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UCSB Staff

From rental listings to dispute resolution, housing officer Jennifer Ja Birchim focuses on student support

When four rental apartments in Isla Vista were evacuated briefly after heavy rains caused a deck collapse in early 2024, Jennifer Ja Birchim made her way to the site almost immediately. Although the units are landlord-owned and only partially occupied by UC Santa Barbara students, she made a quick decision.

“It was better for me to have an eye on the scene,” said Birchim, a long-term staff member of the [University and Community Housing Services Office \(UCHS\)](#). “A huge part of my work is wanting to be there and supporting the students.”

In routine student housing issues as well as in emergency situations, Birchim is a valuable resource, assisting students in creating and maintaining stable and comfortable living situations. It’s work, she said, that has roots in her previous profession.

“As a former teacher, I saw my work in education revolving around having my own classroom,” said Birchim. “My role at UC Santa Barbara has evolved in a really interesting direction and I realized I am still a teacher just in a totally different way. I am now teaching parents, students and staff – providing a lot of support and guidance while directing them to find their best answers.”

The UCHS is a one-stop resource for rental housing information and dispute resolution, providing services such as guidance regarding rental rights and responsibilities and educational workshops. Birchim is one of three managers overseeing all of the university-owned properties, which include residence halls, undergraduate and graduate apartments, family student housing, and community housing services in Isla Vista, Goleta and Santa Barbara. She also works proactively with Isla Vista property owners, developing sustainable relationships that translate into positive living experiences for students. Birchim continues to grow professionally while being challenged in the work she is doing — and she does it while giving her all to her family.

“It can be difficult – being a full-time parent and a full-time employee,” she said. “When you mix the two it seems like an impossible task. But it has never felt impossible in my position here at UCSB because there is just so much support. Especially in Housing, as a working parent, I never feel that I have to put my job as a parent second or that I am being pulled away from my family.”

When the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread globally in early 2020, it brought with it much uncertainty as the campus community worked to keep daily operations up and running. Students who were able to return home quickly left campus, leaving everything behind. A two-week shutdown turned into two years, and the Housing Services Office was left to navigate uncharted waters. Students were eventually reunited with their belongings, parent questions were addressed with sympathy and concern, and staff from various departments began working together in new ways that solidified strong connections with each other and the students needing support.

“One of the silver linings from the pandemic was increased connections between departments,” Birchim said. “And the way our Housing team came together during the pandemic was really unprecedented. Everything was constantly changing and there was a lot of fear in the unpredictability. We were all like kelp – super rooted while flowing in whichever direction we were taken that day.”

Since the pandemic, Birchim has discovered an increased importance in the work she does around mediating roommate conflicts, not as an arbitrator but as someone holding space in a room to help students reach solutions. It is a priority for her, she said, to help students feel supported and grounded, with access to the tools they need to start a dialogue and move forward with positive momentum.

“Post-COVID especially, I see students lacking the ability to resolve conflict,” said Birchim. “I help students become empowered so that they can have conversations with their roommates. I describe this type of situation as the ‘garbage pile’ because the issue continues to get bigger while everyone tiptoes around it. Meanwhile, it still smells and no one is addressing it. I help students create opportunities to share how they are feeling, which is something that does not happen as often as it should.”

As a graduate of UC Santa Barbara, Birchim recalls her time as a Gaucho fondly. She enjoyed living in Isla Vista, being near the ocean and spending time with her sister (who was a senior at UCSB when she was a freshman). These joyful memories inform her work today, as she continues to build and foster relationships and meaningful connections while providing housing opportunities that nurture the vibrancy of the diverse student population.

“I love all of it. I really do,” she said. “I love the work that I am doing and I love my staff like my family. I am inspired every day by the people I work with and grateful for the trust placed in me to try new things and do my job well. I cannot imagine leaving this community - I have traveled all over the world and there is nothing like coming home.”

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