Megan Barry ’14

Being a record-setting distance runner training for an Olympic development race is challenging enough. But imagine doing that while completing an honors thesis and studying possible treatments for Alzheimer’s disease.

That was the life of Megan Barry ’14 while she was a student-athlete with dreams of a future as a runner and a veterinarian.

Barry, a biology major, used her honors thesis to look for a correlation between the ratio of protein to fat in a mouse’s food and the rodent’s cognitive functioning. Her hypothesis was that high-fat diets produce the best results. Barry hopes the findings can be applied to humans and that a diet with higher fat and moderate protein could slow the effects of Alzheimer’s. She worked with Associate Professor Jacob Harney, director of the neuroscience program in the University of Hartford’s College of Arts and Sciences, and Associate Professor Donald Jones, coordinator of the University’s Honors program.

“Megan exemplifies the best qualities of a college student,” says Harney. “She has taken true ownership of her own education. The sky is the limit for her.”

When she wasn’t in the lab, chances are Barry was training. In fact, she plans to spend two years after graduation focused on running. At the prestigious Mt. San Antonio College Relays in California on April 17, she competed in the Olympic Development 10,000-meter race. While the word Olympic inspires thoughts of competing in the Games, Barry’s coach, Stephen Walsh, points out that this is just one of many steps that would lead to the Olympics. Barry placed 20th in the Silver Elite section, shattering her previous school record and personal best with a time of 35:32.98.

Barry was certainly successful on the collegiate level. She set 11 University records over the course of her career and currently holds six of those records. She was the first female in school history to earn All-Conference and All-New England honors in cross-country. In May, Barry won the 10,000-meter race at the New England Championship and finished second in the 10,000-meter race in the America East Championship. Also in May, Barry was nominated as one of nine senior female student-athletes from campuses within the America East for the 2014 America East Woman of the Year award. The winner of that award will be forwarded to the NCAA Woman of the Year selection committee.

Joe Dziok ’14

London, summer 2012. Sochi, winter 2014. Rio, summer 2016. Joe Dziok ’14, who majored in music production and technology at the University of Hartford’s Hartt School, became a regular on the NBC network coverage support team for the Olympics while a student.

After returning from two months in Russia, Dziok, who also plays jazz piano and credits his music with helping him get his network job, has this to say about his time in Sochi:

“London was an internship, but this time around, NBC hired me for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi as a ‘video utility’ in the Venue Engineering Field Shop. My job consisted of building hundreds of cameras for the different Olympic venues anywhere an event took place. I then had to help integrate various video systems and install them at the venues. Once the games started, my duty was to be on standby to bring replacement equipment and/or fix equipment on the spot if there were any issues.

“My experience was much different from the other NBC interns, [who mostly] come for the week before the games begin, and their jobs consist mainly of getting coffee for talent and taking notes for producers and other things of that nature. My internship in London and my paid position in Sochi have been much more hands-on and technically related. I feel like I made a good impression on my bosses [at NBC], and I hope I made the University proud!

“I think that the University of Hartford has prepared me well to handle this AMAZING job opportunity. The hands-on experience I learned in the classroom, both with the recording and audio equipment and in my electrical engineering classes in CETA [College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture], has given me the skills to do what I spent two months working on in Russia. The critical-thinking skills from my AUC [All-University Curriculum] courses and my other various courses have helped me to handle very stressful situations when a solution was needed very quickly. I think, overall, I would never have been able to land this job if it wasn’t for my education at the University of Hartford.

“I was asked to come back again for the Summer Olympics in Rio in 2016! So I’m excited that I did well enough to be asked to come back.”
Because we are constantly using them, it’s easy to take for granted just how complex our hands and fingers are. Graduate students in the University of Hartford’s prosthetics and orthotics program understand these complicated mechanics. Now, one of them is using her knowledge to develop what she hopes will be the most realistic prosthetic finger on the market.

While observing patients’ use of prosthetic hands, Casey Beasley M’15 noticed there was much room for improvement. She decided to design a new prosthetic finger as her University Honors project. Under the guidance of Assistant Professor Michael Wininger in the University of Hartford’s College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions, Beasley spent last summer and fall developing 12 working prototypes. The prototype, known as a biomimetic finger because it mimics the function and structure of a natural finger, includes a “fat pad simulant.” Beasley says this pad “takes on a key characteristic of the natural human grasp: a sort of soft-tissue compliance that aids our fingers in securely grasping many objects.”

