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Visibility, inclusivity and community: UCSB Women’s Center celebrates 50 years

Lily Niven was only in eighth grade during the 2016 presidential election. She hadn’t been paying much attention — again, eighth grade — until Hillary Clinton lost to Donald Trump.

“I remember my older sister being really, really upset and I didn't understand why,” the soon-to-graduate UC Santa Barbara senior said recently. “I didn’t fully grasp the impact of what had happened. But that really woke me up to politics for the first time.”

It also served as a catalyst for her future focus: working with and helping other women.

Today Niven is a student staff member at the UCSB Women’s Center, which after the 2024 presidential election held an event they dubbed “Primal Scream.” She’d come full circle from her sister’s reaction to her own.

“It was this spontaneous gathering —‘come scream with us’ — that is the perfect example of the environment that’s been built here,” said Niven, a political science and English double-major next bound for law school. “It’s not just encouraging, and inspiring. It’s a really safe space to talk about politics, your struggles as a student or

in life, or anything. To me it’s the gold standard.”

The Women’s Center is currently celebrating its 50th year on campus. An anniversary gala to be held in the Student Resource Building is slated for Friday, April 4 — exactly 50 years to the day after its grand opening. The campus community is invited to attend; RSVPs are requested.

Five decades on, the support the center provides, and the community it has cultivated, are as crucial now as they were in 1975.

“Though some things have changed, there is still this commitment to why we need a space like this and why we need to be having these conversations with students and with the community,” said Betsy Kaminski, director of women, gender and sexual equity, who oversees the Women’s Center and the Non-Traditional Student Resource Center. “I think right now, at this point in history and in the larger political climate, it is important to be visible and to show that we have people who really care that we’re here and that want to be sure that we continue.

“The conversation has really grown since the center was created,” she added. “But those core values of ending sexism, ending oppression, building community and providing safe space — those are unchanged."

Over 50 years, it’s just been a change of strategy.

Originally founded on the goals of representation and support for women on campus, the center’s mission has evolved to keep pace with the needs of an increasingly diverse student population amidst a rapidly changing social landscape. The Women’s Center today takes an intersectional, critical approach to combating systemic oppression and sexism, with programs, activities, resources and initiatives all co-created with students — and all designed to meet the moment.

The center offers an array of programming and resources, from workshops and small group discussions to research talks and large-scale events featuring prominent speakers. It’s got a study lounge, a library, a massage chair, even healthy snacks on hand for students. Its most prominent feature, though: a come-one, come-all, open-arms ethos.

“The center is not only for people that identify as women. We’re open to everybody that wants to engage with these ideas and that wants to think about how gender shapes our world,” said Viviana Valle Gomez, associate director of the center and a doctoral student in feminist studies. “While we still have women in the name, everyone is affected by these problems and these structures, and we are using feminism as an approach to tackle them. The mission now really is to create more openness to talk about these things, to engage with other people about these ideas, to expand your mind and build community.”

As Kaminski and Gomez look back, they’re also looking ahead. Thinking about the future of the Women’s Center, they share a hope for growing support across campus — and for expanded opportunities with the world beyond.

“This is just a starting point for a lot of our students,” Gomez said. “We want to prepare them for what’s next, not just silo them in the context of the university. At the end of the day, it’s about showing up for people — physically, financially, emotionally — in whatever way is possible. We need to be active in the ways that we support each other.

“Every new year, every new decade, every new administration, teaches us how to continue adapting our social justice-oriented strategies for how best to do that.”

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