

## Bartlett's News Briefs

May 20, 2022

# Three Oceana High School seniors leave legacy of medical learning and hands-on care

BY JEAN BARTLETT



Jean Bartlett photo

**On campus with Oceana High School seniors, l to r: Kaylee Cheng, Leila Dela Pena and Cherry Wu.**

On May 25, 2022, three friends and senior officers of the Future Medical Professionals Club will graduate from Oceana High School in Pacifica. Leila Dela Pena is Club President, Cherry Wu is Club Vice President and Kaylee Chang is Club Treasurer. The three women created FMP in their junior year, though both Cherry and Kaylee underscored the idea of the club was Leila's. The online club was formed in the middle of the COVID-19 global pandemic. While Oceana offers an array of extra-curricular activities, the school encourages students to form clubs representing their interests. Each club works with a teacher

advisor and all three officers are ardent admirers of FMP's Teacher Advisor Laura Hodder, AP Chemistry teacher.

As explained on the [FMP website](#), *"the purpose of FMP is to help students gain a better understanding of the diverse medical professions available and guide those who are uncertain about what career path they want to pursue. We also want students to become more involved with health care."*

FMP does this through both hands-on projects and Zoom visits with guest speakers representing different aspects of the expansive and multifaceted medical field. In the past two years, FMP hosted three speakers: a forensic pathologist, a hospitalist and an OB-GYN (obstetrician-gynecologist).

At a minimum, all guest speakers were asked: what inspired them to go into their particular field; to walk their listeners through a day on the job; and how were they able to balance their professional life with their private life. All guest speakers were additionally quite frank about the number of years of schooling their medical field required. Did that latter answer scare Leila, Cherry or Kaylee? They all laughed and said, "a little," but all agreed it was not a deterrent.

As to hands-on projects, the women looked to veterans, specifically veterans with dementia.

"My mom works at the San Francisco VA Medical Center," Leila said. "During the pandemic, she talked about how the patients she worked with were really miserable because they couldn't go outside of their rooms. To be stuck in a room all day, not able to see your loved ones, I just thought that was so sad."

And so the research of what to do about that began and created FMP's "Brain Exercise Initiative." Leila, Cherry and Kaylee created it with the help of Leila's mom and a San Francisco VA nurse. The project was inspired by UCLA's nonprofit organization, Brain Exercise Initiative. UCLA's BEI uses "simple math, writing and reading aloud exercises as an intervention to improve cognitive function in those with Alzheimer's disease."

"The plan for our small program," Leila explained, "was to help those who suffer with all forms of dementia through simple cognitive exercises such as: simple math, reading, poetry activities, asking them about their pasts – having conversations with them. We collected data and did word recall every week to see if the patients were making any progress."

"Our club meets every Thursday for an hour and a half," Cherry noted. "After we would do a 'Brain Exercise Initiative,' we talked to the nurse who was taking care of these patients. We told the nurse what went well during the session, what went wrong and how we could improve the slide show we presented. Each time we visited with a patient, we kept a journal log of what we told them and what happened during the session so we could tailor our slide show more towards the individual person."

The three FMP officers explained what "poetry activities" entails. A theme, such as "food," is picked. Then during FMP's online visit with a veteran, they ask specific questions which evoke a past memory.

"We would form their unique responses into poems and read it to them the next time we met. In some cases, we even transformed these poems into songs and sang it to them."

The beautiful poem that follows was created by one veteran's memory about nature. As stated on FMP's website, Leila, Cherry and Kaylee also said in person, "This particular veteran was wise and intelligent, giving us a new perspective on life."

*I used to hike in nature  
Encountering some barriers  
At least I didn't have to pay  
To have fun and admire the bay*

*I like the Jerusalem artichoke  
Its beauty could give me a stroke  
And I don't have to venture far  
To cherish the abundant herbs in my yard*

*Out my window is the ocean  
I love to watch the waves in motion  
I like the seals that come to shore  
They are slippery but I adore*

*I remember Mexico's sunset  
And the dead stingray, I'll never forget*

*When the sun says goodbye  
It reminds me of that loss of life  
The sun and stingray went to rest  
Went to a place without stress*

*~By San Francisco VA Hospital veteran and friend to Future Medical Professionals Club*

"I really enjoyed working with patients with dementia," Leila said. "It was so rewarding to see a smile on their face. When they left Zoom they would say, 'Oh, they are such good kids.' Or when they laughed, that meant a lot to me. Just the friendships we made with them were so valuable. It is really rare to make those intergenerational-type friendships, especially during the pandemic when it was such an isolating time. It was just so valuable to me."

Since she was very young, Leila knew she wanted to immerse herself in medical research.

"My sister works with pharmaceutical companies and clinical trials. As I was growing up, she would take me to her labs and I knew then I wanted to be in that environment. I enjoy the dynamic of it."

