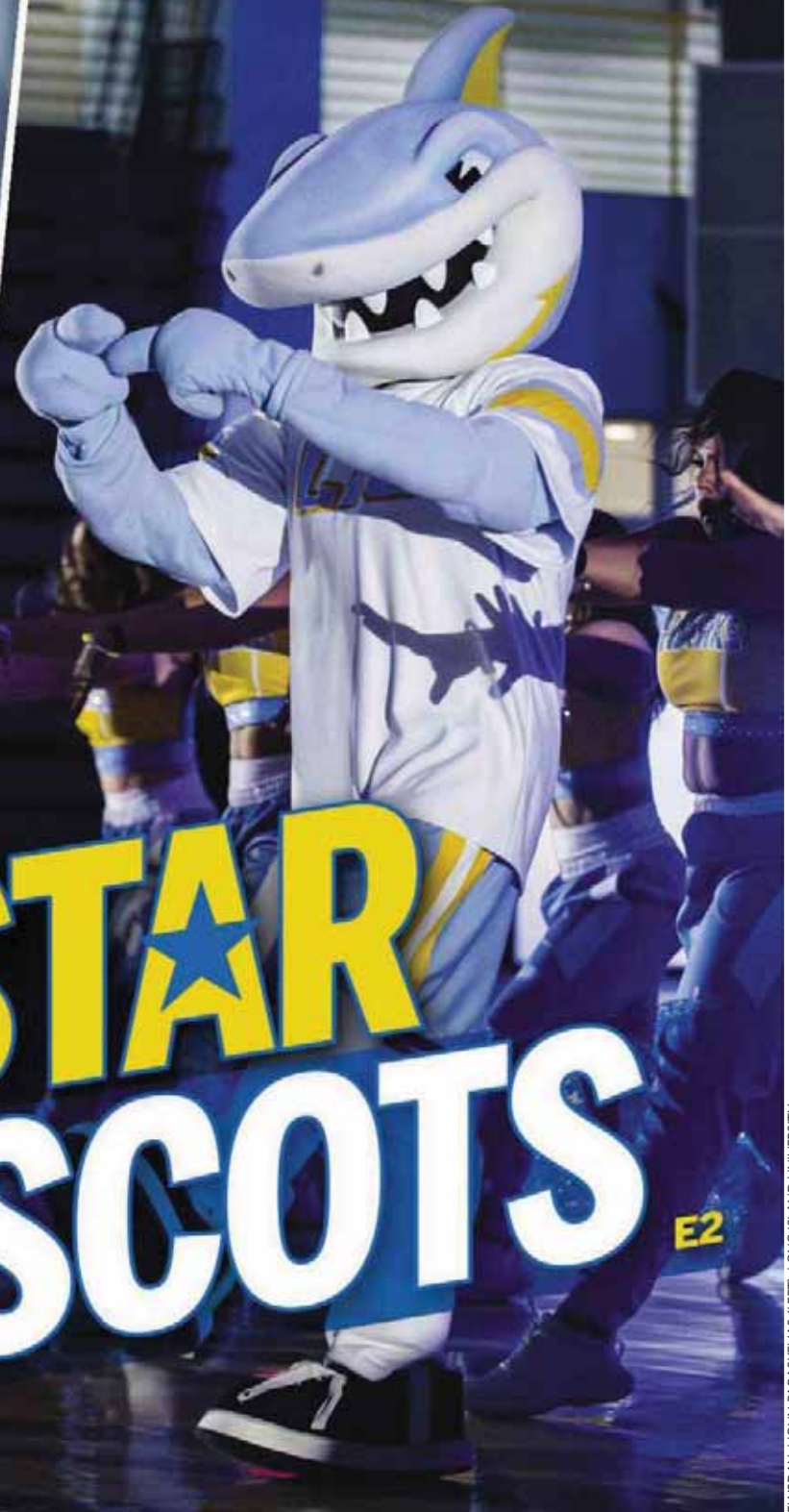


# LI Life



# SUPERSTAR MASCOTS

LI universities are cheering on their fan and brand boosters

E2

Hofstra's Willie and Kate Pride and the LIU mascot, Finley, stir up school spirit.

## ACT 2

She gave him a kidney, and he has made the most of it **INSIDE**



DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN

## TEACHER OF THE WEEK

Second-grade teacher Lori Cebul sends out love and gets it back, multiplied **E13**

S2

# Fan and brand BOOSTERS

Mascots pump up the crowds as social media ups their exposure

**ONLY IN NEWSDAY**

BY LIZA N. BURBY

Special to Newsday

**A**lec Pearson lived a double life as a college student. His friends at Hofstra University in Hempstead knew him as a dance major with a double minor in marketing and mass media studies who was always too busy to attend basketball games with them, he said.

What they didn't know was that he was actually courtside the entire time — but in disguise, wearing a lion head, paws and a tail. Pearson was the performer behind the school mascot costume: Willie Pride, a lion, who, with lioness Kate Pride, spreads school spirit at events like games, orientation and graduation.

