

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

March 14, 2022

Sonia Fernandez

The Best of Both Worlds

The little-known music written by political prisoners of the Soviet Union. How the walls in Vincent Van Gogh's painting, "The Bedroom," changed from the original purple to blue. These were just two of the fascinating research topics discussed at UC Santa Barbara's Grad Slam 2022 Final Round. Ten finalists took to the stage and rocked the audience with three-minute talks on such other subjects as runaway seaweed, sleep chronotypes and shaky internet connections — the latter done in verse.

But it was Geoff Meyerhof's presentation about a protein in the eye of fruit flies and how it might yield clues to, and perhaps better control of, our circadian systems that won the grand prize of \$5,000. Meyerhof, a graduate student researcher in the lab of neurobiologist Craig Montell, shares the discovery of that protein with fellow Grad Slam finalist Menglin Li.

"She deserves a ton of credit for making our project what it is," Meyerhof said of Li, adding that making the finals alongside his research colleague was one of the best parts of Grad Slam. That and winning, of course.

"It felt great to win. Honestly, public speaking makes me super nervous, so just finishing the event was a huge relief," Meyerhof added with a laugh. "It was a lot of fun to participate in Grad Slam. I'm really passionate about the research I'm doing, and it's nice to see there is public interest in it, too."

Back and better than ever, this year's Grad Slam finals are the first to return to the stage since the start of the pandemic. The contest was cancelled in 2020 at the outset of the nationwide shutdowns and reappeared virtually in 2021. This year's contest was a mix of both, said Leila Rupp, Interim Dean of the Graduate Division and Grad Slam finals host.

"This year we decided to do the first round virtually, with students making videos, since at least some students last year preferred the virtual format to the anxieties of performing live," she said. The finalists, she continued, are competing in both modes, "a unique challenge and great preparation for confronting our increasingly hybrid world."

Both inside Campbell Hall and via YouTube livestream, the finals excitement was real as supporters cheered their favorite competitors, asked questions via Twitter and YouTube chat and voted via QR code. Presenters introduced themselves with an introductory video before giving live three-minute presentations. Judges evaluated the presentations based on qualities such as clarity, organization, delivery and visuals.

In addition to Meyerhof (biomolecular science and engineering) and Li (molecular, cellular and developmental biology), the finalists and their home departments were: Alexandra Birch (music and history); Krystal Vo (chemistry and biochemistry); Alyssa Lawson (psychological and brain sciences); Taruna Schuelke (ecology, evolution and marine biology); Skyler Palatnick (physics); Siena McKim (ecology, evolution and marine biology); Esther Showalter (computer science); and Sophia Bailey (chemistry and biochemistry).

Runners-up Bailey and Lawson each took home \$2,500 for their presentations on advanced biomimetic materials and the positivity principle in teaching, respectively. Palatnick was a favorite with the crowd, earning him the \$1,500 People's Choice Award for his talk on imaging exoplanets with metasurfaces.

Meyerhof, with his grand prize win in hand, now moves to the systemwide competition, set for May 6 in San Francisco and hosted by UC President Dr. Michael V. Drake. Those interested in viewing and voting can do so via <https://gradslam.universityofcalifornia.edu/>.

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.