

Class Acts: 2020 Grads Step into the Spotlight

They've worked hard, made an impact, inspired their communities, and most of all, they've demonstrated incredible resilience in challenging times. Help celebrate the class of 2020's remarkable achievements by reading their stories of hope as these new alumni create better futures for themselves and the world.

Playwright Cynthia Ochoa Reconnects with Passion for Theatre while Earning a Degree

Major: Theatre

College: Sixth College

Growing up in Querétaro, Mexico, a city where theatre is a rich cultural tradition, Cynthia Ochoa has always been passionate about theatre. As a child, she'd always imagine herself onstage as an actor or make up stories where she'd cast her younger sister in her productions. "I believe that's when I first started to create in order to understand myself and the world around me," said Ochoa. Unfortunately, she had to leave school at sixteen in order to help her family make ends meet and she was unable to pursue her love of the arts. Decades later, after having three kids and a moving to a different country, she found that her passion for theatre was almost extinct, like a candle about to be snuffed out. In order to rescue that tiny flame still deep inside her, Ochoa enrolled in a General Education Development (GED) program. "It was cathartic," she said. "Once I started, I couldn't stop. Getting my GED wasn't enough anymore." At Southwestern College, she began taking acting classes and fell in love with theatre again. She applied to UC San Diego after hearing about great opportunities within the Theatre and Dance Department like the Wagner New Play Festival. In 2018, she was able to transfer with full financial support, thanks to the [Chancellor's Associates Scholarship](#), which is awarded to eligible students, including those who are first-generation like Ochoa.



At UC San Diego, Ochoa was able to explore her personal background as an immigrant to advocate for social justice within her community, especially as she became focused on playwriting. She wrote about it in her play “Separateland,” where it was selected last winter as part of LAB, a laboratory of exploratory works designed for students to create their own productions from the ground up. “I like to write plays that intend to call for social change,” she said. “We are experiencing times of uncertainty and there’s a need for us to reflect on why we’ve lost the most basic human values like compassion, empathy and love.” Her play “Separateland” focuses on the lives of five immigrant children that were separated from their families under the current administration. Ochoa’s play was nominated by the Theatre and Dance Department at UC San Diego to the Fifth Annual Undergraduate Playwrights Workshop at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

After graduation, Ochoa plans to continue her studies and apply for graduate school next year. “I want to keep writing and dreaming aloud,” she said. “I’m doing my best to keep moving forward.”

Varun Govil: Undergraduate Expanding the Horizons of Cancer Diagnosis

Major: Bioengineering: Biotechnology

College: Earl Warren College

When Varun Govil was in high school, he became fascinated with biology after learning about the large-scale living systems and how they were all integrated together. In particular, he was interested in cancer mechanisms, especially the Darwinian evolution of tumors, and the research process scientists have utilized in their attempts to defeat cancer. Combining his interests in engineering and the ability to experiment with biological systems in the lab led him to study bioengineering at UC San Diego. Govil was awarded the Irwin Jacobs Scholarship, a full merit-based scholarship for top engineering students, which has opened up other avenues for mentorship and growth as an undergraduate researcher.



Govil was involved with several synthetic biology research projects during his time as undergraduate, including working in the School of Medicine to help develop and patent Epinoma, a blood test to screen for liver cancer. “It’s by far one of the most intriguing ideas that I’ve been fortunate to work on,” he said. “Our discussions with various oncologists and cancer patients highlighted some of the most pressing challenges in cancer diagnostics today, mainly the issue of cost, invasiveness and limited accuracy.” Those discussions were used as a launching point to create a protein that could be applied to blood samples and give off a fluorescent signal that would then be used to assess patient health.

Govil led a team of 11 undergraduates as part of an independent research team in the School of Medicine and together, they built a set of unique machine learning algorithms to identify the biomarkers for liver cancer. The algorithms characterized the properties of a nanomaterial for better sensitivity and created a digital platform for patients to monitor their own health. “Looking back, I think our team was really driven by the desire to positively impact others’ lives and the desire to just perform good science,” Govil said.

In 2018, Govil and his team earned a second-place win at the International Genetically Engineered Machine (iGEM) competition earned additional funding to keep developing Epinoma for the appropriate levels of sensitivity. “For me, being a part of this competition was just absolutely incredible,” he said. “It was so exciting to see our vision grow from an initial set of experiments to unfolding into a much more useful technology.”

