my work on TikTok and Instagram and booking live drawing events. My apartment looks like a purse warehouse right now doing purse portraits.



My own brand of greeting cards (Jeri Rae Art), clothing, stickers, prints, and such has also been taking off, and I'd like to see that continue to grow. I'm also interested in doing work for Magic: The Gathering and Dungeons & Dragons cards and doing more cozy mystery book covers.

**Q: What's the best advice you've received, and what would you tell students pursuing an art degree?**

**A:** Jeff McGee told me a long time ago to always finish everything. There's something about really seeing things all the way through that helps you figure out what works and what doesn't.

For current and future students, community college is a great place to start. It gives you solid grounding, saves you some money, and can give you some more time to figure out what you truly want. There's no need to rush a career path. Keep hustling and posting your work online. Build relationships with other artists doing what you want to do. Put yourself out there and shoot your shot. You never know what opportunities might come from it!

**Where to find Jeri Rae Venegas:**

- [JeriRaeArt.com](http://JeriRaeArt.com)
- [instagram.com/jeriraeart](https://www.instagram.com/jeriraeart)
- [instagram.com/jeriraeprints](https://www.instagram.com/jeriraeprints)

Scan the QR code to learn more about San Jac's **fine arts degrees**.



Photos courtesy of Jeri Rae Venegas

# THIS MONTH *IN* SOCIAL MEDIA



## LinkedIn

San Jacinto College is moving forward with new leadership across its campuses. The Board of Trustees approved leadership changes that strengthen our commitment to student success, workforce readiness, and the College's BOLD 2030 vision. Join us in congratulating Dr. Alexander Okwonna, Dr. Rhonda Bell, and Dr. Christopher Wild as they step into new roles serving our students and community.



212 Reactions | 486 Post-Link Clicks

11,803 Impressions | 722 Engagements

### COUNTDOWN TO CLASS



**1 WEEK TO GO**




## Instagram

1 week until Spring 2026 classes begin!

Make sure you're registered and ready for the first day on Jan. 12. There's still time to lock in your schedule—don't wait.



225 Likes | 12,576 Impressions | 297 Engagements




## Facebook

All campuses are closed Saturday, Jan. 24–Monday, Jan. 26. Follow for more updates. Stay warm, Ravens!



32 Reactions | 1 Comment

12,081 Impressions | 314 Engagements


**SAN JACINTO<sup>SM</sup>  
COLLEGE**

## College Closure



**FOLLOW US FOR THE LATEST NEWS AND EVENTS!**

# YOUR GOALS. YOUR COLLEGE.



## SAN JACINTO COLLEGE <sup>SM</sup>

**NORTH CAMPUS**  
5800 Uvalde Rd., Houston, TX 77049

**CENTRAL CAMPUS**  
8060 Spencer Hwy., Pasadena, TX 77505

**SOUTH CAMPUS**  
13735 Beamer Rd., Houston, TX 77089

**MARITIME CAMPUS**  
3700 Old Hwy. 146, La Porte, TX 77571

**GENERATION PARK CAMPUS**  
13455 Lockwood Rd., Houston, TX 77044

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### VISION & MISSION



**Vision** — Together with our community members and business and industry partners, San Jacinto College sets the standard for educational excellence, economic growth, and social mobility characterized by innovation and responsiveness.

**Mission** — We change lives through education, community engagement, and partnerships.

### SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS



A gift to the San Jacinto College Foundation transforms lives, enriches our community, and provides tomorrow's community leaders. For more than 25 years, the Foundation has helped thousands of students reach their goals. Our former students and graduates have filled vital roles in hospitals, classrooms, executive offices, manufacturing plants, and laboratories across our region and beyond. They have also won the World Series and NBA championships, starred in major motion pictures, and created major theatrical productions. Help our students today with the gift of education. Contact the San Jacinto College Foundation at 281-998-6104 or visit [sanjac.edu/foundation](https://sanjac.edu/foundation).

### COMMUNITY IMPACT



Surrounded by monuments of history, evolving industries, maritime enterprises of today, and the space age of tomorrow, San Jacinto College has served the people of East Harris County, Texas, since 1961. The College is ranked second in the nation among more than 1,100 community colleges, as designated by the Aspen Institute and was named an Achieving the Dream Leader College of Distinction in 2020 and 2026. As a Hispanic-Serving Institution that spans five campuses, plus an online college, San Jacinto College serves approximately 45,000 credit and non-credit students annually. It offers more than 200 degrees and certificates across eight major areas of study that put students on a path to transfer to four-year institutions or enter the workforce. The College is fiscally sound, holding bond ratings of AA+ by Standard & Poor's and Aa2 by Moody's.

For more information about San Jacinto College, visit [sanjac.edu](https://sanjac.edu).

