



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

Alumni Spotlight

This month's bonus Spotlight features Maura, a former Dance and Sociology double major who's now transforming the lives of people seeking physical and emotional recovery through dance therapy.

**Maura Harris:
Dance Therapy
92Y Harkness Dance Center**



What are you up to now, post-graduation?

A few months ago I began working as an Administrative Assistant to the director of the dance therapy program at the 92nd Street Y. Part of the job is performing administrative duties for her and other faculty members, which includes keeping track of client data, monitoring and responding to email inquiries about our programs, and advertising for upcoming courses and workshops. After doing this for a while I feel like I have a good grasp on the entire dance therapy program here—the various opportunities associated with each program and how to match them with our clients' interests.

The other part of the job, however, allows me to assist the courses being taught. The teacher is Julie Collins, who worked under Dr. Berger for seven years and now administers classes on her own, specializing in courses for people with movement disabilities. This is the part

of the job that keeps me coming back for more. There is a wide range of participants in the course—a client recovering from a stroke, a client on the autism spectrum, a client with Parkinson's disease, for example—and witnessing the physical and emotional transformations these people go through from the beginning to the end of class each week is truly phenomenal. For most of these people, this is the one hour a week where they get to feel mobile, or the one hour a week where they get to release tension, or the one hour a week where they get to feel "normal." Dance therapy is a truly special kind of therapy in that it uniquely combines physical relief with mental and emotional relief. During the first class that I came to assist with, I was holding hands in the group circle with a client who has Parkinson's and her hand was affected by a tremor. After a few minutes of moving,

"Art is a form of healing in every walk of life, and is farther reaching than you might imagine."



however, I felt the shaking calm down to a point where neither of us noticed it. That was the moment that reaffirmed my desire to pursue dance therapy as a career. I am now looking into beginning the process to become a licensed Dance/Movement Therapist in the next year.

How did you get to where you are?

I graduated with a BA in Sociology and a BFA in Dance. Throughout my entire career at UCSB, whenever I told people what two majors I was pursuing, the response I would get was, “That’s an interesting combination. What are you planning on doing with those?” They were right. It is a bit of a peculiar pairing. I have always had an innate passion for dance. That will never disappear, which is why I knew I wanted to pursue a career that involved dance in one way or another.

I was also lucky enough to end up

being equally as passionate about my second major. I absolutely loved the sociology program at UCSB. The courses I took there absolutely sparked my now overwhelming interest in international relations, particularly pertaining to global justice. I knew I needed to find a way to combine my intense passions for these two areas of study and I have found that in dance therapy. I believe there is no better time than now to become involved because so many areas of the world are experiencing trauma that can be eased by arts therapy. Currently, for instance, there is an influx of Syrian refugees in New York City. The community of creative arts therapists here have truly astounded me by coming together to create a supportive environment for these people, and providing therapeutic treatment where needed. Art is a form of healing in every walk of life, and is farther reaching than you might imagine. I am eternally grateful to UCSB for providing me with access points to learning about such a range of

fields of study within each of my majors. It was absolutely exhausting (the dance major at UCSB has one of the highest number of units required, and the sociology program is necessarily rigorous as it is number one in the nation), but the communities within each one were so supportive I was able to turn my exhaustion into determination and it was absolutely worth it.

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

Specifically in the dance major, the relationships I made with my professors were indispensable. I interned for two years with one of them and ended up babysitting another’s child. By the end of my career in the major I felt I could come to almost any one of them with any issue—whether it be dance-related or personal—and feel that they would guide me in the right direction. Not only is it important to have mentors like that

“After a few minutes of moving [with the client]...I felt the shaking calm...”



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there to reassure you of the potential you have, but they easily become the references you list on resumes, and the sources for a lot of contacts in the professional realm outside of undergrad. I locked in this job at the 92nd Street Y because of the contacts I made through one of my dance professors who suggested I attend a summer program at the Y here in the city. Another put me on a first-name basis with one of the world’s foremost contemporary choreographers. This day in age it’s true what they say about networking—that’s what it’s all about. I’m forever grateful to those professors for their help in the professional world and, on a personal level, I feel lucky to have them as sources of support.

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

Branching off of my last answer, within the sociology major (and I think this holds true for any major), I wish that I would have considered working with and doing research for the professors that I respected a lot earlier. I only really started doing that my senior year—partly because it wasn’t until then that I had even taken

a class from them—but if I could have started doing that research my sophomore year I feel like I would have learned so much more about topics that I really was interested in. UCSB is a top school for several reasons and one of them is the stature of its professors. They are incredibly knowledgeable and have so much to offer, all you have to do is ask. And they really do want you to succeed. Further than that, I probably would have had the chance to learn which areas of study I didn’t care for. College is the best place to narrow down your interests, and I think it’s important to do that by dipping your toes in as many things as possible. College is great because unlike post-grad, if you try something and you don’t end up liking it, you’re not stuck forever. Sure, technically nobody’s stuck in anything forever, nobody’s forcing you to do anything, but in college the options are seemingly endless with no repercussions for either not enjoying something or just not being very good at it—everyone sucks at something, and it’s best to find out what that is while you’re in school and not in the workplace.

What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?

The community. I know I keep using this word but it is the best way to describe it: supportive. My four years at UCSB were absolutely, without a doubt the best four years of my life. I am fortunate enough to actually like the person that I am today, and I owe most of that shaping to my time at UCSB. The people there are ex-



“During my time at UCSB, I learned about myself and I learned about humanity.”



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traordinary. Maybe it has something to do with waking up to the sound and smell of ocean waves every-day—I think that inevitably has a positive effect on people—but so what if it does? That's just another aspect of UCSB that makes the experience there so unique. The people I met at UCSB are truly special, and I learned from each one of them. Like most people going through college, I went through some of the highest and some of the lowest points in my life while I was at school, and I felt like I was surrounded by family the whole time. Right now I'm living with two other recent grads from a different university. Whenever I speak about the love I have for UCSB and my friends there, they look at me as though I'm speaking a different language. They don't miss being in school because they didn't see the

world as having endless opportunities while they were there like I did. They don't dream of times they had at school because they didn't experience the pervasive happiness present throughout Isla Vista. They aren't planning trips back to their college town because they don't love the friends they made there the way I do. What a shame that is. During my time at UCSB I learned about myself and I learned about humanity. And in the end that's the most important education you should get from college.

Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?

I've found that wisdom is defined differently by everyone based on their personal experiences. By the time you graduate, you'll understand what I mean by that.



Maura welcomes UCSB students to contact her via email with questions about dance therapy or advice on how to become competitive in the field. Requests to review resumes or inquiries about open positions will not be responded to.

m.harris528@gmail.com



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Editor:

Brandilyn Gilbert
Academic Advisor

College of Letters & Science