UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

June 8, 2016
Jim Logan

Triumph and Gratitude

When Tamara Thacker got to UC Santa Barbara two years ago she was, uncharacteristically, a bit lost. After spending 12 years as a Navy corpsman and quickly conquering Moreno Valley College in Riverside, she found herself struggling academically and surrounded by a bunch of smart young people with whom she had little in common.

“It was difficult at first, I won’t even kid you,” Thacker conceded. “It was really difficult, and soon as I found my place I started to accelerate and just do better all around. And now that I’m leaving, I’ve got it down like nobody’s business.”

Indeed she does. Thacker, who goes by Tami, will receive her bachelor’s degree in anthropology June 11 in a moment equal parts triumph and gratitude. She made it, as she knew she would, thanks to good professors and her “place” — the campus’s Veterans Resource Center (VRC).

As most vets will acknowledge, the transition from service member to student can be daunting. The tidy discipline of military life gives way to what seems like casual chaos while being surrounded by people who have zero understanding of what it means to serve. That’s what Thacker, 41, found at UCSB. It didn’t help that she’d breezed through Moreno Valley College, where she founded a veterans club and earned two associates degrees.

“I graduated with honors from community college, and I had excellent grades,” she said. “I got here and my grade-point average dropped,” Thacker said. “It hurt my

heart that my GPA dropped, because I know I'm a good student. But you have a lot of competition here. They may be young, but they're smart."

Not the sort to feel sorry for herself, Thacker made two moves that turned things around: she switched majors and found the VRC. Originally a psychology major, "It was not what I anticipated," she noted. "I wanted more patient-care learning, and it was more statistical learning. So I needed something that was going to connect me with people, and when I took a cultural anthropology class and I learned so much about different cultures, I was done. That was it. It was where my heart should have been from Day 1 when I started at Moreno Valley College."

Next up was the VRC, where she found a home at last. "You walk around campus and you miss your duty station," Thacker said. "You miss all of your shipmates. I got out and went right to school. I needed to find my niche, I needed to find my place where I belonged. When I got there I found that, and I had my duty station, I had my shipmates. I felt comfortable. I could go there to socialize, I could go there to study, I could go there for help, I could go there when I'm having other issues, like I needed to talk to somebody."

Thacker is quick to praise Kevin Hagedorn, who oversees the VRC as veteran and military services coordinator. A former Army Ranger who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hagedorn knows what it's like for vets to make the transition from service to school. "Kevin's been there for me every single time I've had an issue," she said. "Anything that happened — good, bad or indifferent — Kevin was definitely there. I mean, he's really good to us. He makes himself available. He asks us what we need and he provides it. It's endless. 'What do you need?' He hustles for the resources for us. If there's something that we want or need, he finds a way to get it. Just all these little things that make your day better."

Hagedorn noted that Thacker jumped right in and worked to help her fellow vets. That generosity of spirit and eagerness to serve, he said, was the hallmark of her time on campus. "Tami represents everything great about the promise of higher education and military service," Hagedorn said. "She has made the best of both opportunities and at every step of the way has dedicated herself to serving her fellow sailors, marines, students and veterans. She has a big wonderful heart and everyone who meets her is touched by her compassion and her strength."

Many transfer students, especially those who are older, arrive at a university a little intimidated. It feels like a giant step up from community college, and they can wonder if they're good enough. Thacker admits she was nervous at first. UCSB was the big time. "I picked this school because it was rated so high that you couldn't help but say yes," she said.

The class work was hard, she said, but her professors made her feel like she belonged. "What I like about this school is the professors are kind of relaxed, that they speak to you like you're a grown-up person, like you're normal," she explained. "That is something I appreciate, because I feel like, 'Oh, I can breathe now.' I've learned to relax here. I've learned to be a little less military."

Thacker called Katharina Schreiber, a professor of anthropology, her biggest influence in the classroom. "I've had her a couple of times, and you get so much information the way she teaches you can't help but absorb it. She does it in the *right* way. When I walk out of this college, those are the things I'm going to remember, the things that she taught me."

Thacker plans to attend graduate school to earn a master's degree in social work. Her No. 1 choice of schools is Cal State San Bernardino, which "matches up perfectly" for what she wants in a program. "I'm going to try to get a job at the VA and make a difference in their mental health department."

Now, she said, as she gets ready to accept her diploma, "I feel accomplished. I feel like I did something, and something good."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.