



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

# Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Lauren, a former Black Studies major who is now bridging the worlds of art, culture, history, and community activism through the development of museum programming.



**Lauren O'Brien:**  
**Education Program Assistant**  
**Jane Addams Hull-House Museum**

## What are you up to now, post-graduation?

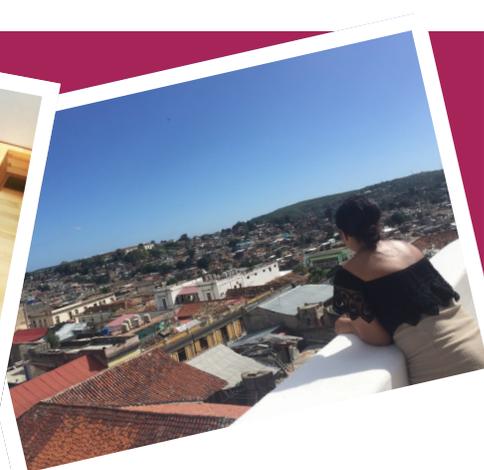
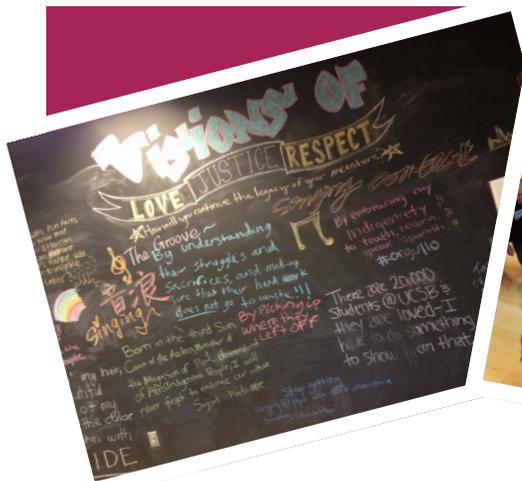
I am a public historian. I currently serve as the Cities of Peace Education Program Assistant at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago. Hull-House serves as a dynamic memorial to Nobel Peace Laureate Jane Addams, her fellow reformers, and the migrant neighbors who struggled to organize, engage in cultural exchange, and impact national and international public policy.

I joined Hull-House in the second year of the Cities of Peace program, which recognizes the global epidemic of police violence that disproportionately impacts young people of color, as well as queer, trans, and gender non-conforming youth from marginalized communities. It connects two groups of young people affected by this—one in Chicago and one in Phnom Penh, Cambodia—

through coordinating exchange visits and opening discussions. Youth meet with local historians, human rights advocates, legislators, artists, and survivors. This past year, the exchange culminated in a Youth Peace Summit, through which young activists shared their experiences and presented a collective platform for international solidarity.

For the program, I partnered with the Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce to develop a corrective history curriculum. It included original research, lesson plans, community organizing techniques, arts interventions, and interviews from program participants. Additionally, in partnership with local artists, activists, and scholars, I facilitated a series of teach-ins within Chicago Public Schools and at a variety of cultural and historic sites throughout the city.

**“I literally began Googling careers in multiculturalism, education, and black studies.”**



I love what I do because it bridges both academic and community work. As a black woman in history, I wanted to find the environment that would allow me to help my community the most. I grappled with the idea of becoming a school teacher, but learned I wanted the freedom to engage my audiences outside of the classroom. My museum work has allowed me to do so.

### How did you get to where you are?

While At UCSB I switched my major a few times, from Cultural Anthropology, to Comparative Literature, but ultimately landed in Black Studies. A professor once told me to study what leaves you curious and wanting more. That's what Black Studies was for me. I remember taking a class on Afro-Latino identity and learning that the second largest population of African descent is in Brazil. I was just like, "Wow! What else don't I know about the world?" The interdisciplinary nature of the

Black Studies major appealed to me—I like literature, history, religious studies, and art history, and was able to dabble in all of them within one major. That interdisciplinary aspect gave me the ability to approach a subject from multiple academic points of view, a skill that's made me stand out in my career.

Initially I wanted to be an elementary school teacher. Thankfully, my first two summers of undergrad, I worked with non-profits teaching K-12 students from underrepresented communities. I figured out that, while I was passionate about education, I wanted something more unique to my interests. Meanwhile, my position as User Group Coordinator at UCSB's Multicultural Center was exposing me to multiculturalism and community organizing. As a person of color, this position was very important to me because it gave me a platform to serve as a liaison for other UCSB students from marginalized communities. I

literally began Googling careers in multiculturalism, education, and black studies. That's how I came across, "museum curator." Excited, I applied to internships all over Los Angeles for the summer after my junior year. I either received no response or was politely rejected. It was really discouraging because I wanted more experience in museums, but didn't have the experience to obtain these positions.

