

Triton Alumnae: Making an Impact

In honor of Women's History month, this week is featuring an occasional series of stories highlighting UC San Diego alumnae and the difference they are making in the world

Elizabeth Phu, School of Global Policy and Strategy '00



From left, President Barack Obama, Elizabeth Phu and her family in the Oval Office. Photo courtesy Elizabeth Phu.

She works as ... director of space engagement policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense in Washington

The best part of her day is ... coming home to see her kids.

Advice every UC San Diego student should know is ... “kindness, collegiality and sincerity will serve you well. You never know who will run in your circles in the future. Be nice to everyone.”

As many mothers do, Elizabeth Phu sincerely considered scaling back her career commitments to dedicate more time toward her growing family after her first-born came along.

That was before the opportunity of a lifetime came up: The chance to directly sculpt President Barack Obama’s

Southeast Asia policies and strategies.

“I put my reservations aside, overcame my anxiety and jumped at the chance to return to the White House,” said Phu, who formerly held posts in the Department of Defense and National Security Council. “I never regretted it.”

And she even has the photos to prove it—snapshots with her family in the Oval Office and selfies with President Obama in his limo, to name a few.

As well, she is no less dedicated to her family and has even scaled up her career from a solely Asia focus to that of outer space.

As director of space engagement policy, she shepherds partnerships with United States allies around the globe to improve space capabilities. Phu continues to hold the position under the new presidential administration.

“Outer space is increasingly recognized for its criticality in everything we as a department and as a government do, from forecasting weather in support of military operations, to supporting intelligence activities, to supporting communications among our armed forces,” Phu explained. “My job is to work with those partners and allies to do just that.”



Phu poses for a photo with President Obama inside his limo nicknamed “the Beast.” Photo courtesy Elizabeth Phu.

The work, Phu said, reminds her a little of her time at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy in that it entails a bit of teamwork.

“All of those group projects were fantastic training on how to collaborate and maximize everyone’s strengths,” she said.

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