

UC SANTA BARBARA

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‘Pretty Lucky Baby Boomers’

They arrived as wide-eyed teenagers, eager to learn about the world. They left as seasoned activists, skilled in the art of protest and social change. On Saturday, April 27, members of the UC Santa Barbara Class of 1969 came back to campus for their 50th reunion — an opportunity to reminisce, catch up and contemplate their legacy. The luncheon and panel discussion were among the Gaucho-related gatherings that marked the 2019 All Gaucho Reunion.

“We were pretty lucky baby boomers,” former Associated Student (AS) president and reunion committee co-chair Paul Sweet said to the attendees gathered on the patio of The Club & Guest House (formerly the Faculty Club). More than 100 people came from near and far to celebrate a half-century as Gauchos, visit old haunts, revive running jokes, present a class gift and reconnect after many years away.

And lucky they were. Riding in on a wave of optimism brought on by technological advances, an intensifying space race, a robust economy and, by today’s standards, shockingly low tuition, members of the Class of 1969 got their first taste of independence flavored with sun and sand, and set to the music of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

But the idyllic life wouldn’t last for long. In a few short years many of the students who began their college years in the mid 1960s would respond to the turmoil that had begun rocking the nation and the world.

“We started opening our eyes to new people, new ways of life, new academic pursuits,” said reunion committee co-chair and UCSB Foundation trustee Marilyn Lee Schneider. “And then we were hit by that amazing train called social activism and it really changed us forever and was for the good. It became part of our DNA.”

The country’s escalating involvement in the war in Vietnam hung over the students, many of whom likely knew someone who had been conscripted — or, perhaps, had avoided the draft themselves. In addition, racial and political tensions were escalating — and more so following the assassinations of Martin Luther King and, later, Robert F. Kennedy — sparking riots, demonstrations and marches.

It was in this crucible of social unrest that the Class of ’69 found its place in the movements that would become this class’s defining feature. Some students brought their activist inclinations with them, while others became active through exposure and coming-of-age.

As a result, UC Santa Barbara became a hotspot for protests and demonstrations. These not only led to the founding of the Black studies department, but also contributed to the establishment of the Chicano and Chicana studies department in 1969, and opened the door to the creation of the Asian American studies department, all of which were borne out of demands by students of color at the mostly white campus.

But the Vietnam War and nationwide social unrest were not the only catalysts for activism; many students were spurred to action by local, student-centered problems as well, including lack of housing, inadequate infrastructure, predatory landlords, and food insecurity.

By the time their senior year rolled around, the activists of ’69 were equipped to respond to one of the biggest local crises of the time: the blowout of Union Oil’s Platform A in the Santa Barbara Channel. Up to 100,000 barrels of crude oil spilled into the water, killing thousands of fish, birds and marine mammals while coating shores on both sides of the Channel black. The disaster mobilized protest from across the community; the students lent their time and energy to the many community-wide events, including cleanups, petitions, outreach, demonstrations, teach-ins; as well as perhaps some of the more “guerrilla” tactics such as collecting small bottles of the spilled oil to send to lawmakers at every level.

Though not the only environmental concern at the time, the attention on the 1969 oil spill was one of the main drivers for a series of environmental initiatives, resulting in the establishment of the California Coastal Commission, the California Environmental Quality Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act, which, in turn, established the Environmental Protection Agency. In the aftermath of the disaster Earth Day was born, as well as a new Environmental Studies major at UC Santa Barbara.

Still, it would be a mistake to assume that the Class of 1969 was a monolith in terms of their activism. Behind all the directed action was a variety of viewpoints, criticisms, priorities and strategies.

“I think sometimes these things look much clearer in retrospect than they looked at the time,” said George Keiffer, former AS Executive Vice President, who is now the current chair of the UC Board of Regents. “I think things were much more complicated and sometimes we tend to, with this generation, pat ourselves on the back for things being done that were much more confused than you might like to think right now.”

The challenge for today’s student activists, the panel agreed, would not be so much about how to find one’s tribe or one’s voice. Social media has largely taken care of that. Rather, they said, the test is in being able to connect outside of the bubble or echo chamber and direct that energy to generate real solutions.

“I think the optimal orientation is one where students are listened to and guided by members of the broader community who have a stakeholder orientation,” suggested panelist Nicolás Pascal, a doctoral student in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education with specialties in humanitarian and human rights work. That reach, and listening to others with empathy, will be a major part of the activism of modern times, according to the panel.

Additionally, the mode of leadership within activist movements is moving toward inclusion, thanks to the influence of ethnic- and gender studies, said panelist Lupe Navarro-Garcia, the campus’s assistant vice chancellor for student academic support services.

“One of the things I’ve noticed in our student activism is that they are taking the legacy that you’ve all created in terms of pushing social movements,” she said. Taking it further, she said, groups such as the Afrikan Black Coalition and El

Congreso have taken steps to ensure the diversity of the voices within their groups, with men stepping back to allow female and LGBTQ members the space to air their opinions and viewpoints. “So the students are taking what they’re learning in the classrooms and they’re acting on it through their leadership, and it’s really a wonderful model for the rest of us in society.”

To continue their efforts to make the world a better place, the Class of ‘69 has created their 50th Reunion Scholarship Fund, which “seeks to invest in current student leaders who are making a difference at UCSB or in the community as we did in the late 1960s.” With a goal of \$50,000, the Class is eager to match the first \$20,000 donated to the fund. Learn more about the 50th Reunion Scholarship Fund and other ways to help [here](#).

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.