Another new feature involves the phalangeal segments, or bones, of the finger. Beasley’s creation uses continuously adjustable phalangeal segments so that there is a more customized fit for the patient while still making it possible to mass-manufacture the fingers.

This spring, three of Beasley’s classmates joined the project. Derek Becker M’15, Joseph Cassella M’15, and Stephen Sousa M’16 each brings his own perspective and expertise, and all are focused on expanding the finger design to a complete hand prototype.

Beasley received a Connecticut Space Grant Consortium Student Project Grant award of $932 as well as $9,307 from the University of Hartford’s Women’s Education and Leadership Fund. Both will help with the next step, which is to send the best prototype out for machining and then develop the electronics to make it work.

Beasley has been asked to give a talk on her research at the American Orthotic and Prosthetic Association National Assembly in Las Vegas, Nev., in September. The conference is the largest gathering of prosthetics and orthotics professionals in the world.
UHart students excel in annual poetry competition
The University of Hartford is gaining a reputation as a perennial powerhouse in an annual competition among some of the most talented college students in Connecticut. This competition does not take place on a playing field, and it does not involve popular competitive pursuits like robotics or chess. This competition is all about verse.

For five of the last six years, a University student has been selected for the prestigious Connecticut Poetry Circuit Student Poets Tour. This annual tour, which the Connecticut Poetry Circuit has been sponsoring since 1970, sends five undergraduate student poets across the state to read their work at Connecticut colleges and universities. They also read their work in the summer at the renowned Sunken Garden Poetry Festival at the Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington, Conn.

Competition for the five spots on the Student Poets Tour is intense. All two- and four-year colleges and universities in Connecticut are invited to nominate one undergraduate each year to be considered for the Student Poets Tour. No University of Hartford student had been selected for the tour until 2008–09—the year that Assistant Professor Benjamin Grossberg joined the University's College of Arts and Sciences faculty.

Grossberg, who recently published his third book of poetry, is the first poet to serve on the English department faculty in many years. He has made it a goal to try to get a University of Hartford student on the poetry tour every year—and he has an almost perfect record of success.

"It seemed like an incredible opportunity. It is a great way to build up students' ability to think of themselves as writers in the world," Grossberg says.

Every fall, Grossberg invites all undergraduates at the University to submit five pages of poetry. After reviewing the submissions, he selects one student to be nominated for the tour. Grossberg then works closely with the student to help revise and edit the work before submitting it to the Connecticut Poetry Circuit for consideration. For the five University of Hartford students who have been selected for the Student Poets Tour, the experience has been profound.

"The tour was the highlight of my undergrad career. It let me experience the performance side of poetry," says John Dudek '10, who won a spot on the Student Poets Tour in 2010. Dudek is working toward an MFA in poetry at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he recently won the Robert J. and Katharin Carr Graduate Poetry Prize.

Tim Pettus '11, who was on the Student Poets Tour in 2011, says, "It was flat-out the coolest thing I did during college. I was meeting great poets, visiting Connecticut's best and brightest institutions, and sharing my voice with a much larger audience than I had imagined reaching at that early stage."

The students on the tour often develop a close bond, Grossberg says, allowing them to become part of a community of writers in a profession that can be very solitary.

"The most important thing for a writer is being part of a community, because it isn't a profession with an instruction manual that tells you how to be successful if you follow certain steps. You figure out what to do by experiencing other writers," says Matthew Gilbert '09, who became the first University of Hartford student to win a spot on the tour when he was selected in 2009. Gilbert went on to earn an MFA in poetry from Columbia University.

All of the students who have represented the University of Hartford on the Student Poets Tour say that Grossberg's teaching and mentoring played a key role in their success. Grossberg expanded their ideas about what a poem can be, they say, teaching them poetic technique while encouraging them to experiment and branch out in new directions.

"It was his encouragement that led me to submit my poems to the Connecticut Poetry Circuit in the first place," says Amanda Schoen '13, who was selected for the 2013 poets tour. "He always had time during office hours to discuss revisions, and I believe his suggestions made my pieces significantly stronger."

The newest University of Hartford student on the tour is Laura Ahking '15, a former art student who is finding her voice as a poet. Being on the tour this year has helped significantly with that process.

"Not only did I get to meet other extremely talented student poets, I got to observe them grow throughout the eight readings. I grew as well; I became more confident and sure of myself as the readings went on," Ahking says. "It was a great learning experience."