

Interview with Helaine Kwong:

By Melody Jue

What year did you participate in the Integrated Studies program?

I was in the class of 2004.

Did you go in declared as a specific major?

I did, but it's kind of funny because when I applied to school, I didn't know what major I wanted to do or what it was called. I went in declared as a biology major with a B.A. instead of a B.S., which is what I actually wanted, so my sophomore year I ended up changing it to NPB.

How did you come to choose UC Davis, and why did you choose Integrated Studies?

I chose Davis because I had the Regent's Scholarship. I didn't have any money to pay for college, so Davis it was, and Integrated Studies had the nice dorm. We were the very first class to live in Miller Hall. And I remember they had so many kinks in the building right then. The fire alarm used to go off like three times a day, and it got to the point where nobody was leaving the building anymore, because they were like oh, it's a fake fire alarm, it's not functioning. So they had to get the fire Marshall to come in and lecture us about leaving every single time. But thankfully by the end of the year they got that fixed.

Did you have any expectations going into the program and were those met?

I don't know that I had any real expectation. I knew I was going to be in an environment with other people that studied a lot, but I guess I didn't realize how social it would be too, and it was a really nice environment to have close friends built in. I lived on the third floor, 312, right by the lounge, so it was kind of loud sometimes.

Did you have any favorite IS courses or professors?

I really liked storytelling. I liked listening to everybody's story. When I went in I wasn't very talkative or social, so it was scary for me to tell the stories. I mean I got an A in the class, but it helped me get over the whole fear of public speaking.

Was it easier to tell your second story than your first?

Absolutely. I mean you know everybody, so if you mess up you hope nobody's going to laugh at you. But everyone's personal stories and fables—those were really good.

Were there any that stood out to you?

I remember one of my friends, her name was Anika, and she had this story about how she was—oh I can't even tell it as good as she did! She went to a tropical country in Central or South America and she got lost in the jungle, so her whole story was her acting out cutting through the bushes, and she got so totally lost. It was this great story. You know how it ended because she was there telling it, but that's the one that I remember.

Would you say that your interaction with IS professors was any different from your professors outside of IS?

I think it's really what you make of it. I mean if you don't want to talk to your IS professors, then you don't talk to them. But then again if you want to, they're there for you. I'm the kind of person who never went to office hours for any of my classes, and I never talked to any of my professors, so I can't say that I really developed that big of a relationship with them. My last class I was really interested in—I took biophotonics with Dr. Shackelford and Dr. Molinaro. That was one of the classes where I was really interested, and I did want to talk to the teachers, so I did, and that was great because they were available. If that had been a larger class open to the general student population, maybe I wouldn't have had that chance. And I still talk to Dr. Shackelford. That was the best class I've ever taken. It was the first year they had that class, so they were working out kinks, but it was a very good class.

It must have been exciting to be exposed to all that new research.

Yeah, sometimes it was sort of overwhelming because you were a first year and you hadn't taken any of the foundational classes, and sometimes the people would go in and start talking and you're like, oh my God, what are they talking about? But I think they changed it so that you get more of a basic background. But still, it was really fun. I met one of my mentors through it, Dr. Edie Zusman. She's a neurosurgeon at the Sutter Institute, the Cancer Institute in Sacramento. She was one of the lecturers and was doing epilepsy research on rats, and when she talked I was like oh my God, I want to be her when I grow up! So I emailed Dr. Shackelford and he told me about the CBST summer internship and encouraged me to apply for that. I ended up working with her, and it was

a really great experience. She wrote me a recommendation for pharmacy school, and Dr. Shackelford wrote me one, so without IS I would totally not be where I am today. I'm not the kind of person who's going to talk to her other teachers, so I think that the close environment really helped.

What was the internship environment like?

It was really good. My mentor really encouraged me to think outside the box, think independently, and I helped her with her general project. She gave me bits and pieces of things to do, and I really learned a lot about research. Since she was a surgeon too, I learned a lot about patient interaction and healthcare. She was an MD, she did everything—she had her own practice and had so much on her plate, I don't know how she did it but she did, and I really admire her.

Is that the same kind of profession you're interested in now?

