

ALUMNA EMBRACES HER INTUITION TO JOIN THE AZTEC MENTOR PROGRAM



Marla Diann says mentoring is a way to leave a legacy.



Michelle Zoldano ('18) joined AMP for entrepreneurial advice.

“Know your genius talent, build your career on that and listen to your own intuition and not somebody else.”

— Marla Diann

By Antoine Stevens-Phillips

Some people are born to mentor. When Marla Diann would go to her teenage son Taylor’s career day at school, she found herself giving life tips to his classmates.

“I was one of the parents at career day, sharing with these young 13-year-olds what they could do with writing or within a publicist career,” said Diann ('83, public relations/journalism).

Today, she continues that tradition of mentorship at her alma mater in the Aztec Mentor Program. Diann recently completed her fifth year in AMP, which helps students “Move from Campus to Career.” The semester-long program pairs juniors, seniors and graduate students with professional mentors who, through their expertise, provide advice and guidance as students move forward with their career goals.

Like many SDSU students, Diann found her path to career success wasn’t always easy, but great opportunities were closer than she thought.

“What was I going to do with this writing/journalism career?” said Diann, who first worked several dead-end jobs at local news stations that didn’t allow her to use her creative writing skills. “Honestly, I was scared to death to get paid to write. I had no confidence – I had no real-world experience other than an internship.”

“It took me two years to develop an excitement and the right path to then get paid to write in some form of journalism,” Diann said.

In 1986, the Los Angeles native was working at a TV station and not doing what she loved (writing and PR), when she met a woman who worked as a publicist at Warner Bros. Intrigued, Diann asked her a dozen questions about her career. The woman suggested that Diann use her public relations and journalism credentials to follow the same path. Diann knew intuitively that it was what she was meant to do.

It was a defining moment.

Diann was off on a mission to make this her full-time career. She parlayed her passion and excitement into a 22-year dynamic – and creative – career as an entertainment publicist in Hollywood.

In 2003, Diann survived breast cancer and began to segue into a new and equally rewarding career. She served as speaker chair for the Los Angeles chapter of the Susan G. Komen Foundation and found a new community of inspiring women. After meeting with a business mentor and coach, Diann decided on a new purpose: coach, support and strategize with high-achieving female entrepreneurs in the creative field. Diann helps them establish trusted and savvy brands that attract desirable clients and higher revenues.

Diann also was determined to use her success in business to support future female entrepreneurs.



Michelle and Marla Zoom session.

“Before the Aztec Mentor Program was created, I was looking for ways to get involved as a mentor,” she said. “Then I opened an email two weeks later about the AMP program, and I thought, ‘That’s it; that’s what I want to do!’”

Established in 2013, AMP has facilitated more than 10,500 mentor-mentee matches since the program started.

A mentor in the Aztec Mentor Program since 2014, Diann is passionate about guiding SDSU female students who want to become successful entrepreneurs.

She engages her mentees through Zoom webcam conferences, sets weekly entrepreneurial goals for them and invites them to her inspirational training and networking event, “Creative Influencers Private Dinner.” At these events, Diann stresses the importance of knowing your innate “genius talents” and allowing intuition to inform your career path – encouraging participants learn more with Gay Hendricks’ book, “The Big Leap.”

“It’s unfortunate to be in a career for many years, then realize you hate it; it’s not a fit for you – and it never was,” Diann said. “It was someone else’s dream, not yours.”

“Know your genius talent, build your career on that and listen to your own intuition and not somebody else,” said Diann, who has shared this advice with each of her last five student mentees.

Her most recent mentee was Michelle Zoldano, who graduated in 2018 with a degree in business marketing.

“I chose Marla as my mentor because of her experience mentoring entrepreneurs,” Zoldano said. “I have always wanted to start my own company and wanted guidance into the right direction. Her experience really fascinated me, and I knew her mentoring me would be a good match.”

Diann recalled Zoldano as a “self-directed (mentee), who already knew what she wanted and researched her chosen industry prior to meeting with me.”

Zoldano’s love for beauty and fashion led her to obtain skills in the art of microblading semi-permanent tattoos for eyebrows. She earned the certification needed to start her business and secured work in a salon as an independent contractor.

“I gained so much by learning to be in the right mindset with Marla,” Zoldano said. “Becoming an entrepreneur – especially while finishing up school – is tough and can be distracting.

“I really gained excellent insight from Marla in the ability to gracefully remove myself from negative feedback others were offering me – no fault of their own, just trying to protect me!

Marla has really helped me stay focused on my dreams and not give up when I hit a few bumps along the way. She taught me to always think positively, always think things through and to follow through.”

Diann encourages SDSU parents to suggest the AMP program to their students. “It’s life-changing in ways that the classroom can never touch, and it’s real-world experience,” she said.

Diann also highly recommends that parents get involved in mentoring. Years after those middle school career days, her son Taylor is now a successful 28-year-old building his own business in real estate investment and solar power.

“Back when I mentored for my son’s middle school, I enjoyed seeing young minds get inspired about their talents and how they could make an impact. Today, I am honored to do the same for SDSU students,” said Diann.

“In AMP, we are building leaders for the future. That’s a legacy plan we can be proud of.” ■

Aztec parents are encouraged to get involved as professional mentors in the Aztec Mentor Program and to encourage their junior, senior and graduate students to sign up for a mentor. Find out more online at <https://amp.sdsu.edu/about>