Pearson, 23, of Harlem, said that it was his on-campus job to perform as Willie for three years. Because of the intentional secrecy around the role, no one knew until his big reveal at graduation in May 2025 in an Instagram video ([instagram.com/reels/DJ107kgNoh7/](https://www.instagram.com/reels/DJ107kgNoh7/)). “I just thought being a mascot would be a good side hustle in college, but I loved it,” he said.

He's one of several Long Island college students working as their schools' mascots. But it's more than just a campus job, according to James Boglioli, spirit squad manager in the Department of Athletics at Stony Brook University.

“It has become more important to schools than people realize. It's a character and a brand to nurture and grow into a big presence on campus, and that has certainly come through a lot more after events had to be canceled because of COVID,”

said Boglioli, who handles the daily operations of SBU's mascot, Wolfie, like hiring, training, staffing and scheduling.

Mascots play a key role in branding, according to Corey Goldstein, SBU's assistant athletic director of marketing.

“They essentially serve as an extension of the university,” he said. “It's a consistent representation, no matter what event you're at. I think Wolfie is the greatest marketing tool that we have at this university, so there is an investment to keep it that way.”

It's also good for fan engagement and game-day experience, said Michael Berthel, vice president for student affairs at Long Island University in Brookville. “There's nothing like sitting in the stands and seeing the mascots walk through and hyping the crowd up,” he said. “Ultimately, it's just about pure pride and passion for the university that just comes through a mascot.”

Boglioli — who was Stony Brook's mascot for four years until he was revealed at graduation in May 2025 — said that social media has increased mascots' popularity. “There have been schools down South that have had huge mascot programs forever. But with the Chicago Bulls' Benny the Bull shifting to social media [launching viral TikTok videos in 2019], that really brought mascots into the forefront in professional sports,” he said. “That interest has trickled down to colleges. We're seeing a lot more interest in finding performers. Those kids grow up on professional sports and it's really making people a lot more interested.”

As Pearson learned, secrecy is part of the job, so we can't reveal who the current student mascot performers are. But we can present the mascot programs run by the athletic departments of some of Long Island's universities.

## WOLFIE

**Hometown:** Stony Brook University

**Persona:** Sea wolf

**Originated:** 1995

**Annual appearances:** 500+

**Career highlights:** Second-place open mascot champion at the 2026 UCA College Nationals and SUNY Mascot Madness champion 2022 and 2023



ELIZABETH SAGARIN

**Wolfie with Stony Brook University spirit squad manager James Boglioli and mascot liaison Qimora Hayes. Wolfie has a team that helps him at games and social media events.**



Wolfie solicits donations from Stony Brook University students on Giving Day at the Student Activity Center last month, left. He attended 520 events last year, according to the school.

ELIZABETH SAGARIN



Hofstra senior Laila Owens, of Hempstead, poses with Willie and Kate Pride at the campus student center.

NEWSDAY / JOHN PARASKEVAS

Wolfie was born when Stony Brook Athletics transitioned to Division I play. His costume and persona have changed over the years, with his current iteration dating to 2005. Boglioli said Wolfie is modeled after the NCAA Division I mascot programs at Southern schools, “where they attend hundreds of events a year.” In 2025, Wolfie was at 520 games, milestones like graduation and community service events.

To make it all happen, Wolfie has a team, including 12 mascot

liaisons who accompany him to events and social media appearances. Their main job, Goldstein said, is to maintain performer safety.

“When we have really large events that have hundreds of kids, it’s too much for Wolfie to be on his own,” he said. “Having handlers who can protect the kids and Wolfie, that’s really important. You’re in a really heavy, hot suit — it’s usually 40 degrees above ambient temperature — so safety is a big deal.”

The hiring process includes

tryouts with 90-second performances that rely on physicality since mascots can’t speak, Boglioli said. There’s also a physical fitness test. “We have 50 times the number of applicants than we ever have spots for,” he added. He declined to disclose how many Wolfies there are.

Boglioli, 24, who became a performer in his sophomore year while majoring in geology, said his most memorable moment as Wolfie was at an event at Stony Brook Chil-

dren’s Hospital.

“There was a little boy who was so excited to see Wolfie, and his mom had a photo of him from years ago, way before my time,” Boglioli recalled. “I was walking down the hallway with him holding my hand, just like in the original picture, and he was talking about how much it meant to him that I’d come back to see him and how much he’d missed me. I broke down in the suit. It really speaks to how much of an impact Wolfie has.”

## WILLIE AND KATE PRIDE

**Hometown:** Hofstra University, Hempstead

**Persona:** Lion and Lioness

**Originated:** 1980s

**Annual appearances:** 300

**Career highlights:** Have been invited to join appearances with the Mets, Islanders and Nets mascots.

Hofstra has had several

See COVER STORY on E4

NEWSDAY / JOHN PARASKEVAS

# Fans love the fins and fur



COVER STORY from E3

mascots over its 90-year history, including the Ducks and the Flying Dutchman, said Terry Coniglio, vice president for marketing and communications. The current mascots, named after the school's benefactors William Hofstra and his wife, Kate, originated in the 1980s and have had at least six iterations, with Coniglio leading the latest redesign effort in 2024. "We wanted them to be fitter, fiercer and have a presence to them, so we redesigned them to be very athletic," she said.

