



## ALUMNI

### Alumni Mentoring Inspires a New Generation of Broncos

BY MARTHA GROVES

Christina Olivarria ('18, communication), a busy mother of three, has managed to flourish in her career, and she credits her success in no small measure to the strong mentors who coached her along the way.

"My ability to navigate my career so gracefully is thanks to other women who have cheered me on," says Olivarria, the director of business strategy and communications for a healthcare consulting firm.

Despite her hectic schedule, she didn't hesitate when the **Womxn's Resource Center** at Cal Poly Pomona emailed her in March 2021 about its Pass the Torch mentorship program. Olivarria readily signed on to advise **Ashley Morales Diaz**, a senior studying architecture, about internships, scholarships, career paths and life in general.

Olivarria and Morales, exemplify the power of having an experienced veteran guide a younger person in need of advice to grow personally and professionally.

At Cal Poly Pomona, such relationships exist in abundance. For half a century, the **Cal Poly Pomona Alumni Association** has worked to connect alumni willing to share their experience and expertise. The aim is to help students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college, reach for the stars.

The association, which has paired hundreds of mentors and mentees, is "deeply committed to educational experiences and supportive services that engage our students, enhance personal well-being and growth, provide career opportunities and foster ethical citizenship," says **Andrea DeCoudres**, assistant director of the Office of Alumni and External Relations.

Through its **Bronco Mentoring Network** and a dedicated online portal, the office enlists alumni volunteers for the Womxn's Resource Center, academic departments and other entities on campus that seek to promote mentoring.

The benefits clearly move both ways. Mentors derive satisfaction from helping eager protégés. Mentees feel bolstered as they navigate the often-baffling options and obstacles on their path to a career.

**Eric Schmidt** ('92, aerospace engineering) began his formal connection with Cal Poly Pomona's mentorship program in 2019 when he joined the **Dean's Leadership Board** in the College of Engineering. But Schmidt, president of **Exquadrum Inc.**, an engineering research and development company specializing in rocket technologies in Victorville, says his mentoring work started years earlier — when as a college student he took it upon himself to advise young people in high schools. Since then, he has mentored dozens of students and employees.

Schmidt says many aspiring engineers have posed this question to him: Should I start a master's program immediately or should I work for a few years first?

His advice: Given the spectrum of career possibilities in engineering, it's best to work for a while to learn which technical aspect of your career most appeals to you. Then find a master's program that best fits the chosen "occupational subcategory."

"Almost without exception," he says, "the questions and concerns come from younger people whose parents did not go to college or even finish high school." The parents lack knowledge of college and its opportunities and often do not have the ability to help their children choose a profession or a course of study.

That was the case for **Natalie Brizuela-MacLean** ('15, business administration), who had to figure things out for herself after growing up in Azusa in an atmosphere of low expectations. After attending community colleges while working full time in the food and beverage industry, she found her groove at Cal Poly Pomona in the field of contract management. She went on to get a master's degree at George Washington University School of Business and now works for **Leach International Corp.**, based in Buena Park, which makes electrical switches and relays for aerospace and rail companies.

Her aim now that she's a mentor, says Brizuela-MacLean, is "to help 'me,' the student who was in my position and needed guidance."

"I want to be the shoulders that they can stand on," she says of the younger women she has coached.

One fortunate recipient of her guidance has been **Minerva Lopez** ('21, business administration), who shares her mentor's love for the field of contract management. Lopez, who was born in Mexico City and grew up in Pomona, struggled financially and socially with her initial college experience at UC Santa Barbara. After several years at community colleges, she landed at Cal Poly Pomona and discovered that she loved her contract management classes.

Brizuela-MacLean, who was a guest speaker in one class, told Lopez about the mentorship program and offered to conduct a mock job interview. They hit it off immediately.

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— MINERVA LOPEZ, '21, business administration



Alumni Elias Wilson, left, and Eric Schmidt talk with student Maggie Hoang about her career goals. Schmidt is the president of Exquadrum, and Wilson is director of engineering at the firm, as well as an adjunct faculty member in the College of Engineering.

