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Nora Drake

Confidence Boosted

Courtney Chan barely finished high school. She struggled with emotional and behavioral issues and always felt out of place. She was even asked to skip her graduation ceremony. “I was brushed aside and unfairly labeled as a troublemaker,” she said. “The parts of me that needed to be nurtured didn’t get what they needed.”

Eleven years later, perhaps no one is more surprised than Chan herself that she has gone on to flourish in an academic setting. In addition to receiving a B.A. in psychological and brain sciences (with a labor studies minor), Chan will represent the class of 2020 as student speaker when UC Santa Barbara’s virtual celebration goes live June 13 at 9 a.m. Her remarks will be delivered via recorded video now and then again at an in-person ceremony to take place at a later date, when students and their families and friends can be welcomed back to campus.

“I’ve never been on a graduation stage, period,” Chan said. “I was always told that college wouldn’t work for me, so it’s very surreal to be able to represent so many students — even though they are different from me — as a speaker.”

As someone who is a little older than the traditional graduate and took a few detours on her path to a college degree, Chan is keen to share her hard-earned wisdom.

Born in Canada to parents who emigrated from Hong Kong, Chan and her family eventually settled in San Gabriel, California. “I went to a medium-small high school

in an affluent community where no one really was a bad kid," she said, noting that teachers and administrators seemed ill-equipped to help her when she started acting out. "Instead of supporting me, they put me in remedial classes even though I wasn't a remedial student academically," Chan said.

She was a challenge for her parents, too. Though she is the youngest of four children, Chan acknowledges that her particular teenage struggles threw her family for a loop. "My brother and sisters are all brilliant. They had their issues but ultimately went on to colleges like UC Berkeley and USC," she said. "I think it was the first time my parents had to deal with someone with emotional issues and they didn't know what to do."

With less than stellar grades and no real sense of direction, Chan enrolled in cosmetology school after completing her high school coursework. She went on to become a nail technician and a hair assistant at a spa, where she worked for a couple years. She said that she would likely still be working there, if not for a number of friends who told her she should give Pasadena City College a try.

"I had a lot of friends who were at community college and it sounded like so much fun," she said. "My first semester there I only took one class — Chinese I — but I had such a good time that I started signing up for more classes."

It was enjoyable classes (one focused on comic books was particularly memorable) that kept her progressing, Chan confesses, as opposed to any concrete plan for her future. But her strategy of taking stimulating courses paid off, as she inadvertently acquired enough credits to transfer to a four-year university.

Chan knew she wanted to study some sort of psychology. She was drawn to UC Santa Barbara because of the stellar reputation of its Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences. Still, she says she was surprised to get in, and unsure if she would like the school overall. "I'm low energy and I don't want to go surf after class," she said with a smile. "I wasn't sure I would fit into the culture."

After initially struggling to adjust to the quarter system, Chan eventually found her footing, thanks to some faculty members who became her mentors. She credits Vanessa Woods and Diane Mackie, both professors of psychological and brain science, for believing in her even when she was unsure of herself. "Dr. Woods does

what she calls intrusive mentoring," Chan explained, "which is gently pushing you toward something she thinks you're good at. She is an open door who will answer any questions."

Chan participated in research in Mackie's Social Evaluations and Emotions Lab, an experience she found revelatory. "Every time I would go to Professor Mackie's lab, it was so exciting to be there," she said. "I worked on a thesis with her and got a grant to do an independent research project. It was so thrilling to be doing work on that."

"It's so nerdy to say," she continued, "but I felt like I wanted to analyze that data for the rest of my life. It felt effortless."

Besides finding her academic passion, Chan was pleased to discover that almost every person she encountered was friendly and welcoming to her, even though she was a transfer student. "It's interesting because I started off thinking that I wouldn't be able to join the UCSB community," she said, "but now I feel very connected to it."

It's a connection that has been vital during the global outbreak of COVID-19, as Chan has maintained her social and academic life remotely.

"Even though it's ending in a way that's not ideal, UCSB is such a tight-knit community that I am still in constant contact with my friends and professors," she said. She has sought comfort and advice from her fellow Gauchos as she excitedly plots her next move. Chan plans to take the GRE this summer, and aims to continue her studies in a graduate program for either psychology or public health.

In a twist she never predicted on her long journey to a college degree, she is not only looking forward to the future, but finally feels ready for whatever it may bring. "Being at UCSB has boosted my confidence," she said. "Now I know that if I come across a problem that I've never seen before, I have the tools that I need to figure it out. I've always felt unprepared for what comes next, and that was very scary for me. But after UCSB, it feels like even though I'm unprepared, I can handle it. Now it feels more exciting than scary."

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.