

New Digital Skills Help Centre

Successful campaign a game-changer for USask

THE CAMPAIGN BY THE NUMBERS

- Total funds raised: **\$570,739,155**
- **101,000+** gifts made to the campaign
- **27,000+** generous donors supported this campaign
- **2,600+** campus initiatives funded
- **10,500+** supporters inspired to make their first-ever gift to USask
- **One in nine** alumni made a contribution to the campaign
- Supporters from **44** countries around the globe contributed
- **23** research chairs established
- **950+** scholarships created to support Indigenous students
- **14,000+** donations to support research that will aid in solving the world's greatest challenges, including water and food security, infectious diseases, and rural health
- **2,700+** gifts made to support students in crisis
- **3,921** donations to support mental health and emergency funding for students in need
- **7,800+** gifts to support Huskie student-athletes
- **\$90 million+** invested in new and enhanced learning environments, state-of-the-art athletics facilities, and collaborative spaces

Earlier this fall, the USask Library opened the Digital Skills Help Centre in the Murray Library, offering students vital support in navigating today's digital learning environment.

As technology and artificial intelligence (AI) continued to reshape academic life, the centre was created to help students build essential digital literacy skills—such as evaluating online content and using digital tools ethically and effectively. Free drop-in and online support, one-on-one appointments, and workshops have been available since launch, with programming running year-round.

“This was one of the ways we put our digital literacy and AI frameworks into action,” said Jo Ann Murphy, assistant dean, Learning and Curriculum Support. “It’s part of how the library supports students in building the digital literacy they need to succeed.”

Developed in collaboration with the office of the Associate Provost Teaching Innovation and Strategic Initiatives, the centre was modeled after the successful Writing and Math Help Centres. It reflects USask’s commitment to student success and lifelong learning.



BY THE BOOK

NEWS FOR THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY'S DONORS AND FRIENDS



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Welcoming Dr. Lori Birrell as the New Library Dean



The University of Saskatchewan (USask) Library is entering a new chapter with the arrival of Dr. Lori Birrell (EdD) as its new University Librarian and Dean. A passionate advocate for curiosity, scholarship, and community engagement, Birrell brings a wealth of experience and a deep commitment to research and learning.

“As far back as I can remember, I’ve been someone who asks questions,” Birrell said. “I’m a naturally curious person and I love learning new things.” That curiosity first took root during childhood visits with her parents to her local public library and has since grown into a fulfilling career in academic librarianship.

Birrell joins USask from a series of administrative roles at research-intensive universities in the United States. Her background has prepared her to lead in a dynamic academic environment, where the library plays a central role in supporting faculty, students, and the broader community. “The idea of being part of such a scholarly community, where the focus is on producing research that improves lives, is one of the things that excites me most about joining USask.”

With advanced degrees in feminist studies, history, library science, and higher education leadership, she has held key roles at the University of Arkansas and the University of Delaware, overseeing rare collections, museum operations, and contributing to organizational strategy. Her collaborative fundraising efforts have secured over \$1.6 million, and her research on library leadership and workplace evolution continues to shape the field.

“I’m a firm believer that leaders are made, not born. That philosophy drives both my practice and my research,” Birrell said.

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As Birrell steps into her new role, she is keenly aware of the challenges and opportunities facing academic libraries. One pressing issue is the rising cost of scholarly journal subscriptions, which increase by five to 10 per cent annually. She sees this challenge as a catalyst for innovation. "This gives us the opportunity to further explore how we can best leverage different publishing models in support of research and learning."

