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Gabler Promise Scholars

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A Take on Change

Sometimes, I find myself connecting the material I learn in my Sociology courses to the campus organizations I am involved with. In these classes, there are often discussions about how the history of certain topics have led to the problems or injustices we see today. With this in mind, I try my best to be intentional with my responsibilities in the two organizations I am involved with. However, there are times when the world appears passive with the issues I care about that make me question the work I am involved with. Sitting with my mixed feelings and noticing how my friends continued to be present in their own organizations or spaces, I grew curious about what led them here and if they shared the same experience finding community in these organizations. The journey of joining a community-oriented group, choosing to stay, and continuing to envision goals for this group and ourselves, raises an important question: what drives us to do good work in our world?

For this reason, I decided to interview three student leaders from UC Santa Barbara (UCSB) involved in a range of community-oriented work. The questions I asked were centered around their experience in their respective groups as shown below:

1. Besides being a student at UCSB, what extracurricular activities are you involved in?
2. *Can you tell me a story about* what drove you to join these spaces in the beginning? Consider the people, the mission statement of the group, and your own position in these spaces.
3. What *inspired*/drove you to continue your efforts to remain in these spaces? Have your goals changed throughout your time here? (Consider your personal experiences, your education, career goals, or personal values. There is no need to provide details about such experiences, just motivating factors or impact they have had on future decisions)

4. If at all, what do you wish was different about your experiences in this work or being in these organizations?

5. Can you tell me a story about what you hope to change in the world or in yourself by doing this work?

"She made me feel safe. That's how I want to make people feel."

- Emily Flores (she/her/hers)

Emily and is part of the executive board for La Escuelita, a non-profit organization focused on K-12 outreach and community service. Apart from being Co-Chair of La Escuelita, she is also the Fundraising Chair for Raices de mi Tierra, a folklórico dance group.

When asked what drove her to join these organizations, Emily shared several moments in high school that touched her. She considered herself to be shy and wanted to better express herself through a cultural dance group, folklórico. Although this motivated her efforts to join a folklórico group at UCSB, she recalls working with elementary aged students through volunteer work at her aunt's non-profit organization that made her feel special. "I was happy to see them," she said and shared that they felt the same with her. In a way, the bond that she created with these kids continued in her time in college.

In her involvement with Raices, she not only dances with those of her age, but also with younger kids in elementary school. Through the social activities outside their dance practices such as pairing Emily with a "buddy" or making cards with them, they have grown to know each other. Through her involvement in La Escuelita, the kids she dances with participate in our community service events and activities that are oriented towards the Isla Vista and Goleta neighborhoods. To Emily, she is able to talk to them more and save their bonds. In a way Emily has accomplished a safe connection or friendship with her "buddies."

When asked what change she envisioned for the world, additional past experiences were shared. There's a need, "to do something better," Emily explained about her hometown Willmington, where less resources are provided to her low-income, predominantly Latinx community compared to wealthier ones. Yet, Emily believes that

through her volunteer work in high school, a “cycle of giving back to [her] community” was created. In regards to herself, she wants to become a social worker. In a personal matter that required assistance from a social worker, Emily remembers, “ she made me feel safe. That's how I want to make people feel.” From my standpoint, it seems like Emily continued to create this safe feeling through building relationships with the children she works with in Raices and La Escuelita.



“...creating a safe space for a diverse community...”

- Gina Milan (she/her/hers)

Gina is a youth group leader at New Life Church in downtown Santa Barbara. On campus, she is a part of InterVarsity Christian fellowship. Through these roles, she has found several volunteer opportunities.

It was only until her last year of high school that Gina started to get more involved in her Christian community. She wanted to dive deeper into religion in college and found InterVarsity in her search for this space. She found an environment that embraced and created a safe space for people of different cultures, ages, and sexual

orientations. She felt, “culturally, socially, and academically supported and loved,” when she first joined.

As a first gen student struggling academically in her first year, this took an emotional toll. However, she grew close to those in InterVarsity that mentored and helped her in her personal life. This community inspired her to stay and her leadership responsibilities grew more ambitious as she envisioned expanding their capacity. “The potential is there,” she explains for her ideas of adding more bible studies and outreach events to get, “more people to experience this community.” Although excited about her organization’s future, Gina expresses her worry of her tight-knit community becoming too large and losing this sense of family or belonging.

“I think looking forward,” she says doing this work has motivated a new goal in a career in ministry. Her religion-based involvement in Isla Vista has shown they are “creating a safe space for a diverse community.” In response to the change for the world, she hopes to change the single story of Christians as “judgemental and angry people holding signs and such.” To break this stigma, she wants to continue to outreach by showing simple acts of kindness where people “feel loved and welcomed no matter what they believe.” Through her involvement and the support of her Christian community, she has experienced better mental, spiritual, and emotional health.



"I made a promise to myself to make sure as many people are heard."

