



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Megan, a former Global Studies major who is now on a life-long adventure, capturing stories from around the world through journalism and photography.



Megan Snedden: Travel Journalist and Photographer

What are you up to now, post-graduation?

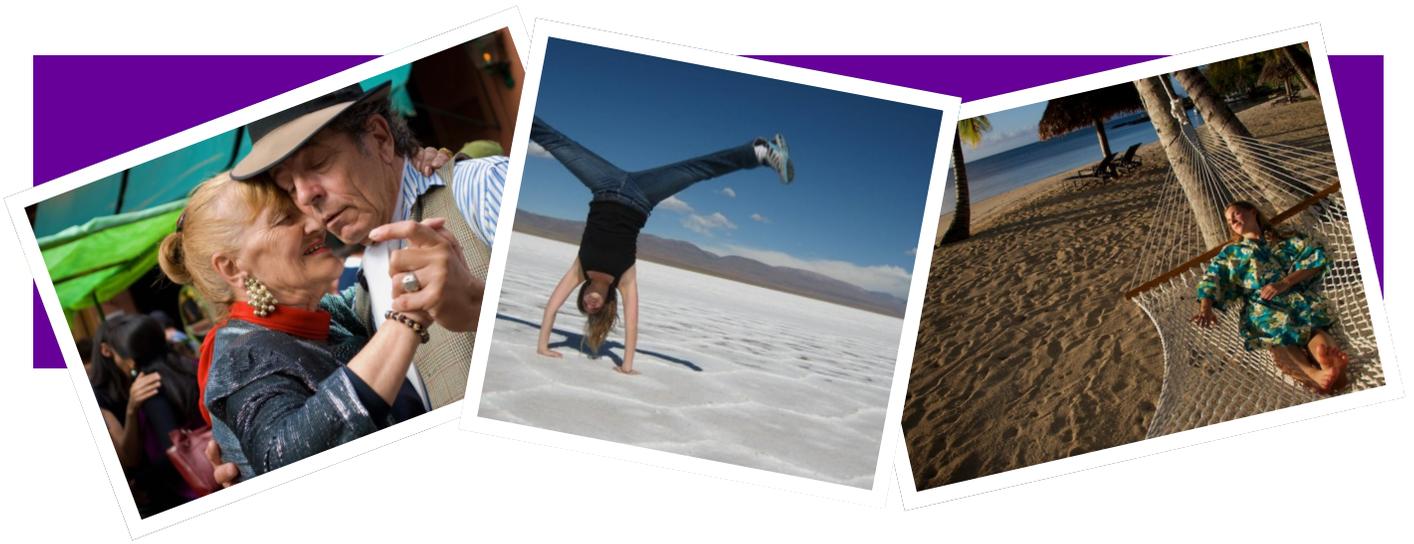
I work as a freelance travel photographer and journalist for a lot of different publications like USA Today, BBC, Yahoo Travel, Nat Geo Traveler, and a few publications based out of Australia because I lived there for a time. One of the best parts of my job is how diverse it is. The nature of my assignments changes one month to the next, which keeps my curious mind stimulated. I come up with ideas for stories, so one minute I am working on cultural travel topics and meeting local people around Fiji, the next I'm home researching something related to entrepreneurship and the environment.

Being a travel journalist means you get to have some of the most wild and unforgettable experiences. One time, I got to take a helicopter pub-crawl around Australia's

Northern Territory, literally flying from one pub to the next, with my partner by my side.

I began the journey of this career in pursuit of freedom. I wanted to create a life where I could go wherever I wanted in the whole world whenever I wanted. I wanted to explore during the prime of my youth, instead of saving travel for old age when my shoes and shoulders had been completely worn out. Being able to experience firsthand the things I'd dreamed about from photos—seeing the echoing waterfalls of Iguazú in Argentina, snorkeling off the shores of exotic beaches, touching the red dirt of Australia—made my life feel so meaningful. And what it took to actually make it happen helped me develop a sense of confidence.

“You're right. I'm not going to live a normal life. I'm going to live an extraordinary life.”



By far, though, the most fulfilling aspect of my job is connection. Being a journalist doesn't mean just gallivanting around for the heck of it; I am able to share a real, soulful connection with people from around the planet and get inside the experience of what it's like to be them. It gets real. People love to talk about what's true for them and what brings them passion. So when you go live on a Gaucho ranch in this middle-of-nowhere town in Argentina, you get to see people come alive through their everyday experience. Then, through a form of creative expression that I love, I get to share those moments with the world.

How did you get to where you are?

I've never been a person with a completely clear career path. When I went into UCSB, I had no idea what I wanted to study, so I spent several confused semesters just sampling different things. I ended

up studying Global Studies, and to this day, I look back and I still love that major so much. It was a perfect fit for me because you could take so many classes across different disciplines. I also minored in Professional Writing. Funny enough, even though those two disciplines exactly align with what I'm doing, I didn't choose them according to my future job. I just chose them because I loved those topics.

Honestly I suffered a lot after graduation because I had no idea what I wanted to do. I didn't even know you could be a travel journalist. My first foray into journalism had been the Daily Nexus where I started out as a reporter and then became an editor, but I still didn't think of it as the career path I'd follow. At that time, the Global Financial Crisis had hit, so everyone and their mother was like, "the economy is sliding off the shelf, so you'd have to be insane to go into journalism right now. Choose something responsible." I also had a lot of external pressure to

perform and be as successful as everyone thinks Millennials are supposed to be. I clocked too many hours on Monster.com and Craigslist, wrote fancy cover letters, but just kept getting rejection after rejection. Finally, I had just had it. That strategy was not working and I was miserable, so I decided to do something that would make me feel good about myself again. I bought a one-way ticket to Peru where I planned to teach English and work on my Spanish. I had a friend who worked at the Santa Ynez Valley Journal who had written a column for them while she was traveling. I called her up and said, "Hey, I'm going to Peru, maybe I could do that?" I ended up writing a few articles while playing around with photography. After Peru, I moved to Argentina and worked on a Gaucho ranch. That's really when my skill set as a self-taught photographer began to improve.