Govil was also awarded the Strauss Scholarship, a generous \$15,000 grant, to develop Verde Lux, a pilot program for low-income and underprivileged San Diego high school students with an emphasis on STEM engagement. Working together with a team, he researched relevant case studies to build a virtual classroom. Their primary focus is providing underrepresented minority students the opportunities to pursue nontraditional research pathways and get them excited about a career in science and engineering. “It’s been really rewarding to be able to share the joy of science and learning with others,” Govil said. “It’s given me a completely different perspective about educational pedagogy.” Verde Lux was recognized by Imperial College’s School of Business QSReimagine Education competition for its innovation in the education space and shortlisted for the Top K12 Project award.

After graduation, Govil will be attending the Masters in Translational Medicine program, a joint program between UC San Francisco and UC Berkeley, where he hopes to continue working on next-generation cancer diagnostics and gain hands-on experience with medtech devices. “I think that we as scientists and researchers should realize the enormous privilege we have been given, to be at the front lines of driving change, and to make the most of that opportunity,” he said.

Juan Reynoso Creates Visibility and Awareness for Marginalized Identities through Education

Department: Education Studies

This spring, Juan Reynoso will graduate from UC San Diego’s Department of Education Studies with a master’s in education and a special education teaching credential. Prior to his acceptance to UC San Diego, he worked as an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter and paraeducator in the San Diego county. As he began to find his footing in the public education arena, Reynoso was drawn to teaching. He researched and interviewed educators working in the field and even reached out to close Deaf friends to get their perspective and feedback on him becoming a teacher for the Deaf. “UC San Diego

offered me exactly what I needed to be prepared for becoming a public-school teacher working in special education,” he said. “Their masters and credential program in ASL-bilingual is the only program of its kind so I had to apply.”

Before enrolling at UC San Diego, Reynoso earned his bachelors from William Woods University in Fulton Missouri; however, his path through higher education was not a smooth one. It took him nearly 15 years to complete his undergraduate studies. He first enrolled in community college, dropped out, enrolled again before pursuing a trade occupation that provided him and his family with more financial stability. “It wasn’t until I turned 30 when I had a moment of realization,” he said.

“I had lived in the shadows of my own self-doubt and disappointment for years and told myself it was time to stop making excuses.” He found his way to Palomar College’s American Sign Language and English Interpretation Program before transferring to William Woods University in Fulton, Missouri to complete his undergraduate degree. When he came to UC San Diego, voices of self-doubt soon began to resurface. “I would ask myself, ‘Do I really belong here?’ I was much older than my peers and the only indigenous person in my cohort,” he said. “As a member of the Kumeyaay nation, the original people of this territory, it’s not always easy to look out on the community landscape and see so little of you represented within it.” Because UC San Diego sits on the land of his Kumeyaay ancestors, Reynoso has found great strength and pride in meeting other indigenous peers on campus, collectivity working to create visibility on this campus.

Working in the Deaf community has been one of the most rewarding and eye-opening experiences Reynoso has had. He became interested in ASL in high school and always wanted to do something with it, but he never quite felt like he was good enough to do so. “It wasn’t until I entered my professional interpreting program at Palomar College that I truly realized how fascinating and demanding the field of interpreting was,” he said. “I quickly found myself attending Deaf events and building lifelong friendships with a community that shares the narrative of marginalization.” ASL has opened the doors for Reynoso to become an ally for the community, advocating for accessibility and disability rights. Because ASL interpreting requires both linguistic and cultural competency, it takes more than just knowing how to sign. “Working as an ASL interpreter is indeed a professional occupation; however, it extends beyond the premise of clocking in and out,” said Reynoso. “There is a shared sense of community and respect for those who value ASL and other natural signed languages. Being an interpreter has allowed me to be a part of the Deaf community, an experience I’m so appreciative of.”



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After graduation, Reynoso plans to apply for work in San Diego county as a teacher of the Deaf. He also wants to continue his education further by applying to UC San Diego's Doctoral program. "I hope to represent my community by advocating for equitable practices in education for all persons and begin designing a framework that focuses on indigenous cultures, accessibility and deafness," he said.

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