UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

April 21, 2021
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To Educate and Inspire

Imagine having a one-on-one cello masterclass with Yo-Yo Ma, or running lines with lauded actor and playwright Anna Deavere Smith. Talk about potentially transformative occasions.

Providing such rare opportunities has become standard operating procedure at UC Santa Barbara Arts & Lectures, by way of its educational outreach program. The organization offers an extensive slate of specialized engagement events with many of their top performers, speakers and other presenters throughout the academic year.

“We know that these are life-changing experiences that will stay with students forever,” said Celesta M. Billeci, the Miller McCune Executive Director of Arts & Lectures. “That’s why Arts & Lectures makes it a priority to bring our students in touch with our visiting artists and speakers. Education has always been integral to our program, and we’ve continued our commitment to student engagement throughout the pandemic. We’ll continue to grow this program to make sure that our students are not only getting to experience seeing A&L speakers and artists in the theater, but also that each event creates a lasting impact in the lives of our students.”

These efforts have a rich history within A&L, but have expanded significantly under Billeci to include not only UCSB students, but also local K-12 populations and the community at large, as well as ¡Viva el Arte de Santa Bárbara!, a countywide, collaborative arts and cultural outreach program.

“Education and community engagement are a key part of A&L’s work,” said Loribeth Gregory-Beck, director of education and community engagement, who previously led education programming for the LA Philharmonic. “We take the model of bringing artists and speakers to campus one step further by engaging students and community members with the people we present.

“Our education programs aim to foster a more connected, thoughtful and compassionate community through diverse ideas, arts and cultural encounters that are accessible for all,” she added. “To achieve this, we engage learners of all ages in inspirational and dynamic learning opportunities across classrooms, campus and community spaces (including virtual spaces this year!). We connect students with some of the world’s best and brightest artists and thought leaders. We open doors to new ideas and experiences. We bring people together.”

Prime example: legendary dancer Archie Burnett and choreographer and b-girl Ephrat Asherie will put on a free, virtual movement workshop for students and the public Thursday, April 22, following Asherie’s A&L performance earlier that week.

Also this spring, building on A&L’s ongoing “Race to Justice” series, students were front and center at several small roundtable events meant to foster conversation about key issues. These discussions — open to all UCSB students, faculty and staff members to observe — engaged students from across the disciplines in active dialogue with thought leaders including Dr. Mae Jamison, a physician, engineer and former NASA astronaut; sociopolitical comedian and CNN host W. Kamau Bell; and Robert Bullard, widely known as “the father of environmental justice.”

According to Gregory-Beck, most A&L artists or speakers have some educational component to their residency — whether it’s a masterclass with UCSB students, a K-12 field trip, or a community-based workshop.

“We start by talking with artists and speakers about what they have to offer and from there reach out to whomever we are working with about how the opportunity can best serve their students,” she explained. “On campus, this often means working closely with faculty, student leaders or key staff members. Developing events in collaboration is important when engaging students in meaningful, accessible ways.”

To wit, this means maximizing educational experiences through close-up interactions with world-class artists and thinkers, who engage in workshops, Q&As,

masterclasses, lecture demonstrations, roundtable panels and more.

“Across the arts, sciences and the humanities, students glean inspiration in intimate settings and connect more deeply with their personal and academic experiences,” said Gregory-Beck. “UCSB students in particular have the chance to take what they’ve learned in the classroom and engage with professionals who have a public-facing presence in their industry. When we have conversations that bring together professors and A&L guests, it’s an incredible opportunity for students to hear two professionals in dialogue about their field. Students also have the chance to pose questions and drive the conversation.”

Meanwhile, K-12 students who might not otherwise visit UCSB — or even consider college as an option — have had the opportunity to come to campus and explore arts and ideas from world-renown artists and speakers. On occasion, those presenters have spent time on the students’ home campuses as well.

In all cases, noted Gregory-Beck, “it fosters a sense of connection with something bigger than ourselves. No matter where we are at in our careers or lives, we’re connected through the passions we pursue.”

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.