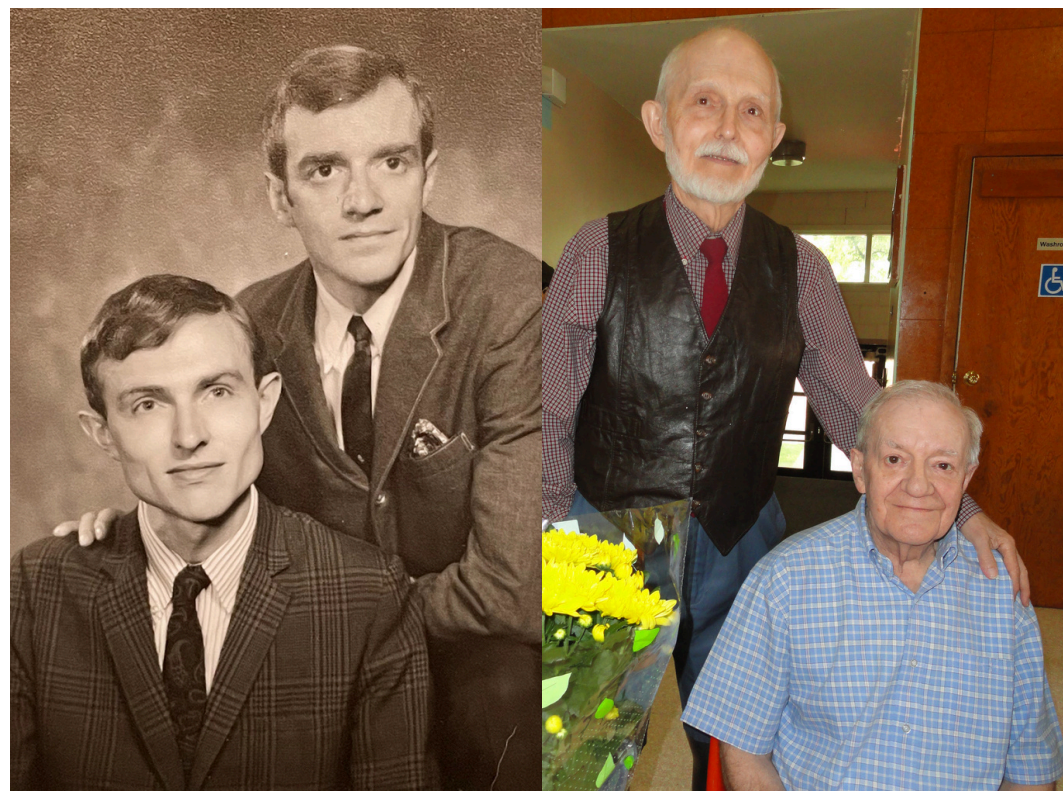
Birrell emphasizes the importance of making the library a welcoming space for all students, especially those who may not have had prior positive experiences with libraries. "The library should be a place for everyone," she said. "We must offer services to meet students where they are, help them save time, and support their development as scholars."

She is also enthusiastic about stewarding unique scholarly resources, especially as the University Archives and Special Collections prepares to move into a new, state-of-the-art space. "This project will help us both preserve those materials and better ensure researchers' access to and use of these remarkable collections."

Recognizing USask's milestone of surpassing the \$500 million goal of the Be What the World Needs campaign, Birrell is committed to maintaining strong relationships with the library's supporters. "Everyone's an alum of the library," she said. "We need to help students and alumni understand the impact the library has had on their success—and keep that momentum going."



Estate Gift Elevates 2SLGBTQQA+ Initiatives on Campus



James Komar and John Irwin in 1968 and 2011 (Photo: Submitted)

A generous \$300,000 estate gift to the University of Saskatchewan's College of Education and University Library is honoring the legacy of gay activist couple James (Jim) Komar and John Irwin, while advancing 2SLGBTQQA+ initiatives on campus.

Tom and Rose Rogers, close friends of Komar, shared heartfelt memories of the man they considered family. "Jim was an amazing man," said Rose. "He had a strong sense of justice and a strong desire to have LGBTQ people accepted in the community."

Born in Passaic, New Jersey, in 1932, Komar was a gifted musician, trained in piccolo, flute, classical guitar, violin, piano, mandolin, and ballet. After serving in the U.S. armed forces, he earned a Bachelor of Arts from The City University of New York in 1965. It was in New York, in the late 1960s, that Komar met Canadian John Irwin. Their love was immediate and enduring.

