

Making Change from the Inside

A Profile of Madison Tilner, a Student Activist

By: Lia Bilodeau



Wednesday, February 24th of 2021 was a bittersweet day for Madison Tilner. When she pressed “Leave Meeting,” her term as President of UCSB’s Panhellenic Council officially ended, and another chapter of college had come to a close. The installation ceremony she presided over was vastly different from the one she experienced a little over a year ago, and rather than celebrating alongside her fellow council at Mosher Alumni House on campus, she was sitting under the fluorescent lighting of the garage at her house. From my bed across the room, I had witnessed Madison sit through hours of meetings each week, never failing to conceive innovative ideas to meet her community’s ever changing needs. As President, Madison filled many duties, but the most important one was activist.

Known to friends and classmates as Maddie, Madison Tilner is a senior at the University of California, Santa Barbara, just one quarter shy of graduation and on the precipice of what is sure to be a lifetime of activism. Madison can often be overheard chatting with peers in Zoom rooms, intently listening to the stories and plans of others, and offering her own inspiration through stories of her own work and experiences. Going above and beyond her role as a student leader and transforming into a student activist has been Madison’s mark at UCSB, and her impact will last far longer than her years as a student.

From Polling Stations to Capitol Steps

Joining her mother on walks to the polling station from a young age, awareness of the political power that every single person holds has been a constant in Madison's life. There wasn't an election that the duo missed and this consistency prepared her for diligent activism as she grew older. Raised in the San Fernando Valley, she was surrounded by the height of Los Angeles political action, and exposed to political debate and conversations in school and beyond.



Madison, second from left in row of students, lobbying in Washington D.C. while in high school. Picture from Madison Tilner.

In 11th grade, before she could even vote, she joined her peers on a trip to Washington D.C. to lobby her local representatives on gun control. The conference was hosted by her temple, which gathered young Jewish students from across the country to teach them the power of political action and the power of their individual voices. Madison still recalls the speech she crafted with her friends, and how they practiced their parts over and over before meeting with Congressman Brad Sherman to share their stories and vision of a gun-free world. Having a mother and religious leaders in her life who affirmed her political power encouraged her to speak up about things that mattered to her and the world. The idea that anyone can be an activist and fight for change has stuck with Madison through college and empowered her to go above and beyond in everything she does.

Stepping into UCSB

Madison's commitment to leading a socially-conscious life is evident in the extensive coursework she has undertaken at UCSB. As a double major in both Political Science and Sociology, as well as an active member of the campus honor's program, she has studied many of society's most pressing social issues, as well as the structures that either uphold them or change

them. One recurring theme for her has been the power to make change from the inside, and how important it is for people in positions of power to consider themselves activists and use that power for good. This drive to create change in the places where she already has power is evident from how willingly she steps into leadership roles and won't ever settle for the bare minimum.

During a typical school year, Madison could often be found in the Arbor or walking through campus housing, checking in with students to ensure that they had registered at their new addresses and were set to vote in any upcoming elections. Her mission was simple: to remind every student of their political power and voice through voting. In the back of her mind, it lingered that not everyone had been as fortunate as her to grow up in a house where they were encouraged to be civically engaged, and taught that their actions and opinions mattered. Every time she made contact with a student was an opportunity to share her message about the power each individual holds, and to invite them to act upon it.

As a freshman, Madison was eager to get involved in the campus community and make the most of her college experience. Joining Greek Life isn't the path that people expect of when thinking of a typical activist, but for Madison, being an activist is not circumstantial; it is something she carries with her in everything she does. Starting during her first quarter of membership in Gamma Phi Beta, Madison stepped into chapter leadership roles, and eventually served on the Executive Board during the 2019 school year.

As Panhellenic Affairs Vice President, Madison worked with the wider UCSB community to support the philanthropic goals of Gamma Phi Beta and other organizations. Listening to feedback from community members and watching fellow student activists primed her with ideas for her term as Panhellenic President, and opened her eyes to the impactful work already being done around her. After attending a conference with the larger Greek community and hearing about how multicultural organizations felt excluded by Interfraternity Council and Panhellenic chapters, she successfully planned and hosted the first annual All Greek Barbeque, which has become a standing event. To Madison, there was no hesitation to step up after hearing about the concerns and inequality in her own community, and she made her position her own. The official description of the position wasn't a goal to be met, but rather a jumping off point for how she could better the world for others.

Panhellenic President

When she first entered her term as the President of UCSB's Panhellenic Council, Madison was ready with a fresh list of ideas and vision of the future for the Panhellenic community. She was tasked with leading over 1,400 women, making her the President of the largest women's organization at UCSB. However, less than one month later, life around the world fundamentally

changed, and the remainder of the year brought challenges that no one had expected. The world was plunged into a once in a century pandemic, and nearly every activity had to be modified to preserve the health and safety of the global community. Nearly everything she had been trained with in preparation for her term was rendered irrelevant, except for one suggestion. Her staff advisor through the university left her with a word of advice that shaped her term as Panhellenic President: “You have so much and could do so much, and you don't realize it.” Although she was not the first student in her position to hear that advice, it came from someone who had watched it go neglected in prior terms. As it stands, the role of President is exhausting. The meetings are ceaseless, the summer months are consumed with planning for recruitment, meeting incoming students, and keeping in touch with community members to ensure a safe and rewarding membership experience.