- Gabriela Silva (she/they)

Gabby is one of the Co-Chairs of MUJER, an organization that advocates for students of marginalized genders through education and outreach. They are also a part of USLAC, a student labor organizing group that works closely with unions.

In their first year at UCSB, Gabby struggled navigating the university. They tried joining environmental organizations, but many of those in these spaces were middle class. Even with their roommates, Gabby could not relate to them due to class and other identities. Finding a space to be themselves has been a struggle until they found MUJER and joined in their second year. They did not know it was a space they needed as MUJER offered a safe space for queer, nonbinary folk and was not Mexican centric. In addition, Gabby shares that MUJER gave them an opportunity to explore politics such as learning about strikes on campus.

Although Gabby worked 25-30 hours a week, they managed to be present at MUJER meetings. It was the first time they felt "heard and listened to," as there have been times when their jobs have put them down. When Gabby was nominated to be Co-Chair, they were surprised as someone from MUJER "saw something in [them]." They never thought of themselves in such a way and Gabby shared, "'I made a promise to myself to make sure as many people are heard" through this position. To Gabby, their activism to combat a range of injustices allows them to practice what they believe in. "To be an activist is to be seen," they explain.

Gabby is reminded of themselves as the many who join MUJER may be quiet but they are passionate about their activism. Those in MUJER are learning and continue to come to strikes that demonstrate their support. Seeing those in MUJER doing this motivates Gabby to continue this work as they want to pursue a career as a community organizer. "I don't see it as a job. It's second nature to me," they said. As for the future, Gabby recognizes there is "a lot of work to be done." Although the change Gabby wants

to see might not happen in their lifetime, they “know people are watching and will inspire the next generation of leaders of revolutionary change.” Gabby hopes for others to continue listening to the current injustices that are happening and to take action. As for Gabby, they do not want to stop learning and challenging themselves to step out of their comfort zone in these activist spaces.



My Experience

I am the Co-Treasurer of La Escuelita, a non-profit organization focused on K-12 outreach and community service. I am also a part of USLAC, a student labor organizing group that works closely with unions.

As for myself, there were times in high school where I did not listen to my intuition. I wanted to get involved in more radical volunteer work, but I was afraid. I hoped when I went to college far away from my judgemental peers I could join organizations that resonated with me and not others. In my first year at UCSB, I found it liberating to explore multiple organizations on campus. However, most of them did not feel quite right.

When I first joined La Escuelita, they were organizing their Student Parent Conference. The day of the conference, I felt so touched to see first-generation high school students with their families share their struggles that reflected my community back home. This was the first time I helped organize an event and saw the impact it had on those we were assisting. Apart from La Escuelita’s community service events, I

wanted to get involved in political organizations. I attended the Student Labor Organizing Conference with others who were involved in different political organizations like MUJER and USLAC. I was amazed to see so many gathered together from all over California to learn organizing skills and ways to combat internalized biases like I did. I want to continue to challenge myself and learn ways to advocate for the change I want to see through organizing.

I was encouraged to apply for the executive board for La Escuelita and USLAC even though I had no prior experience organizing events or strikes. I have learned so much about myself and skills to bring back to my hometown from these two organizations. In a way, my participation in both align with the change I want to see in myself and the future. I recognize that the change I want to see may not occur faster than I would like to, but I do know that I want to continue working on my personal habits that offer revolutionary change along with others in USLAC. As for La Escuelita, the community service events we organize reminds me of the future I want to see where as a community we take care of each other and celebrate life.



Final Remarks

Interviewing Emily, Gina, and Gabby reminded me of the different types of good and people we need for the change we want in our communities. Without realizing it at first, we are all first-generation college students who are impacting our local community through each of our organizations in some way. Whether it is through cultural dance, community service, faith, or grassroots organizing, they are all essential. These interests

and values are essential in the journey in finding community, but there were also key moments that acknowledged our existence and hardships that motivated us to remain in these spaces and replicate the experience through others.

Emily was touched by a social worker's actions that made her feel safe and has inspired her to pursue this career. In a way, she continues to create these safe connections through the community she has developed with the children she interacts with. Gina was loved and supported by those who shared her faith in a time when she faced personal and academic challenges. This experience has motivated Gina to continue forming this community she found as a leader in InterVarsity. Gabby felt seen in the radical space she found and driven to continue their activism as their peers in MUJER believe and support the causes they care about. I did not feel so alone anymore when I saw others wanting to organize to combat injustices and those who wanted to form community events to create a positive impact in our local neighborhoods. To be heard, to be validated, and to continue wanting to replicate this experience for our peers or the community we are assisting is empowering.

As one can see, people that were once strangers to us have deeply impacted us. They have also inspired us to continue to do good or honorable humanitarian work in our world. Our experiences show how we are impacted by others actions and it is possible that those who have done so for us are not aware of the extent of the change they have made for someone else.