Something in healthcare, I decided I didn't want to pursue medical school—it was not so much why I didn't want to become a doctor, but why I wanted to do pharmacy more. I really like drug interactions, physiology... and I think it's really exciting how pharmacy is changing in the coming years. Most people think of pharmacy as the guy standing behind the counter at Longs, or Walgreen's, but there's actually a lot more to it—you can pursue clinical pharmacy, which actually started at UCSF only forty years ago. [In clinical pharmacy] the pharmacist is in charge of drug therapy management, and actually following patient cases and adjusting doses, and working with the medical team. Or you can do research at Genentech, or go into industry, or go into the legislative side, working with policy makers—which doesn't interest me as much. I've heard that pharmacy is one of the most regulated industries.

Back to some more questions about dorm life—what was going to dinner like?

Sometimes I went in a group. The new DC hadn't opened yet, I don't know why they thought it would be okay to open three new dorms and not open the new DC at the same time, but you know how it goes. So it was super crowded, except for outside, but then the trees would drip sap and rain down on you, but it was kind of fun.

Did the smaller size of the DC make it easier to find people?

I know some of my friends who met people from other dorms at the DC, but I just stuck with my friends.

What did you do on weekends for fun?

I actually had three jobs my entire time in college, so I didn't have that much time to spend. I remember my freshman year I was working at Thai Recipes downtown in Mansion square, so a lot of my nights were spend there. Then I worked at the Davis Food Co-op, and I worked at Willet Elementary. That was one of my best experiences.

What did you do at that school?

I was a yard duty.

Oh, cool—you got to watch kids play all day, which must have been fun!

Yeah but the bad part is you have to discipline them, and they're so cute you don't want to.

Do you have any other memorable IS related stories you want to share?

I remember there was a formal, but I don't think it was through IS, but I remember a lot of us went. I remember getting all dressed up and taking a picture. And it was really sad because I had to work that night, so I ran back and I missed the group picture. But it was really fun, spending time with all of my friends and getting all dressed up.

Did you go to the Shakespeare play at the end of the year?

I did. *Taming of the Shrew*, that was it—that one was really good. I have to say, I really didn't expect it to be that professionally done, but the theater was really nice. I kind of wish I had done it, but I wanted to do Biophotonics more. Everything happens for a reason, right? I went the next year, too. My classmates aren't going to like this, but I think I liked *The Tempest* better. I think it was even better. I didn't think it was going to be better because the first one was so good, but it was really spectacular, so that says a lot about the quality of students we get, I guess! It's also kind of cool because not everyone's an actor you know. I haven't gone since though.

Do you know of any IS related love stories?

My goal for this interview was not to embarrass myself or incriminate myself, or anyone else. I know people dated, but frankly I don't know if they're still together.

Were there any real characters in your dorm, or people who stood out to you?

I'm not sure that any one person stood out to me, but it was more this whole feeling. It was really nice because everyone was super smart in what they did, and sometimes I really questioned like, why am I here? I think everyone has that fleeting moment of why am I here. Even now I sometimes get that at pharmacy school, because you know UCSF is a really well-known school, and sometimes you're just sitting there like, I don't belong here. But then again they chose, you. IS chose you, UCSF chose you, so they thought you had potential. And you know I think the great thing is that if you're struggling with anything, your classmates are there for you. You can go down the hall and there's someone who's brilliant at general chem. And most people would not hesitate to help you at all. And that was great because there was a curve and everything, so it was really hard to find people to help you. I think that was one of the great things about IS, because you could just go down the hall and have help. You didn't have to call someone and make an appointment. It was a really supportive learning environment.

As opposed to being really competitive?

Yeah I thought it would be, but it really wasn't that competitive. But once you got out into the general student population, it was super competitive. I think it might have been the classes I chose to take too. NPB has a lot of pre-med majors.

Did you end up seeing a lot of IS students in your classes after freshman year?

Some, but there weren't that many NPB specific majors. A lot were biology or engineering. After our first two years, the classes kind of diverged. I remember taking anatomy with a girl from IS, so we hung out there. It's always so much fun to see where they are today. Some people went to vet school, optometry school, grad school. My friend Dan from IS did something in Washington DC and just came back and got a job, doing research for a political campaign. It sounded really cool. He does research for anyone from the Democratic Party about their competitors, not like digging through the trash kind of research, but what they said in this year, and how they voted, and stuff like that.

That does sound like a really interesting job. Would there be anything that you want to say about the IS program to prospective students?

