UC SANTA BARBARA

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Shelly Leachman

Staying Curious

Santa Barbara is a long way from Nebraska. And Nebraska is an exceptionally a long way from Iran and Malaysia. But all four locations are integral to the personal evolution of aspiring educator and activist Aryana Kamelian.

The new UC Santa Barbara graduate — whose double degrees in psychology and in political science will be officially minted when the Class of 2020 Virtual Celebration goes live June 13 — was raised in Nebraska by her Iranian father and Malaysian mother. It was a formative experience in multiple ways.

“Growing up the daughter of two immigrants definitely made me stronger, it made me have thicker skin,” Kamelian said. “But I think what I appreciate the most is that it made me more empathetic.

“In retrospect, I know I hadn’t put much thought into my identity while I was in high school,” she added. “I didn’t feel Iranian or Malaysian — I just felt like I was a person of color. Once I got to college in a new place, I felt like I had the opportunity, and in some ways the obligation, to learn more about identity.”

And so she did.

Following her first year at UC Santa Barbara, Kamelian landed a research position in a campus lab that studies, of all things, identity. Her first big project? A study of “ambiguous raced individuals.”

“That opened my eyes,” Kamelian said. “I had this research that was describing exactly how I had been feeling in high school and I think this was the first time I was starting to understand a part of my identity. Ever since then I have been really interested in how our identities intersect with one another and how our identities impact our different experiences.”

Kamelian has brought her identity — and become more closely connected to it, she said — through the many diverse experiences she’s been afforded during her years at UCSB.

Working at a public health clinic in Nicaragua the summer after her freshman year provided her some eye-opening perspective on Americans and how much there is to learn from “countries we’ve written off as ‘underdeveloped.’”

A summer spent with a professional journalism organization in Berlin, where she was assigned stories about illiteracy and the assimilation of Vietnamese within Germany, was enlightening, too. Kamelian’s quarter in Washington D.C., working in the House of Representatives, gave her unique insight into the political process that was instructive and, in a way, inspiring.

“I believe our identities are inherently political,” she said. “Our identities and experiences drive our political actions, whether that’s participating in the Black Lives Matter movement or voting for a particular candidate. A lot of it has to do with our perceptions of ourselves and also, importantly, how others view us.

“I could go on and on forever about all the things these experiences taught me, but collectively, the more I learned the more I realized how much more there is to learn,” Kamelian added. “It’s just pushed me to stay curious and keep an open mind.”

It’s with that curiosity and openness that Kamelian will soon move to New York. Committed to the 2020 Teach for America Corps, she’s been assigned to teach chemistry at a charter high school in the Bronx. Also in her sites: a master’s degree in education and, ultimately, “a career in education policy,” she said. “My dream job is to be the Secretary of Education.”

“Education really did change my life in ways that I haven’t been able to put into words,” Kamelian continued. “I spent a lot of time volunteering and organizing fundraisers or community activities, and I realized that if I help educate someone, or empower someone to pursue an education, that person will have a lifetime of

opportunities. And they will know how to advocate for themselves and their community. Right now, education is not a right in this country and the truth in that can be seen in the inequity in our school systems in every city in the United States. I’m going to dedicate my life to changing that.”

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.