A Global Free Spirit

Embodying the international, entrepreneurial and adaptable spirit of GPS, Greta Paa-Kerner ’96 is our 2019 Outstanding GPS Alumna

By Rachel Hommel | GPS News

San Diego native Greta Paa-Kerner could be considered a chameleon of sorts. Her career has spanned marketing, finance, academia and entrepreneurship, all with a curiosity for other cultures. Her ability and willingness to take risks are as diverse as they are impactful.

“She is a shining example of the depth, capability and diversity that the GPS program graduates,” said former classmate Leslie Bell-Friedel ’97. “Greta is not only smart, hardworking and entrepreneurial, she is also lively, charitable, fun-loving and beautiful inside and out. She is the type of person you are honored to claim as a business partner or as a friend, or both.”

From day one at GPS, this Del Mar native knew she wanted to work overseas. What she thought would be one or two years abroad became a diverse and rich international career. Starting out at Hewlett Packard in Rancho Bernardo, she used her GPS toolkit to customize her career beyond the typical linear path.

“HP was the perfect first employer and my chance to move abroad with a multinational company. I couldn’t think of a bigger dream post-graduation,” said Paa-Kerner. “My boss was really supportive in my dreams to transfer overseas.”
An International Soul

Packing her bags for Barcelona, Spain Paa-Kerner never looked back. Courage has followed her throughout her career, from entering the competitive world of private banking with little experience to starting her own business, all as a foreigner living abroad.

“You cannot have the imposter syndrome living abroad. I’ve been in board rooms where I am the only woman and where everyone is speaking Spanish,” recalls Paa-Kerner. “You have to sit down and hold your own. No one is better than you.”

Her current endeavor has allowed her to share her expertise by entering the world of academia as head of business engagement at Buckinghamshire New University. Managing three innovation hubs, she loves getting to oversee the growth and development of the university’s relationships.

“There’s so much to learn and do. The more you learn, the more you realize what you don’t know,” said Paa-Kerner. “The world keeps on changing and evolving so much. The things I do now weren’t around when I graduated. If I had stopped being curious, I’d be a total dinosaur in my career!”

A Dedicated Wife and Mother

Balancing work-life and motherhood is no small feat. During her time at London’s Publicis, a multinational advertising and public relations company, she was commuting weekly between London and Barcelona while a mother of two young toddlers.

Her advice to working moms?
“Lower your standards. You aren’t going to be perfect all the time,” laughs Paa-Kerner. “It’s a lot easier if you have a partner that helps and is supportive.”

While pregnant with her third child, she started Ganduxer Design, her own high-end giftware company, which “added information and inspiration to everyday objects.” Inspired by the arts, Paa-Kerner finds passion in creating and entrepreneurship.

“I’m a very creative person and I should be an artist. I do ceramics once a week,” said Paa-Kerner. “I find it so important to add value to things people might not have value in.”

Stay Curious!

For those graduating from GPS, Paa-Kerner fondly remembers some of the best times in school being alongside her cohort. Inspired by her fellow students, she is also proud of the countless alumni she has met with her work in the GPS European alumni club.

An avid alumna, Paa-Kerner has helped at countless panels, career talks and informational interviews. A true global citizen, she is eager to help other budding jetsetters. Want to move abroad? Paa-Kerner suggests targeting a multinational and moving from there. Give them a reason to sponsor you.

“Never ask why, ask why not. Never stop being curious,” said Paa-Kerner. “When you graduate, your learning doesn’t stop. It just starts. Be prepared to keep learning.”

An alumni selection committee reviewed nominations for and determined the winner of the 2019 Outstanding GPS Alumna or Alumnus. Thank you to the following alumni who represent board and non-board members from different regions as well as different degree programs:
- Scott Park, MPIA ‘90
- Liliana Pao, MPIA ‘02
- Liz Jimenez, MPIA ‘07
- Santiago Bunce, MPIA ‘12
- Jamal Russell Black, MIA ‘16
- David Boman, MAS-IA ‘18
- Simeng Zeng, BA/MIA ‘14

See past Outstanding GPS Alumni award winners:

Time to act, Tamar Koosed, MPIA ‘09
A sustainable seafood hero, Tobias Aguirre ‘05
Yiru Zhou embraces the past and shapes the future of GPS, Yiru Zhou ‘93