



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Carly, a former Psychology major who is now doing double duty in helping people overcome hardships as both a stroke researcher and a volunteer trauma advocate.



**Carly Creelman:
Stroke Researcher
Weill Cornell Medical School**

What are you up to now, post-graduation?

I'm part of a stroke research team at Weill Cornell Medical School on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. We run a variety of studies and also work for the rehabilitation department. Our patients have already had strokes and we're working on their rehab. We run drug studies, looking into how pharmaceuticals help with spasticity and stiffness, trying to get patients full range of motion and better gait. We do some studies on new devices that help with pain after a stroke. We do a lot of robotic studies where a patient's limbs are inserted into a machine that helps stretch them out and move them in ways they can't themselves, like with the Hand of Hope (pictured on page 2). A lot of our patients don't have function of one side of their bodies, so stretching their muscles can lead to eventually regaining some movement.

A lot of my job is organizing and recruiting for all those different studies. My favorite part is working with people who have determination to get better. It's easy to give up because it's a long battle, you have to constantly put in effort to rehab yourself, but there are patients who stick with it. I've had some patients go back to work, which is a huge deal in the stroke community. With some patients, even the littlest tasks like picking up a pen can be a major accomplishment and a happy victory for everyone involved.

How did you get to where you are?

At UCSB, I double majored in Psychology and Law and Society. I really liked the intersection between law and psychology, so I found a master's program in

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Forensic Psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I loved it and I did really well, graduating with honors. However, there are very few jobs in that particular field you can get with just a master's. To make matters tougher, by the time I graduated, with the economic crash, all the PhDs flooded the job market that was supposed to be at the master's level. I looked for a job in my field, but after I graduated, I faced the reality that I had to start getting paid or move home. For a while, facing rejection from job interviews for the first time in my life was something I took very personally. But there was something else that had happened unexpectedly—I had fallen in love with New York. I realized I could succumb to feeling like a failure and move back home, or I could pick myself up and look for an opportunity that would allow me to stay in this amazing city. So, I did something I never expected and got a job as a nanny on the Upper East Side for two years. The mother was a doctor and knew people at the

hospital I work at now, so I eventually got connected with my current position. It helps to know people.

Throughout it all, I've used my psychology background in a volunteer capacity in trauma work and supportive counseling. Currently, I am a rape and domestic abuse advocate in the ER setting. I'm on call during the night and, if anyone comes in because of that kind of abuse, I go in and play a supportive role for them. I give them counseling and reality testing to make sure they're aware of the reality of their situation. I do psychoeducation and safety planning. A lot of those women go back to their abusive partner, and I'm not trying to sway them one way or the other on that decision, they're going to do what they're going to do. But if they do go back, I give them tips and tools to use if it does—and it usually does—happen again. Before that, I volunteered for a suicide hotline. It's not easy work, but I have the skill set for it and I like the feeling of giving back. Even though it's

not in my job description at Weill, I find myself using those skills and tips to help stroke patients keep their spirits up, increase their motivation, and make sure they're connecting with reality. Some people expect to come in for a study and think we're going to give them a pill and they'll be magically fixed, which is very far from reality. So I help manage their expectations to make sure they understand the work that's ahead.

I'm still hoping to use the skill set I'm building in medical research toward a future career in the psychology field, either research or trauma work. Again, it's a very competitive job market. But what things not going according to plan with my career taught me is that I'm more resilient than I ever knew. It taught me to roll with the punches, be versatile, and create opportunities for myself. It taught me that you just have to keep going.

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What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?

I remained very focused and tried to get involved with as much as possible. I volunteered in a Psychology lab. I worked. I played sports. I was very dedicated to my studies. I had a very clear vision the whole time and I'm not saying you have to have that, but for me personally having a really clear cut goal helped guide me through the experience.

For grad school, research is key to getting in. One of the reasons I took my current job was to put more research on my resume in case I want to get my PhD at some point. Talking to a lot of admissions people from master's and PhD programs, it's definitely something they pay attention to. And they like to see multiple research projects or different labs—that's where it gets difficult. They have all these demands while you're just one student with only so much time.

That said, it's so important to create a healthy school/life balance. I had friends who didn't pay a lot of attention to their schooling and they didn't do so well. I also had friends who on-

ly focused on school and they suffered in a different way. Self-care in any situation, whether in college or in the work force, is a huge deal in creating a positive environment for yourself.

What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?

As I said before, I had a very clear plan for undergrad and I accomplished it. And I thought, “I'm going to go and do the same thing with my master's and then, once I do, I'll have a job.” I thought it would be that easy. I wish someone had told me to really look into the options you'll get from a master's versus a doctorate for my field. If you're going to take out loans to pay for more school, you should make sure you're really informed on the weight that degree will hold in your particular field. You need to research the job market for your goals. And keep a backup plan in mind because the job market changes. You might do everything right and find that by the time you reach where you're going, the field has shifted. Suddenly, you're not the most qualified applicant or there aren't enough positions available in your location. If you create skill sets in different areas,

you can be flexible. Eventually, those skills might even combine and help you find a perfect fit.

What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?

I would say the amount of opportunities you're faced with to become part of something. A concert. A club. A lab. Take Back the Night. There are all these posters all around and you have an opportunity to be part of something you really care about, whatever that may be. I tried to soak in as much



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Next month's Spotlight features Michelle, a former Film and Media Studies and English double major who's now commanding cameras, scripts, and crews, shaping the world through filmmaking. To learn about her journey and her advice for the current Gaucho generation, catch the next Alumni Spotlight in December.

of it as I could, but there's always so much more. My advice would be to sit down and think about what you really care about, then seek out related opportunities. You'll meet like-minded people and create a mini-community within the larger community of UCSB.

Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?

Prepare yourself as much as you can while you're at UCSB to be a strong applicant for the future, even if you're not sure what the future looks like. Maybe you don't want to go to grad school now, but in the future you might—I know a lot of people who have changed plans. Without that solid base of a good GPA and experiences and skills to put on your

resume, it's very difficult for those people to try new directions later in life. So, keep your grades up. Keep some breadth in your interests. Pursue interests outside your major. You don't know where life is going to take you. It helps to be prepared.

Above all, pursue what makes you happy. I had a great time at UCSB because I made sure to pick classes based on interest. Some people just wanted to get the degree, but I let myself enjoy the learning process. It was so fun and enlightening, studying things I cared about in both undergrad and grad school, and I had a blast. It's for that reason that, even if things didn't go according to plan, I wouldn't trade my experience for anything.



Carly welcomes UCSB students to contact her via email with questions about medical research or applied psychology and for mentorship on how to become competitive in those fields. Requests to look over student resumes or inquiries about open positions will not be responded to.

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