#IamUCI – Erin Araneta

Q&A with Class of 2022 graduate Erin Araneta, B.S. in chemistry.
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Class of 2022 graduate Erin Araneta, B.S. in chemistry.

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Although she was born in Anaheim, Erin Araneta has an immigrant's outlook on education and life in America. That's because her family moved to the Philippines when she was 1 year old. She came back to California at age 15 and began attending classes at Golden West College in Huntington Beach a year later. "I was initially apprehensive about returning to America, having to learn a new language

and finding myself in an unfamiliar place," says the first-generation college student. "But I was passionate about chemistry, so I persisted, even though as an immigrant and a woman of color, I did not have many role models with similar experience who excelled in this field."

Over time, Araneta's response to this situation was to develop a set of skills that enabled her to be a mentor to others. At GWC, she started a program to pair nonnative English speakers with conversation partners. As a student at UCI, Araneta founded Theory of Joy, a nonprofit that aims to fight poverty and broaden access to science, technology, engineering and math education for underrepresented communities. As chair of the Younger Chemists Committee of the Orange County American Chemical Society, she organized outreach events at hospitals and farmers markets and put on virtual chemistry "magic nights" to show disadvantaged children the wonders of science – all while working on cutting-edge carbon sequestration and sustainable chemistry projects as a researcher in the laboratory headed by Jenny Yang, UCI Chancellor's Professor of chemistry.

In her spare time, Araneta began writing a children's book series, the Adventures of Chemist Clara. She plans to pursue a graduate degree focusing on sustainable chemistry and a career in science. "It still feels surreal that I stepped onto American soil just a few years ago, lost and facing substantial adversity," Araneta says. "Now I live every day with the opportunity to mentor and create an impact on other students."

What is your favorite memory at UCI?

My favorite memory is the Halloween night climb with the UCI climbing team, which involved my favorite sport, the opportunity to climb with amazing people and a chance to share my love for the outdoors. Another favorite memory is traveling to various conferences to present my work in chemistry, including going to San Diego with my lab to talk about my sustainable chemistry research and diversity and inclusion work.

What are your plans after graduation?

I plan to go on a kayaking and climbing trip to Alaska and visit my family in the Philippines. I will also be doing a leadership seminar at the American Chemical

Society LEADS Conference in Washington, D.C.; finalizing three more Adventures of Chemist Clara books; and then going to graduate school in fall 2022.

> **“I see Erin’s genuine dedication to learning and am reminded of the reasons I became a scientist, to learn and seek knowledge… Mentoring her has made me a better mentor, scientist and person. I can’t wait to see all she accomplishes.”**
>
> – Alissa Matus, UCI research fellow in chemistry

Where do you see yourself in five years?

I want to continue learning and am eager for the opportunity academia provides to expand my knowledge, curiosity and creativity and enrich the lives of others. I see myself graduating with a Ph.D. in chemistry and applying for positions to work as a sustainable chemist at a national lab or industry. I also aspire to further the spirit of scientific collaboration by continuing my involvement with professional chemistry associations such as the ACS and continue to use my platform to promote diversity and inclusion in chemistry.

Who was your biggest influence at UCI?

My mentor, Alissa Matus [UCI research fellow in chemistry]. She has supported me so much as I navigate my way around chemistry as a woman and person of color. She taught me so many skills and techniques in the laboratory and helped me develop my deep passion and love for chemistry. In addition to that, she inspires me to be the best version of myself, further the field of science and cultivate curiosity.

What do you know now that you wish you had known before coming to UCI?

As a first-generation college student in America, I wish I knew the immense possibilities that pursuing a degree in chemistry at UCI would give me. I struggled to navigate my space as a woman of color, but UCI had so many resources for me to be successful. My experiences joining the Yang lab and clubs, receiving awards and grants, and going to conferences have expanded my network and support system in unimaginable ways. I aspire to use these opportunities to encourage other women and people of color to pursue what they're passionate about and show them that they're capable of what they put their hearts into.

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