I mentioned my difficulty in finding an internship to the two professors I was doing research for in the Black Studies Department. Surprisingly, one of them had worked with a curator at the Grammy Museum and encouraged me to connect. After talking on the phone for about an hour, the curator asked me if I was available to intern that summer. With my foot in the door, I was able to continue working at museums until graduation. The experience taught me the importance of sharing your ideas and passions with others. For example,

"The experience taught me the importance of sharing your ideas and passions with others."



“Whenever I found someone doing what I wanted to do, I contacted them, introduced myself, and asked for advice.”

once the director of UCSB’s Multicultural Center find out I was interested in museums she gave me the opportunity to curate a participatory art project in the center to encourage students to think about social justice.

I applied to PhD with the aim of becoming a historian of black history and working in an African American history museum. I was rejected from all programs but one that offered me a place in their MA program. It was devastating at the time. Rejection hurts, especially after you’ve put in so much effort. But sometimes rejection is really a redirection. I accepted the MA program and moved to Chicago. There, I received an email on my department’s listserv for the Cities of Peace program. I didn’t get the position I applied for, but instead was offered an internship in the museum’s Education Department. In a matter of weeks, Hull-House became another home for me as I became immersed in the museum’s history and programming. When my internship ended, I was offered a position as the Cities of Peace Education Program Assistant.

In addition to working at Cities of Peace, my graduate program gave me more experience in public history

through conducting oral histories, working with neighborhood historical societies, and interning at several other museums including Loyola’s Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago. These experiences made me a much stronger applicant for doctoral programs and gave me a much clearer understanding of which programs would be best for me. As a result, I was accepted to Rutgers University PhD program in American Studies and will continue both my education and museum work this fall.

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

The most important aspect of finding opportunities is talking to people! Whenever I found someone doing what I wanted to do, I contacted them, introduced myself and my interests, and asked for advice. I also remain in contact with these individuals, as well as the staff and faculty that have helped me along the way. It’s nice to keep people in the know about how their support has influenced where you’ve gone since.

Something else that truly helped me was studying what I love. As a student

in the humanities, people were constantly asking what I was going to do with my degree in Black Studies. Sometimes, that questioning made me feel insecure about my choice of major. But when you get out into the world, you realize it’s all about translating the skills from your education and experience to a desired career. I had no idea what I would do with my major, but I loved it and I did really well in my classes as a result. My non-traditional path has made me stand out to employers and institutions. The Art Institute of Chicago, for example, noticed me among their



“My non-traditional path has made me stand out to employers and institutions.”



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

[www.facebook.com/AskJoeGaucho](http://www.facebook.com/AskJoeGaucho)

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

applicants because I was interested in cultural history rather than traditional art history. A good co-worker of mine was a physicist and a print artist. As long as you get the necessary coursework or credentials for your intended field, studying what you like can highlight your uniqueness.

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

I wish I would have learned a foreign language and studied abroad. A professor at UCSB invited me to travel with her on a trip to Cuba over winter break and the trip was life-changing! I realized how much I would have benefited from staying somewhere different long term and I don't have access to as many opportunities to do so as I did at UCSB. Because I work with the public, I wish I was fluent in another language so I could better communicate with my audiences.

#### **What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?**

The best thing about being a Gaucho is the environment. The isolation from an urban city creates an environment where people want to build community with each other. I learned so much from my peers and realized that even with great tragedy, we remain in solidarity. It brings me joy to see alumni plates, sweatshirts, or even read the name of the school in the newspaper. My UCSB community of friends, faculty, and staff truly helped mold me into the woman I am today and it will forever be my first home away from home.

#### **Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?**

This quote by Elizabeth Gilbert: "You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestation of your own blessings."



*Lauren welcomes UCSB students to contact her via email with questions about museum curation or community programming and for advice on how to best prepare for the field. Requests to review resumes will not be responded to.*

*[lauren.obrien@rutgers.edu](mailto:lauren.obrien@rutgers.edu)*



Facebook.com/AskJoeGaucho



@AskJoeGaucho



@AskJoeGaucho

*Editor:*

**Brandilyn Gilbert**  
Academic Advisor

*College of Letters & Science*