Jennifer Burney named to endowed chair established by Joan and Irwin Jacobs in memory of environmentalist Marshall Saunders

By Jade Griffin | UC San Diego News

Climate change advocate Marshall Saunders was widely known as a man who paired a deep respect for others with determination to make a difference. Driven by these values, in 2007, Saunders founded the Citizens’ Climate Lobby (CCL), a nonprofit, nonpartisan, grassroots advocacy organization focused on national policies to address climate change.
It is this legacy that inspired Joan and Irwin Jacobs to establish the Marshall Saunders Chancellor’s Endowed Chair in Global Climate Policy and Research at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) in honor of Saunders, who died in late 2019. This gift contributes to the Campaign for UC San Diego.

“Over the years, we have been so impressed with what Marshall was able to accomplish with the Citizens’ Climate Lobby — he built an amazing organization that is well on its way to influencing many members of congress,” said Irwin Jacobs, who is a past member of the CCL Advisory Board. “When Marshall passed on, we thought it was important to remember his accomplishments, and a chair at GPS seemed to be a very good way of doing so.”

UC San Diego has announced that the inaugural chairholder of the Marshall Saunders Chancellor’s Endowed Chair in Global Climate Policy and Research is
GPS associate professor, Jennifer Burney. An environmental scientist, Burney’s research focuses on simultaneously achieving global food security and mitigating climate change. Burney studies poverty alleviation and agricultural adaptation, the relationships between energy and food security, the environmental effects of food production and consumption, and climate and air pollution impacts on agriculture.

“Marshall was not only passionate about tackling climate change. He was compassionate about global social justice,” said GPS Dean Peter Cowhey. “We first met because we were both involved in work of a global anti-poverty organization especially focused on serving women. It is especially fitting that the first holder of the Saunders chair is Jen Burney, whose scholarship addresses both climate change and the enhancement of food security, a prime concern for women in poor households.”

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organization focused on national policies to address climate change. It is this legacy that inspired Joan and Irwin Jacobs to establish the Marshall Saunders Chancellor’s Endowed Chair in Global Climate Policy and Research.

Burney has done a significant amount of work focused on developing countries, looking at the science, technology and policy of energy services and air pollution, and the role that mitigation of non-greenhouse gas emissions can play in meeting both climate and food security objectives.

She is a research affiliate at UC San Diego’s Policy Design and Evaluation Laboratory and she leads the Big Pixel Initiative and the Science Policy Fellows Program at the School of Global Policy and Strategy. In addition, she is a member of the National Geographic Explorers.

“Receiving this chair is a tremendous honor,” said Burney. “The idea that my faculty colleagues would think that I might be able to do some justice to Marshall Saunders’s legacy really hit me very powerfully.”

According to Burney, an endowed chair can make a significant impact on the research enterprise. While typical grant cycles for research projects can be slow, with months of preparation, then waiting and negotiation, an endowed chair offers immediate funding to take advantage of research opportunities as they arise.

“Having the ability to start new projects or take advantage of unique opportunities on very short time scales is really wonderful,” Burney said. “This type of funding provides latitude to stay really true to my research agenda, which matters so much to me.”

Recently, Burney spearheaded research projects related to agricultural practices and climate change. She co-authored a study highlighting a way to improve groundwater monitoring by using remote sensing technology (known as InSAR), in conjunction with climate and land cover data. The work could be revolutionary,
as groundwater monitoring and management have been notoriously difficult to carry out due to lack of reliable data.

Earlier this year, Burney published findings in Nature Sustainability, showing that the decomposition of coal-fired power plants in the continental U.S. has reduced nearby pollution and its negative impacts on human health and crop yields. She found that between 2005 and 2016, the shutdown of coal-fired units saved an estimated 22,563 lives and 379 million bushels of corn in their immediate vicinities.

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**A Chair to Inspire Future Generations**

Endowed chairs, such as the Marshall Saunders Chancellor’s Endowed Chair in Global Climate Policy and Research can also provide critical support for students,
exposing them to research activities to which they might not otherwise have had access.

“Research funding is really precious, and for me the single most important component of that is supporting students — they are the engine of the research apparatus, and they’re the future!” said Burney. “This chair will help me open up more opportunities for people to get involved in research. So many talented students can’t do things like internships or independent studies because they need to earn money to pay tuition or support their families. Funding from this chair can help me bring in more undergraduate and masters students so that they can see what research is like.”

Joan and Irwin Jacobs, who established their first endowed chair at UC San Diego almost 40 years ago, also feel passionate about using endowed chair funding to help support students who may want to work with UC San Diego’s outstanding faculty members.

“We believe that an endowed chair like this one can have seed value,” said Jacobs. “We hope that students can look at Marshall Saunders and see what he accomplished and be very much inspired by him.”

Marshall Saunders’ wife, Pam, similarly expressed how grateful she is for this chair to continue her late husband’s legacy for future generations.

“I am so happy for Marshall to be recognized in this way,” she said. “I know he would have been terribly pleased. Marshall’s goal always was to empower others. He wanted people to fill their own potential and possibilities.”

This endowed faculty chair was established as part of the university’s Chancellor’s Chair Challenge, launched in January 2015, to support the recruitment and retention of distinguished faculty. The gift from Joan and Irwin Jacobs contributes to the Campaign for UC San Diego—a university-wide comprehensive fundraising effort concluding in 2022. Alongside UC San Diego’s philanthropic partners, the university is continuing its nontraditional path toward revolutionary ideas, unexpected answers, lifesaving discoveries and planet-changing impact. To learn more about supporting the School of Global Policy and Strategy, visit the giving website.