Their redesign included increased social media presence and a dedicated program.

"We do a lot more promotions so that people can get used to seeing Kate and Willie because they are a major part of the university," said Pat Montagano, senior director of the campus recreation department. "They mean a lot to us."

Olivia Galante, 23, a graduate assistant for spirit support, works with the mascots, chaperoning and scheduling them for internal and external events — including an alumna's wedding — as well as their social media content. When it comes to hiring, Galante, a former dance team member, runs them through an audition that includes handling various game-day scenarios and dance skills. Since 2024, she said, they've had about 40 applicants and they have a team of eight students.

Pearson said that when he was Willie, his dance background helped. "Being a mascot is purely physical because you have to be aware that people 360 degrees around you can see what you're doing," he said. "You always need to be doing something, being creative. And you need to be creative because you never know how people are going to interact, like if you go in for a hug and someone starts screaming. You need to always be thinking about how you can help this interaction be memorable and lasting."

## FINLEY

**Hometown:** Long Island University, Brookville  
**Persona:** Shark  
**Originated:** 2019  
**Annual appearances:** 60  
**Career highlights:** Performances include ice skating; won four

Paws, the Adelphi University panther, attends a women's softball game, above and right. Because Adelphi is a Division II school, the mascot program is relatively modest, but Paws attends lots of big events on campus.





LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY



MOLLOY ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS

The lion has been the Molloy University mascot since 1955, but he didn't get dubbed Victor E. Lion until after a 2012 naming contest.

**Long Island University's mascot, Finley, has been around since 2019, when the school merged two athletic programs and became a NCAA Division I team.**

consecutive UCA championships

In 2019, the university merged its Brookville and Brooklyn athletic programs and elevated them to NCAA Division I athletics, said Michael Berthel. Until then, they had the Pioneers at Post and the Blackbirds at the Brooklyn campus. "Then we had a student and alumni vote where we chose one mascot that would represent the entire university across all of our campuses, and that's where the sharks came from," he said.

The change included the nickname Finley, who averages 60 appearances each year between football, men's and women's basketball, and men's and women's ice hockey games, plus a wide array of campus traditions and admissions events, Berthel said.

"He plays a really important part in the university," Berthel said. "He's top of mind at basketball games, football games, and he's been on ice skates at our hockey games. He's also at



LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY

nearly all of our student events at both campuses," Berthel noted, adding that there's a group of students across both campuses who try out to be part of their spirit team.

## PAWS

**Hometown:** Adelphi University, Garden City

**Persona:** Panther  
**Originated:** 1947

**Annual appearances:** 25

Adelphi's Panther mascot made his first appearance at a men's basketball game in 1947. However, the panther didn't have an official name until 2017, when in a #DubThatCat contest, the campus voted for "Paws," said Emily Dorko,

Adelphi's associate athletic director for external relations.

As a Division II school, she said Adelphi's mascot program "doesn't operate as extensively and as rigorously as some of the bigger schools with football teams. But you'll find Paws at any major event on campus. We try to have him there to be able to take pictures, mingle and be a representative of our department and share that pride."

Dorko said that there isn't any one student dedicated to the role. She even donned the costume when the presence of Paws was requested. "It takes 15 minutes to get dressed in all the parts," she said.

Until he graduated with a nursing degree in December 2025, Salvatore Carollo, 22, of Glendale, Queens, was the most consistent performer. "I thought it would be a fun and unique opportunity not only as an on-campus paid job but also as a general life experience," he said. "Paws is a symbol of the university, and being that symbol drew our community closer."

## VICTOR E. LION

**Hometown:** Molloy University, Rockville Centre

**Persona:** Lion  
**Originated:** 1955

**Annual appearances:** 25

Michael Grasso, interim director of athletics, said that Molloy's Division II teams have been the Lions since 1955, but the mascots used to be more cartoonish. In 2012, a naming contest resulted in "Victor E. Lion." The mascot's design, inspired by the university's Dominican heritage, has since become more realistic, said Grasso, who played baseball for Molloy and graduated in 2006.

"You want something that speaks about your sports program and is intimidating," he said. "The lion we had years ago wasn't nearly as ferocious as it is now with claws and whiskers."

Victor E. has about 25 appearances annually, including football games and community service events. Grasso said the university is considering a dedicated mascot program due to increasing demand. The gig is unpaid. "Currently we utilize student athletes we identify as high-energy who would be good with kids and engaging to get the crowd going," he said.

Grasso said he's been surprised by the influence the mascot has on game days. "I didn't have this when I was a student athlete," he said, "but now I see how much they impact the game-day experience."