"Natalie worked for NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory for a number of years, and she gave me a lot of great advice," Lopez says. Among her tips: Reach out to your network. Tap available resources. Cultivate relationships.

"Natalie is the shining example of someone who can work full-time and still be involved with committees and Cal Poly Pomona mentoring," Lopez adds. "She started the ball rolling for me."

Thanks to Brizuela-MacLean and a couple of other mentors, Lopez says, she was able to land a great job within three months of graduation as a senior analyst, contract management, for **Acclarent**, a medical devices company that is a subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson.

"I'm really thankful for the alumni network at Cal Poly Pomona," Lopez says. "Without them, it would have been very difficult to navigate my job search. It

probably would have taken me longer to find a job."

Olivarria, who works with architects in her job, can barely contain her enthusiasm when she speaks about Morales, her mentee, who works part time at an architecture firm and hopes to attend graduate school in architecture.

"I completely brag about her," Olivarria says.

"She's incredibly academically gifted, and she has a podcast called 'Disrupting Place' about architectural design and social justice."

Although most of their mentoring was conducted remotely, the two women met in person twice and have stayed in touch. Morales revels in the benefits.

"Christina has been very supportive of me," she says. "Just having her on my team has been motivating and reassuring. She goes out and gets what she wants. That's what I love about her."

#### BRONCO MENTORING NETWORK

Alumni mentors give students confidence and practical advice to tap into their potential and reach their goals. Sign up to be a mentor at [bit.ly/CPMmentor](http://bit.ly/CPMmentor).



## UNIVERSITY NEWS

### Political Science Professor Gifts \$100,000 to Uplift Study Abroad Programs

Political Science Professor **Renford Reese** was first bitten by the travel bug as a college senior at Vanderbilt University.

He had a good friend at the time who attended Spelman College and was in France as part of a student exchange program, and his mentor, attorney **Jesse Spikes**, convinced him to do two things Reese hadn't done up to that point – get a passport and take that international flight to Europe. Spikes, a Rhodes scholar and Harvard Law graduate, was from Reese's hometown of McDonough, Georgia.

"He spoke of going to Paris like it was flying from one state to the next," Reese said of Spikes. "He was the first global citizen that I met."

Decades later, Reese leads annual, short-term study abroad trips to places like Ghana, Mumbai, Brussels and Hong Kong for Cal Poly Pomona students. He has taken 330 students on study abroad trips to Europe, Asia, Africa and Canada.

However, with costs ranging from \$2,500 for a two-week trip to Europe and \$4,500 for Africa, the experience is out of reach for many students who don't have the funds.

Reese hopes to bridge that experience gap with the help of a \$100,000 donation he recently made to fund study abroad opportunities for students.

Proceeds from the sale of vacant land he owned in Pomona will be used to fund \$500

scholarships for 20 students annually over 10 years. Reese plans to solicit donations from past participants of study abroad, faculty and other supporters of the program to double the fund to \$200,000, enough to provide 40 scholarships annually.

"The university, the students, the staff and my colleagues — they have given me everything," said the 54-year-old, who has been at Cal Poly Pomona for 26 years. "And I want to give back to the university what the university has given me."

While the trips squeeze in a little sightseeing, the students spend the bulk

of their time volunteering for non-governmental organizations and nonprofits.

"We have taken the classroom away from campus and are immersing the students in experiential learning, which is the cornerstone of the pedagogical philosophy at Cal Poly Pomona," Reese said. "In order to be a compelling person, you have to put yourself in a compelling situation. I tell students that before we go on every trip."



### Grand Opening of Liquid Rocket Lab

CPP's College of Engineering hosted a grand opening of the new **Liquid Rocket Lab**, which will support students' mission of launching a liquid-fueled rocket into space.

"Taking on different challenges allows us to explore our full potential and forces us to think big, bigger than we have ever thought before. Great tests bring out the best in us and with a doubt, the Liquid Rocket Lab brings out the best in Cal Poly Pomona," said University President **Soraya M. Coley**.



At the lab's grand opening, U.S. Rep. Norma Torres and President Coley talk with students about their rocketry project.