Tulane receives $2 million gift to establish faculty chair in AI at School of Science and Engineering
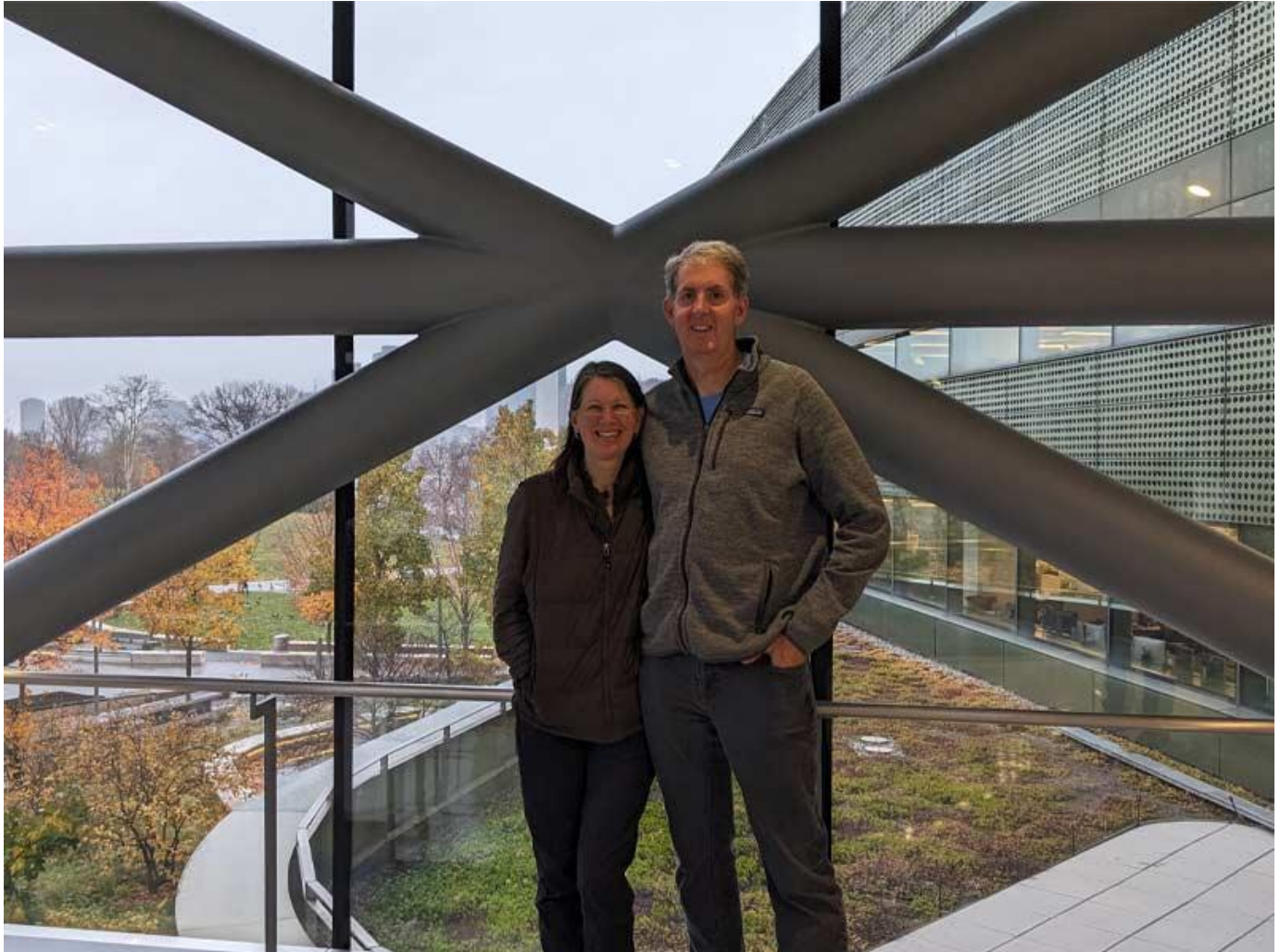
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Tulane alumnus Mark Wheeler (E '89), right, and Amelia Archer, left, have donated more than $2 million to establish the Mark D. Wheeler Chair in Artificial Intelligence Endowed Fund at Tulane's School of Science and Engineering. (Photo courtesy of Mark Wheeler)

Tulane has received a $2 million gift from alumnus Mark Wheeler and his wife, musician Amelia Archer, to establish a faculty chair in artificial intelligence.

The gift will further position Tulane as a leader in developing AI as a positive force for transforming higher education and solving some of the world's most pressing problems in fields ranging from health care and finance to climate change and alternative energy.

The gift will create the Mark D. Wheeler Chair in Artificial Intelligence Endowed Fund at the Tulane School of Science and Engineering. The endowment will support the salary and expenses associated with the chair's academic teaching and research.

"Tulane faculty have always been pioneers and have made singularly creative and profound contributions to imagining, and then building, a better world. There is likely no single academic area that will play more of a role in shaping the future than AI, and I am so grateful to the Wheeler family for their generous gift that will allow Tulane faculty to take the lead on this crucial and fast-moving field," said Robin Forman, senior vice president for academic affairs and provost at Tulane.

The Wheeler Chair will accelerate the university's recent progress in the AI realm, which includes the establishment of the Jurist Center for Artificial Intelligence, the Center for Community-Engaged Artificial Intelligence, and the Connolly Alexander Institute for Data Science and the opening of the Steven and Jann Paul Hall for Science and Engineering. Tulane is also upgrading campus technological infrastructure and convening working groups of faculty and staff to create guidelines for AI and explore its opportunities and challenges, including ethical concerns.

"The Wheeler Chair will be transformational by helping Tulane recruit a senior scholar to continue to build on our growing strengths in artificial intelligence research at Tulane," said Kimberly Foster, dean of the School of Science and Engineering. "I am so grateful to Mark and Amelia for their generosity and support for applied AI research at such a crucial time."

Wheeler, who graduated from Tulane in 1989 with a bachelor's degree in computer engineering, co-founded DeepMap Inc., a Palo Alto, Calif., software developer of high-definition maps for self-driving vehicles. In 2021, multinational technology giant Nvidia Corp. of Santa Clara, Calif., acquired the company. Wheeler is now a vice president for systems software at Nvidia. Amelia Archer is a professional musician and music educator who has played principal flute with the Mission Chamber Orchestra of San José since 2001.

"AI is impacting all the sciences and will play a big role in future discoveries and progress," said Wheeler, who serves on the School of Science and Engineering Board of Advisors. "Leveraging AI across disciplines will be critical for Tulane's continued leadership in teaching and research. Expanding on Tulane's already significant AI expertise will have a big impact across the school. I'm thrilled to be able to make this gift to help in this process."

A Mississippi native, Wheeler attended Tulane on a Dean's Honor Scholarship, participated in the Junior Year Abroad Honors Program and won a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship. He earned master's and doctoral degrees in computer science from Carnegie Mellon University, focusing on computer vision and robotics. Before co-founding DeepMap and serving as its chief technology officer, he worked at Apple, Leica Geosystems and Google.

"I've always been grateful for the opportunities that Tulane gave me as a student," said Wheeler, who is now serving a third term on his Tulane class reunion committee. "I also recognize that Tulane can provide students these opportunities only because of decades of people investing in and building up Tulane, including investments in the infrastructure and the people. It takes investments of all levels to sustain and grow institutions like Tulane, so I have always tried to contribute back whatever I could."