Seeking refuge from the American political climate, the couple moved to Montreal in 1973, presenting as cousins to avoid discrimination. They eventually settled in Saskatoon in the 1980s, where Komar worked as a technical writer for space engineering companies. "As gay rights became recognized in law, the societal persecution lessened somewhat," said Tom. The couple married in 2005, one year after same-sex marriage was legalized in Saskatchewan.

Despite personal hardships—including Komar losing both legs to infection in 2007 and Irwin's passing in 2011—Komar remained deeply engaged in advocacy, music,

and literature. He played a pivotal role in a landmark Supreme Court case challenging anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech and discrimination. A spiritual man, Komar was active in Saskatoon church communities, urging them to embrace inclusivity.

Komar's connection to USask was profound. He served on the advisory committee for the College of Education's Breaking the Silence conference, a multi-day event founded in 1998 by Dr. Don Cochrane (PhD), professor emeritus in Educational Foundations. The conference examined issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools and expanded over two decades to spotlight 2SLGBTQQA+ issues across Saskatchewan and Canada. Komar received the Peter Corren award in 2013 for his fearless activism. "He received the award for his commitment and energy—the human rights campaign; talking to Bishops," said Cochrane. "Jim was fearless."

Komar also volunteered in hospitals, prisons, and medical training programs. Both he and Irwin were active leaders in Alcoholics Anonymous, drawing strength from their own recovery journeys. Irwin quietly supported Komar behind the scenes, assisting with mobility, scheduling, and advocacy work.

Komar's contributions earned him multiple awards from Out Saskatoon, and in 2023, he proudly served as a Saskatoon Pride Parade Marshall. "For me, he was very determined to make society understand that gay people are human, and that they had every right that everyone else had," said Rose. "It was important for him that people know this. There is nothing wrong with being gay and it should be celebrated."

The estate gift, managed by the Rogers, will celebrate Komar and Irwin's legacy at USask. At the College of Education, the donation is funding renovations to queer the Student Lounge, creating a welcoming space for 2SLGBTQQA+ members of the university community. A new display will highlight the history

of queerness in the college, including Komar's work with *Breaking the Silence*.

At the University Library, the gift is establishing *The James Komar and John Irwin Queer Project Fund*, which will support programs and initiatives related to the development, preservation, and promotion of the library's sexual and gender diversity collections.

One such initiative was the Glitter and Glam: A Prom of Possibilities event, hosted in collaboration with USask and community partners during Pride Month. The evening celebrated self-expression, queer history, and identity, featuring Two-Spirit Indigenous activist Donald Meriam and local drag queens China White and Iona Whipp. The event showcased the Neil Richards Collection of Sexual and Gender Diversity, one of Canada's most significant queer archival collections. This collection preserves rare and fragile materials, ensuring that 2SLGBTQQA+ voices—past and present—are safeguarded for future generations.

Komar and Irwin themselves amassed a rich collection of queer cultural materials—books, DVDs, and personal letters—donated to the University Archives and Special Collections. This intimate archive offers a window into their lives, love, and unwavering commitment to advocacy.

In choosing to support these initiatives, the Rogers are ensuring that Komar and Irwin's legacy continues to shape the university's culture of inclusion and visibility. Their story is a powerful reminder of the impact that individuals can have on their communities—and how philanthropy can preserve that impact for generations to come.

Those wishing to contribute to *The James Komar and John Irwin Queer Project Fund* can donate through the University of Saskatchewan, helping to ensure that their legacy of advocacy and celebration of diversity thrives well into the future.



Top and middle: Tom Rogers and Cheryl Loadman at the Glitter and Glam event on June 13, 2025. (Photo: Arrow Photography) Bottom: Jim Komar at home on 14th St., Saskatoon, in 2023 (Photo: Submitted)