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Sarah Kidwell

Sign me up: staff stalwarts help keep commencement running

Claudia Kashin is no stranger to UC Santa Barbara commencements. She donned her cap and gown for both her bachelors and master's degree ceremonies here in 1986 and 1993, respectively, and also attended her sister's 1988 UCSB graduation. Now a 30-year employee of the university, she's received her annual dose of pomp and circumstance by pitching in at nearly every commencement weekend since 2002.

"There's such an exciting feeling in the air," she shared. "Being among the excited family members, the excited students — seeing the joy and happiness and pride."

During the rest of the year Kashin works as a senior academic personnel analyst for the Humanities and Fine Arts Division in the College of Letters and Science, helping to keep administrative matters running smoothly. Her commencement work, previously as a staff marshal and in recent years helping to robe faculty participants, offers a hands-on respite from paperwork, she said.

"I love seeing the faculty members in my division but it's also a chance to see the ones in other divisions — the ones whose work I read about in *The Current*."

Zen Perez, a financial analyst in the Offices of Development and Public Affairs & Communications, has been assisting at UCSB's outside(d) commencement since 2008. A campus friend encouraged her to try it out and Perez liked the idea of being a part of what happens behind the scenes. She still does. Like Kashin, she can also

be found in Hatlen Theater, helping get faculty and graduate students into their robes and ceremonial hoods, an effort she now leads.

“Every year, I’m there,” Perez said, as her 16th commencement approaches. “It’s such a happy occasion and such a community event.” And, she points out, “It’s why we do what we do at a university. Commencement is a time to celebrate our students.”

As director of Event Management & Protocol, it’s Gretchen Falvo’s job to oversee the enormous logistical feat that characterizes commencement weekend each year, with its seven ceremonies over three days, hundreds of graduates and the thousands of family members and friends on hand to witness and celebrate.

“My wonderful staff – I mean, there are only three of us – but we love doing this and we want to make sure people are happy and safe, that’s really our goal,” Falvo said.

That’s why the myriad extra staff helpers who sign up to assist during the weekend are critical, said Falvo. Their roles range from helping guests park and directing them to seats, to lining up students to wiping off damp seats, just to name a few. The all-hands-on-deck approach has worked each year, and Falvo is grateful for the several hundred staffers who show up to lend a hand and their time.

“We bow down to them and praise them,” she said. “We couldn’t do it without them.”

Falvo is particularly grateful to the returners, like Kashin and Perez, who know their job well from previous years and don’t need much training. A little institutional history, she added, goes a long way on a busy weekend.

Trudy Cook fits that bill. After eight years on campus, she retired from UCSB 18 years ago but still comes back each year to help staff the information booth. “I want to be one of the first volunteers who shows up and I like to stay as long as I’m needed. And I get to see my old friends – it’s like a reunion,” said Cook.

A relative newcomer to commencement work is Kevin Schmidt, a director for network and communication services in Information Technology Services, and a university employee for more than 20 years. He admits he mostly ignored the

repeated emails over the years soliciting staff help for the big event, but said that the pandemic gave him a new perspective.

“I felt badly for our students who weren’t able to have a proper commencement,” he said. That prompted a change of heart — and he signed up.

For the past three years he’s worked as a staff marshal, donning a black robe and moving graduates from the Thunderdome, where they assemble, down to the commencement green. He hopes to do it again this year, though he says he’s open to any assignment.

“I check all the boxes,” indicating he’ll go wherever they need him, Schmidt said. “I believe it’s really worthwhile to give students a good send off to this next stage of their lives.”

Some staff helpers are on hand for the whole weekend, while others sign up for a single ceremony. Perez encourages the uninitiated to “take a shift and try it out.”

She explained that it can be a little stressful getting everyone robed and in motion for each ceremony but that “once the music starts, we get a break. You can go out there and see everything, and see how happy everyone is, and it’s a great feeling!”

Click [here](#) for details on Commencement 2024, scheduled for June-14-16.

Click [here](#) to sign up to work at Commencement 2024.

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