Madison, second from the left, after being elected Panhellenic President. Picture from Madison Tilner.

As challenging as all of those tasks are, they become infinitely more difficult during a global pandemic when everything has gone remote. Rather than see this as a horrible twist of fate, Madison embraced the challenge, and used it as an opportunity to examine Greek life through a critical lens and set to work fixing the problems she saw.

When asked to describe the defining agenda of her term, COVID-19 and the racial justice movement that swept through America in 2020 were the two things that stood out the most. Madison was barely two weeks into her term when the transition to remote learning was announced, and the following months were faced with uncertainty about what the coming school year would bring. Just a few short months later, the death of George Floyd rocked the nation, and sparked an anti-racism movement that encouraged every American to look at themselves through

a critical lens and how they were contributing to deeply-rooted systemic racism. Greek life was no exception to this movement, and the internal and external pressure at UCSB to create meaningful reform fell onto Madison, who was ready and excited to rise to the occasion.

Diversity and Inclusion in the Greek Community

Leading up to return to school and recruitment in October, Madison knew it was her chance to create lasting, meaningful change that would shape UCSB's Greek community for decades to come. One of her first action items was to transform the community-wide programming that took place before recruitment each year, facilitating meetings with both chapter leadership teams and the wider community. Rather than having the entire Panhellenic community listen to a motivational speaker, representatives from each chapter collaborated to create presentations about Diversity and Inclusion, and then led conversations between chapters about what it meant to create a more inclusive sorority experience.

Madison also was on the forefront of encouraging change at the national level, working to eliminate legacy preference at UCSB and encouraging national organizations to do the same. She spent hours going back and forth between local and national representatives of chapters, carefully writing new bylaws for Panhellenic that would be considered acceptable to all stakeholders while still creating meaningful change. Her power made her a negotiator of sorts, who worked to further the mission of anti-racism and encouraged leaders within the Panhellenic community to lobby their national organizations for change, or stand in solidarity with inclusion and commit to change within their chapter, even if it stood in defiance of their national organizations.



Madison, bottom center, with the rest of the Panhellenic Council. Picture from Madison Tilner.

One of the other lasting measures Madison took to ensure a financial commitment to diversity and inclusion in the Greek community was establishing an endowment that will provide

scholarships for countless years that will eliminate financial barriers to participation in Greek life. Additionally, she worked with her fellow officers to create a scholarship that was offered immediately and awarded based on both need and merit, with the recognition that eliminating the financial burden of membership would allow members to thrive in the community more than ever. After the funds were awarded, Madison recalled the messages she received from the women who were scholarship recipients. “We got so many responses from the people that were awarded the money, saying how they didn’t want to have to resign from their chapters, and now they definitely wouldn’t need to.” The creation of this scholarship was one of many long-term solutions that Madison led the implementation of to support the need for diversity and inclusion in the Greek community.

COVID Response

On a Friday night, it was a common occurrence for Madison to receive text messages and DMs from concerned UCSB community members who suspected that Greek-affiliated organizations were hosting illegal and unsafe gatherings. Immediately, she would spring into action, crafting carefully worded responses that thanked the person for sharing with her. She then encouraged them to send other information so she could figure out who to get in contact with to make sure that the health of the Isla Vista community was not being jeopardized. The underlying expectation with every message sent to her was that she should be responsible for monitoring student behavior, especially instances where the university fell short. Nothing in her job description bound her to managing Isla Vista nightlife during the pandemic, but she embraced the responsibility, feeling obligated to step up in slowing the spread of COVID.

Madison also used the power from her position to advocate for enhanced COVID prevention protocols on a campus-wide level. She started meeting with Student Health staff to share feedback she had heard from community members about COVID testing and contact tracing, and advocated for weekly COVID tests to be offered to all students, not just those who lived on or worked on campus. It would have been easy for her to only recommend opening testing to residents of Greek houses, but she recognized that she had the ability to help more than just the Panhellenic community. “I wanted to be the person on the inside making positive change, and the change I was trying to facilitate was long needed. I wanted to be the one contributing to that process,” said Madison during our interview.

Looking Forward

Recognition of the power that each person holds when it comes to making change has been a guiding principle in Madison’s life, and the future she envisions for herself holds a life of public

service. “I’ve always had the idea that I want to do something for the government and be that change maker on the inside. I would want to work for the city or the state or the FBI, or something like that.” During her time over the summer that wasn’t spent on her Panhellenic duties, she was preparing to take the LSAT, with hopes to attend law school in the Fall of 2022. Madison hopes that her training in law school further equips her to become a voice for the voiceless, and an advocate for the powerless. She knows that no matter where she ends up post-graduation, there will be an opportunity to represent people who need someone on their side, especially those who need help navigating the judicial system.

In a final message to her peers about what it means to be an activist, Madison said, “We grow up and come to college and are just so used to everyone controlling our lives, one way or another. And I think it takes everyone a different amount of time to realize that they do have a voice. If people are passionate about something, they should feel empowered to work towards it and talk about it, and be an activist because we, even though it's cliché, are the future leaders and if we care about something, we have the time in our lives to hopefully see it through.”