"...through a form of creative expression that I love, I get to share those moments with the world."



“There’s so much noise coming from the outside about who you should be and what you should do.”

In the transition to big-time, I had a couple big breaks I think came about through strategic positioning, networking, honing my craft, random circumstances, and just not giving up. For example, after Argentina, I moved to New York City, which I knew was prime real estate for journalists.

Around that same time, my dad suddenly passed away, which made me think a lot about my personal identity. I realized I had this one life to live that can quickly slip away from us. While before I was kind of putzing around with the idea of maybe pursuing this career, I decided it was time to get serious about it, despite all the voices from outside that told me not to.

So, I looked up all the travel writers and photographers that inspired me and set up meetings with them to hear about their stories. I found this woman who was an editor at a prominent online news source. After reading her personal blog, I discovered she’d lost her parents, so I sought her out. Honestly, I needed to know there was hope for me through all the grief I was experiencing. Before our meeting, I set the intention for authentic and

meaningful connection (not career advancement), but as we talked our conversation naturally segued to travel. I showed her my pictures of the gauchos in Argentina. Later, I got an ecstatic email from her saying she’d love to publish my images, and that was my first big assignment. On the back end of that, everything started opening up for me. That publication led to another and another and everything started to snowball from there.

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

I trusted my gut. There’s so much noise coming from the outside about who you should be and what you should do. That includes society, family, friends, and people you look up to. Truth is, it’s incredibly hard to tune out the shoulds and all the naysayers to just listen to what calls to you, but it’s also absolutely necessary in order to create a life that aligns with your true self, not the self designed to meet the expectations of others. When it came to choosing a major, for example, I was caught up in the land of shoulds. I thought I needed to pick

something that was really going to pay off. Once I silenced that fear of trying to prepare for an uncertain future, I really tuned in to what was true to me. I loved Global Studies and I loved writing. Choosing what I loved really set me up for great things and ended up paying off in a way I’d never expected.



“...I decided it was time to get serious...”



Also, I later realized what you study in college doesn't matter as much as you might think. I mean, it's important to choose something that fulfills you to learn about, but no one has ever looked at my resume and disqualified me from a job because of my major ... actually, nobody's even looked at my resume in years, so they don't even know what my major was. Trust your gut about what you should be studying and go with what fascinates and excites you. Just because everyone else is a Communications or Economics major doesn't mean you have to do that. One of the biggest sacrifices you might have to make in your life is learning to deal with being unconventional or different or someone that marches to their own beat, but that will pay off. Besides, who wants to be like every-

one else when you have the chance to be you?

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

I would have spent more one-on-one time with teachers. That extra connection is what really advances learning. Do it even just to get the mentorship because your personal growth and development at that time are far more important compared to the scholastic things you're learning.

Also, I would have put far less emphasis on getting the A. My whole life, I was concerned about being a straight A, valedictorian

type of student. When I graduated, I had an existential crisis when I discovered there is no grading rubric for life. I wish I had spent more time studying and exploring the things that really interested me, and that includes choosing extracurricular activities or joining groups that I just felt a curiosity about and spending time exploring those. Put more emphasis on the learning and the growing over getting the A.

For students who want to become photojournalists, study abroad, learn another language, and start learning emotional coping mechanisms now because this career is a wild ride and it only gets wilder as you get deeper into it.

What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?

Everything! Once you're a Gaucho, you're always a Gaucho. You continue to meet people who went to UCSB in the most unexpected places and it gives you a relatable point of connection to people who might otherwise have remained strangers. Being part of that is something you carry with you for the rest of your life.

“One of the biggest sacrifices you might have to make in your life is learning to deal with the feeling of being unconventional...”





For articles like these, reminders of important deadlines, and more, like our Facebook page at:

www.facebook.com/AskJoeGaucho

If an alum's story is meaningful to you, consider reaching out with questions using the contact information provided.

Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?

When you graduate, if you're like me and you have no idea what you want to do with your life, that is totally okay. I personally give you permission to explore and try everything and to spend some time confused. You don't have to be perfect or have everything worked out.

Make it a point in college to learn to vibe with uncertainty. I really get that people want the safe and known, but is that a passion-driven lifestyle? The safe life isn't always the happy life. If you have that fire living inside of you and you continue to show up in a powerful way that feels unique to you, then you can learn to deal with anything.

When I was eighteen, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease

called Undifferentiated Spondyloarthritis, which is essentially a shade of arthritis. The inflammation was debilitating. At one point, it went after my eyes and I spent a chunk of time completely blind. During my freshman year at UCSB, a doctor handed me a handicap placard and said, "There's nothing else we can do for you. You're never going to have a normal life." I remember I got in the car with my mom and she said, "Do not let this defeat you." And the pivotal part was that I didn't resign. It actually set me on a mission to prove this guy wrong. I was like, "You know what? You're right! I'm not going to live a normal life. I'm going to live an extraordinary life."

Don't let anyone put limits on what your life can be. Go make it extraordinary.



Megan leads workshops in the Santa Barbara area and welcomes UCSB students to contact her via her website with questions about the field and for advice on how to prepare for a career in travel journalism or photography. Requests to review resumes will not be responded to.

www.megansnedden.com



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