



PRESS RELEASE

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Media contact:

Gaynor D. Daleno
Interim Communications Manager
University of Guam
Tel: (671) 735-2957
Email: dalenog@triton.uog.edu

UOG CHamoru Studies alumna receives East-West Center graduate fellowship

If one can learn anything from University of Guam alumna Brilyn Aguilar's experience, it's to go for an aspiration without being held back by the fear of failure.

While working on her CHamoru Studies classes at UOG's College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, following a degree in photography at an Art Institute in the continental U.S., Aguilar decided to apply for a master's degree program at the University of Hawaii and for a spot in the East-West Center Graduate Degree Fellowship this coming academic year.

She wasn't sure about her chances but with some guidance on her essay, and her portfolio of work in visual storytelling, she went for it.

Aguilar got accepted into the Master of Arts in Pacific Island Studies program UH at Manoa and the fellowship that will pay for at least the first year of her graduate education.

"If an opportunity arises, at least try," she said when asked about what other students can learn about reaching for an academic star. "But don't get too hurt if you don't touch it," she added later.

She starts her master's program and fellowship in August. She aims to compile stories and images to showcase the history and culture of people of the Pacific as part of her thesis plan.

The events that led her back to Guam – and ultimately to UOG – happened during the pandemic. She left Guam when she was 19.

After her degree in photography, and while in a customer service-oriented job in Portland, she spent some of her spare time watching Guam and Pacific culture, history, and other online content that gave her a connection to home.

“I would go on YouTube and just watch a lot of Pacific Islands stuff. I was very homesick during the pandemic; there were all these travel restrictions,” she said. She viewed documentaries “about the Pacific Islands – whether it was history, culture, science – all of the above.”

When the pandemic travel restrictions were lifted, she came back home to her mixed CHamoru-Filipino family, and enrolled in the CHamoru Studies program at UOG. She completed the program in May 2023.

Thankful for mentorship at UOG

She gives credit to all her UOG instructors for providing some of the foundations she needed to aspire to learn more about Pacific Island studies.

The fellowship gives Aguilar the opportunity to participate in the East-West Center’s programs that offer a range of activities designed to foster intellectual and cultural interaction. Beyond fulfilling degree requirements at UH Manoa, East-West Center Fellows are expected to be leaders in the East-West Center Community and active participants in its programs.

Aguilar gets to experience a series of events connecting students to the issues, cultures and leaders that shape the Asia-Pacific Region, and an 8- to 12-month EWC leadership development project, among other activities.

After the initial period of one year, the fellowship may be renewed for a maximum of two years – subject to funding availability, timely and satisfactory progress toward completion of the degree, and fulfillment of East-West Center requirements.

She takes a pragmatic approach to well-intended suggestions from her extended family for her future career options, packing the ideas into her “backpack of aspirations.”

She does take a realistic view: If throwing an aspiration “into the universe – into the ocean” does not result in success, her approach is to prepare herself to not get crushed by it.

If her current journey goes well, she would like to also one day earn a Ph.D. – hoping to get there first – as her two siblings also are aiming for it.

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Photo caption:

Brylin Aguilar, a University of Guam alumna who earned her certificate in CHamoru Studies, has earned a fellowship at the East-West Center and a scholarship to the Master of Arts in Pacific Island Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.