Cherry entered high school knowing she wanted to be in the STEM field (science, technology, engineering, and math).

"As a freshman, I had the idea of being a data scientist or some kind of a mathematician," Cherry said. "But as soon as I joined the Future Medical Professionals Club and had access to guest speakers who talked about such things as 'the day in the life of a gynecologist,' or 'a hospitalist' – these insights changed things. Now I know I want to become some sort of a physician or even a pediatric surgeon."

Something else weighed in on Cherry's decision. Raised in the Bay Area, Cherry was born in Guangzhou, China, where she lived for three years.

"When I was China," Cherry recalled, "I was in and out of the hospital a lot. I became accustomed to that 'hospital' lifestyle and really liked all the nurses who took care of me."

It is a pivotal memory for Cherry and she wants to give back.

Kaylee sees her love of people as the catalyst for her career in the medical field.

"I really like people and I think that the goal of being a doctor is to help people," Kaylee said. "I take a lot of pride in being a people person. I was thinking of being a pediatrician, which I am not deterred from, however, I think I want to go more into women's studies. As a woman, as you mature, you realize things about your personal life that I think others can relate to as well, and that's why I am considering women's studies more than any other field."

"Oh and this has nothing to do with my medical career," Kaylee laughed, "but can you be sure to note that I also love my pet guinea pigs. I have the best guinea pigs in the world!"

What are some of the other interests of the three Oceana seniors?

Leila plays tennis a lot. During swim season, she swims. She absolutely loves trivia. She plays Jeopardy every night. Kaylee thoroughly enjoys taking community college courses. But outside of academics, she really likes cooking and baking.

"I think food is my love language," Kaylee smiled. "I often do baking-related activities. I had a bake sale in high school. We were learning about the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and the bake sale was for the sole purpose of giving donations to individuals in need. I have created cooking classes for little kids. It's a Zoom interaction and it is the most fun thing. Kids are so honest. I have a whole camera set up in my kitchen."

It should be noted that during this interview, Kaylee wore a crepe bandage on her left hand due to a minor burn she sustained while cooking, talking, multi-tasking.

Cherry said she enjoys films and analyzing them. She is additionally a huge fan of fashion and yes, when asked, she would love to go to the Paris Fashion Week in the spring – of course depending on her spring break from UC Berkeley. That is where she is heading to study molecular and cell biology. Leila is also studying molecular and cell biology at UC Berkeley. Kaylee will be attending UCLA. Her field of study is human biology and society. All are well aware there are many more years of schooling ahead before they complete their medical education.

"For me it is all about lifelong learning being in the medical field," Cherry said. "And I really love science. It's just like perfect for me, that the medical field is both lifelong learning and science together."

Last summer, Cherry shadowed a pediatrician at San Francisco Chinese Hospital.

"I got to witness a full day of what she does. She showed me primary exams and yearly checkups. I saw a stitch removal which I found really interesting. I also was able to comfort little kids that were having a tough time."

Cherry additionally took free online courses provided through Stanford's Online Learning for a Lifetime. She took courses created by Stanford computer science professors.

During the pandemic, Leila worked online with a pediatric clinic. The clinic was understaffed and Leila worked with insurance companies, vaccine administration and management.

All three friends believe in getting involved. In that regard, they were each asked about their Senior Exhibition project. Referred to as Oceana's capstone project, Senior Exhibition is a year-long research project "focused on a controversial question chosen by the student, without a single objective answer."

Significant research and expert opinion on both sides of the debate are required, and it has two major parts, the paper and the presentation.

"I did my topic on gender-affirming health care in the U.S.," Leila said, "and how to make it more available especially during this wave of anti-LGBTQ legislation, such as: Florida's 'Don't Say Gay Bill' or in Texas, the 'classifying gender-affirming medical care for transgender minors as child abuse under the Texas Family Code.'"

"I did mine on whether we should increase or reduce pediatric clinical trials," Cherry said. "I was on the side of increasing them because overall we need clinical trials to help further science. I believe there is more positive outcome from clinical trials."

"My topic was, 'should feminine hygiene products be free and available for everyone,'" Kaylee said. "I feel it is a really normalized issue in that it is not discussed as much as it should be because it is the 'norm' to pay every time."

"The school just provided some supplies for free," Kaylee added. "I don't know that I created that change. I think it just happened. But I'll take the credit. Ha! Ha!"

Will the Future Medical Professionals Club continue after its founders graduate? Absolutely. Already the club's 2022-2023 officers have been elected.

"I don't think any of us ever stressed about how to make the FMP Club work because Leila put so much effort into it," Kaylee said. "And all of us wanted to put the work into it. We enjoyed the process. There was no big leap because we were all experiencing going through it for our first time. It just made it fun."



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is also an award-winning children's book author, a former Hallmark Card writer, a produced playwright and the author of two historical biography books on some of the more than 370,000 interred at Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma. Visit her website at [www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com).