UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

May 15, 2018
Nora Drake

Preserving the Personal

Makayla Rawlins has never visited Washington, D.C., much less been to one its internationally renowned museums. But that will change in June, when the UC Santa Barbara undergraduate student moves to the nation's capital for a summer internship with the Smithsonian Institution.

Rawlins, a descendent of the Luiseño tribe with a passion for indigenous art, will spend 10 weeks working with a mentor in the conservation department at the National Museum of the American Indian Cultural Resources Center. She is one of only 14 students to receive this internship opportunity.

For Rawlins, the conservation of indigenous artifacts is deeply personal. "My interest in museum conservation is connected to my passion for conserving native and indigenous artifacts and giving back to my community," she said. "I know that these artifacts can be stored incorrectly and handled without care, so I want to be able to take care of them with respect."

A junior at UCSB majoring in art history and biological anthropology — and minoring in American Indian and indigenous studies — Rawlins credits her interdisciplinary fields of study with preparing her for a busy summer of work and education. "One thing I love about my major is that it has connected me to so many other disciplines that have come to intrigue me," she commented. "Thanks to my art history major, I am able to take my knowledge of contextualization and of museum studies into this internship, as well as what I have learned about my own culture in the process."

During her internship, Rawlins hopes to further her independent research into Hopi Kachina dolls, and to use that research as the basis for a senior thesis project.

“I chose to apply to this particular museum because of my native heritage,” she said. “I wanted to be in a museum setting that is culturally enriched and will allow me to learn more about conservation at the same time. This also connects to my research interests because there is a plethora of archives in D.C. near this museum that I will have access to, and I will be able to further my own research.”

Rawlins began working with Hopi artifacts under the guidance of Amy Buono, a visiting professor in UCSB’s Department of History of Art & Architecture who specializes in Latin American art and heritage studies. Buono was instrumental in encouraging Rawlins to seek out the opportunity to work at the Smithsonian.

“I can’t think of a more deserving student to receive this internship,” said Buono. “Makayla has demonstrated a passion for combining scholarly research with community outreach and engagement. Her upcoming internship at the NMAI will involve her in the conservation of Native American art, connect her with a broader network of museum colleagues and mentors, and help jumpstart her burgeoning museum career and future work in Native American Studies.”

The Smithsonian Institution is the world’s largest museum and research complex, with 19 museums and galleries and the National Zoological Park. The total number of objects, works of art and specimens at the Smithsonian is estimated at nearly 138 million, including more than 127 million specimens and artifacts at the National Museum of Natural History.

Rawlins hopes that the skills she gains working at the Smithsonian will eventually help her to protect the artifacts of her own ancestors. “In the future,” she said, “I hope to work in a museum setting and work with my community’s artifacts, helping to conserve them to the best of my ability.”

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.