I think that if you get a chance to do it, you should do it. I can see not doing IS if you're already living in Davis and you just can't afford to live on campus, but if you're already

going to be here in the dorms, then why not do it? I know there's required classes, but it's only three required classes, and the journals for the seminar aren't that bad. I think it's worth it, the sense of community you get, and the educational support, and there's a peer advisor too.

Do you remember what the fall seminar was for your year?

Ours was *The Quite American*. We learned about the Vietnam War. I'm not sure why the whole theme of the year was Vietnam, I think it might have been an anniversary, because there was the Vietnam class I took too. I remember a woman with a flag that said "peace" on it. It's surprising how little of the history I remember of the Vietnam War, having gone through the seminar and the class, but I think that speaks to how multifaceted the war was. I could probably tell you the series of events and kind of what they mean, but in my head it's kind of like I still just don't know anything about it. I really liked the class though, because it was "Vietnam through art," so he made us buy this huge book of art from Vietnam soldiers, which I still have somewhere. I told myself I was going to save it because it looks like a really good coffee table book. But I don't have a coffee table right now because I'm living in a one-room apartment, and all my worldly possessions are crammed in. I'm hoping that in four years I'll have a real job and a real coffee table and I'll put this book out on it. We also watched movies. I've never seen so many movies in one class, ever.

Do you think those helped a lot?

Actually, I do. First of all, some of the movies were movies I'd never seen, the classic movies that you're supposed to have seen, like "Rambo," and I'd never seen that before. We saw "The Green Berets," "Deer Hunter," and "Apocalypse Now," which was really good because there's so many cultural references to "Apocalypse Now" and *Heart of Darkness* that I guess I wasn't getting before that. But now you can go on the street and watch TV and say, hey, this is what they're talking about. So that was a really good class.

Do you remember if there were any musicians in IS, or if there was much of a music culture?

My friend Helen played the violin with the orchestra, and I'm sure there were more, because I heard people playing through the walls.

Like in their rooms?

Yeah, but I don't remember any bands.

Did you go to picnic day?

It was raining, so bad that day! I actually went by myself, I can't remember why, I think I got lost from my friends, so I was walking around. It was a lot of fun, still. I think it's rained like every single year.

is there anything else you'd like to add about your IS experience?

I just have this overwhelming feeling that it was a good experience, so past that, I don't know what to say. And I thought about it really hard too.

You also mentioned that Dr. Shackelford wrote you a really great recommendation...

I never read it, but I assume it was okay since I got in everywhere I wanted to go. Before I had applied to pharmacy school, I had asked Dr. Shackelford to write me a recommendation for medical school, and this was back in maybe my sophomore year, and I really didn't know what I wanted to do, but I ended up changing my mind and decided I wanted to go to pharmacy school. Anyway I felt bad, or weird, asking Dr. Shackelford to write me another one, because I was afraid it would look like I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, and that would just be weird—two recommendations? So I didn't ask him, and the end, and I asked someone else who unfortunately, at the very last moment, had an emergency, which was a legitimate emergency. It was kind of my fault for not preparing enough in advance. The pharmacy applications were due like Nov. 1st to UCSF and it was like four days before that, so I was like, "Who am I going to get to write me a recommendation?"

I was really upset because everything else was done, and I was like oh, I guess I'm not going to pharmacy school this year, because I can't get someone to write me one in four days. So my friend suggested I should call Dr. Shackelford. I was like no I can't do that, I already asked him to write me one and that would just look bad. So my friend actually called him for me, which I was really upset about at the time because now I was thinking, now on top of not knowing what I want to do with my life, now I look like I can't stand up for myself and I can't solve my own problems! But it turned out alright. Dr. Shackelford was really nice about it, and he understood. He updated the recommendation that he'd already given me, and that night, it was in. He had four days, but two hours later, it was already registered at PhamCAS. So I was like, oh my God, you saved my life. Without him, I really don't think I'd be here right now. Maybe in a year or two, but definitely not right now. So that just speaks to the caliber of the professors at IS, because he really cares. And all the other professors, you can tell they really care about their students, but Dr. Shackelford especially. You can really see he likes teaching, and he's a great researcher.

In addition to managing IS!

Yeah! He just does so much, and if you have this horrible emergency that's just your fault, then he's willing to help do whatever he can. Thank you IS!