MPP student Ama Debrah shares what her life looks like while UC San Diego students are learning from home

By Virginia Watson | GPS News

Master of Public Policy (MPP) student Ama Debrah has a routine, and she’s sticking to it. That’s been the healthiest way for her to navigate learning remotely at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) since the stay-at-home order was issued in mid-March due to the novel coronavirus, she explained.

“It can be really easy to get sucked into the void of never leaving the bed and staring into space, so making sure I wake up, exercise and go to bed around the same time each day has been essential in keeping myself sane,” Debrah said. “I also try to unplug from all electronic devices for about an hour before going to bed.”

Debrah, a native of Ewa Beach, Hawaii, chose to return to Hawaii to ride out the pandemic, where she has continued her rigorous schedule this quarter of taking four classes that meet twice a week.
“I was initially very concerned at how the stay-at-home order would impact my classes, primarily because I’m taking a rigorous quantitative class and also a discussion-based seminar this quarter,” she said. “However, the professors have been incredible with tailoring their classes to be effective through Zoom, whether it’s having additional office hours or recording asynchronous lectures targeting an especially tricky concept.”

Hawaii is three hours behind Pacific Daylight Time, meaning Debrah is navigating the time difference for her classes to her benefit, she said, as she generally finishes her classes by 12:30 p.m. Hawaii-Aleutian Standard Time. Once classes are over, Debrah attends a teaching assistant session or participates in office hours with a professor two to three times a week.

“If I don’t have a large assignment or project due, I’ll study for about two or three hours and then work out, eat dinner and do a bit more reading before heading to bed,” she added.

Though the coronavirus has defined the spring quarter and upended normal life, Debrah reiterated that her courses this term give her hope for the future, particularly a seminar she has taken this term focusing on international human rights.

“The professor, Emilie Hafner-Burton, is fantastic, and I’ve really appreciated taking an in-depth look at different cases of human rights abuses that I’ve previously only heard briefly about. Although the subject matter can be distressing at times, Professor Hafner-Burton frames the class with constructive discussions that are focused on solutions,” Debrah said. “In a time where many things about the future, both domestically and internationally, seem very bleak, I always leave her class feeling energized that progress can be made.”

Debrah, who is pursuing the inequality and social policy track of the MPP degree, said she was drawn to GPS as a result of her experiences working with Teach for America, where she taught early childhood education for five years.

“While teaching, I saw similar obstacles facing my students’ families, including barriers to accessing social services and increased marginalization for undocumented immigrant families,” she said. “I decided to pursue the inequality and social policy track because I felt that the skills I would learn would most directly target the needs of the families I had worked with.”
One of the classes she has found most rewarding so far was a course she took during the winter quarter focusing on U.S.-Mexico bilateral relations with Professor Rafael Fernández de Castro.

“Professor Fernández de Castro, who is a very distinguished academic and was a former foreign policy adviser to President Felipe Calderon, is extremely down to earth and would regularly pepper his lectures with his personal experiences growing up in Mexico and working on the bilateral policies we were learning about,” she said. “Due to GPS’s proximity to the border, our class also took a field trip to Tijuana, where we volunteered at a soup kitchen and visited a shelter and clinic geared toward migrant families.”

Though physically separated, Debrah said she’s relied on her tight network of peers at GPS throughout the stay-at-home order. She is currently on the board for two different clubs: QuIRPS, GPS’s LGBTQ advocacy club, and the Development Club. Both clubs are working to organize different Zoom events for this quarter, along with planning programming for the next academic year.

“Although I decided to return to Hawaii, everyone is still technically stuck in their houses, which means that people are generally down for a quick Zoom or Houseparty session anytime I’m feeling especially lonely,” she said.

Debrah stressed the importance of taking advantage of faculty office hours and Zoom events, such as those planned by GO GPS and other GPS clubs.
“It can be easy to feel disconnected while learning remotely, but GPS has organized so many online events that are geared toward both career and community building that I still feel connected to GPS as a whole,” she said.