



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Jonathan, a former Global Studies major who's now an award-winning photojournalist and running a thrilling media and technology start-up that aims to give context to the world in which we live today.

Jonathan Kalan: Editor-in-Chief Timeline

What are you up to now, post-graduation?

I am Editor-in-Chief of Timeline. Timeline is a news app that presents current affairs through historical perspectives. We believe that the news today is just the short tail of a long string of events. We aim to give readers a better understanding of the events that shape the present by presenting historical context in an easily consumable and shareable format. We launched with a bold long-term vision to build a better way to surface and explore human history. We feel that right now, there's really no easy way to understand and explore our past and its connection to the present. We're building a technology and platform to help do that.

The company is a startup, so my role covers a little bit of everything. As the first employee of the company, I built the editorial and engagement team here in San Francisco—currently eighteen people full time. I run the



day-to-day editorial output, as well as the business development strategy, partnerships, and overall company growth.

How did you get to where you are?

I never thought I would end up as a journalist. I was a terrible English student, and considered it one of my worst subjects. I studied Global Studies, which was great preparation for the life that I've lived in that it was essentially a broad analysis of globalization—religious, political, economic, social—and understanding how the world works and how it's changing. I spent a year in Dehli, India, through the EAP program, studying sustainable development and interning at an organization in Nepal pioneering renewable energy projects across the country. I also did the TMP

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certificate program and that made for a nice hybrid—understanding both developing markets and technology start-ups. That combination has been the link throughout my path since UCSB.

My experiences at Santa Barbara shaped me in many ways, and helped pave the road to where I am today. I helped start Chilla Vista, a music festival that was run off biodiesel and solar, which launched me into the whole concept of sustainable development. In the summer after my Junior Year, I got an internship at a company called Causecast, a small media tech non-profit that was developing new ways to connect celebrities and activists to causes. This internship turned into my first job out of college.

Throughout college, I photographed for the Daily Nexus, and shot the Jesusita and Gap fires. They were incredibly thrilling and powerful things to witness first hand, and I

quickly fell in love with the idea of becoming a photojournalist. I continued in whatever capacity I could while working at Causecast.

After a year working with Causecast, I met a woman at a yard sale who was selling all her things to move to Africa and start this social enterprise called Kujali International. In short, I asked her, “Do you need any help?” A month later, I moved to Tanzania to become the Director of Business Development and Communications for Kujali. Our goal was to create a model for free private education for orphan kids in Tanzania through small business investments, and I helped with start-up ideas and business plans to help fund the school locally—for instance, a pizza shop, a chicken farm, solar kiosks, all sorts of wild things.

While in Tanzania, I founded my own organization, called The BoP Project, which looked at the potential behind the veil of poverty in East Africa by documenting the

work of innovators solving social challenges in a variety of sectors—water, energy, healthcare, etc.

While publishing stories and photos through the The BoP Project, my work started appearing in other places, from Christian Science Monitor to New York Times blogs. I began pursuing journalism and photojournalism full time, and ended up working across East Africa and the Middle East for four years. I ran a bi-weekly column for BBC, contributed to Foreign Policy, The Atlantic, and several other outlets, and even managed to make a cover photo on the New York Times.

In May of 2014, shortly after I moved back to the U.S., I received an email from a fellow Gaucho. He said he'd met a guy starting a company called Timeline, and that they were looking for an Editor-in-Chief. I heard the pitch and was blown away by the idea. A month later I moved out to San Francisco

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and it's been a non-stop adventure ever since.

What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?

I left! My study abroad experience in India shaped me both as a person and as a student. Dropping myself in a place that was so different at a reasonably young age and having to adapt to a new culture, learn a new language, explore on my own—it was an incredible experience. I learned a tremendous amount about myself and how the rest of the world works. It had a profound impact on me.

Santa Barbara is the kind of place where I felt I had the opportunity to try anything and explore my various interests. Take Chilla Vista—I never thought I would end up helping run a music festival, but it was a great experience. I started various groups, worked for IVCRC, and took advantage of any opportunity I could find to grow. I learned that if you set your mind to something in Santa Barbara, you'll find the right people there to support you.

What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?

It was a pretty perfect experience, to be honest. But looking back, I would like to have learned more economics and philosophy. Economics dictates how the world works, and philosophy helps you understand how people think. It's useful to have a solid grounding in both before entering the workforce, especially if you're interested in working abroad.

One thing I'd like to pass on to fellow Gauchos is that there's no reason to be afraid of taking risks. When I moved to Africa, I had no idea how long I was going to be there. I wasn't getting paid. I had \$5,000 in my pocket, and simply said “let's see what happens.” It definitely was not easy. While I was still getting my feet wet as a journalist, I traveled over 36,000 kilometers on busses throughout Africa. I was basically broke. I ate rice and beans every day. I cried one time when I had to spend more than \$20 on a taxi. It was tough, but it was what I wanted to do, and I loved doing it. I had to learn a lot along the way - about journalism, startups, local politics and history,

and how to survive as a freelancer. There were beautiful moments, but I also remarkably tragic moments – like when I covered the Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, or the coup in Egypt in 2013. In the end, the risk was entirely worth it because it got me to where I wanted to be.



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What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?

The freedom and quality of life. It was an amazing community—talented, supportive and creative.

Throughout my travels and work, I continue to run into Gauchos who are doing incredible things. Yet despite their accomplishments, there's always a sense of humbleness, a groundedness to them. It's something that the UCSB experience really cultivates in people – never take yourself too seriously, keep an open mind, and respect others.

Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?

Study what fascinates you, not what you think you should study. A career can take many twists and turns, and oftentimes what you study has little relevance in the long run. If you make your education interesting and

well rounded, it's going to be relevant in shaping you as an intellectual, which is more important than a degree. There's no way I could have predicted that I would be a journalist running a startup, and if I had studied journalism, it's likely I wouldn't be where I am today.

So my advice would be: Do what you're interested in, find a narrative that connects those things, and use that narrative to figure out where to go next. Don't limit your opportunities based on what you think is going to be the best thing for when you get out. The best thing for when you graduate is to do what you're passionate about. Find that niche, whether big or small, where you think you'll enjoy adding value to the world, even if it's different than what other people think is right for you. Most importantly, don't be afraid of take a risk to make it happen.



Jonathan welcomes UCSB students to contact him via email with questions about start-ups, media, or journalism. He has invited Gauchos who are strong writers and have a serious interest in working for Timeline to pitch him their resumes.

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