

The Many Branches of Alia Sky's Advocacy

From quietly sitting in the back of a club meeting to sitting on the board of a nonprofit, Alia Sky embodies the dynamic approaches to advocacy that young changemakers take.



By Sicily Barry

Sitting in the back silently watching the meeting unfold, Alia kept her head down. She planted herself in the chair. Meeting after meeting, roots began to grow from her feet that remained planted on the floor. With time, her head began to rise towards the fluorescent lights that lit the

meetings. Her broken branches began to heal with each conversation being had. She was unaware that this chair, this meeting, this community, would allow her to not just grow, but to blossom. Here, watching a Students Against Sexual Assault meeting unfold, Alia Sky took her first steps towards a college career of advocacy and healing. Entering her sophomore year at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Alia found herself struggling with navigating her own experience as a survivor. After attending a handful of Students Against Sexual Assault (SASA) meetings, Alia was called upon to take on a leadership role as another member could no longer do the work. Through the process of helping those around her navigate their personal experiences as survivors, Alia began to find herself accepting her own experience and her identity as a survivor. While helping others couldn't heal all of her trauma, it gave her a purpose and path to embark upon.

Planting Her Roots

SASA was founded three years ago in Santa Barbara with the mission of eliminating all sexual violence in the surrounding communities. It has chapters at UC Santa Barbara, UC Santa Cruz, and Santa Barbara City College. SASA focuses on changing policy, providing education, and working with the community. Currently, Alia works as the Vice President of SASA, the nonprofit, and is involved in the UCSB chapter. She explained that one benefit of having the nonprofit separate from the school chapter is that they are able to pressure the University both from outside and from within. This enables both bottom-up and top-down change. Her involvement in SASA has allowed her to be a part of a lot of exciting changes. One of her most memorable accomplishments was when SASA was given SB 493, a bill that was being introduced to allow California to counteract some of the Title IX changes instituted by Betsy DeVos, to look over and make recommendations. From making recommendations, to lobbying for the bill, to helping revive and amend it, SASA mothered the bill from infancy to adulthood. After two years, the bill was passed, and Alia got to see her, and her peers' influence come to life through policy change. While we spoke, Alia's face lit up when telling me about how recently SASA was asked to be the co-author of another bill.

While these policy wins are very meaningful, Alia passionately explained that the most meaningful changes that she has been a part of are simple encounters with others. “When we get asked to work on a policy change, we usually only get a scrap. They’re not going to give us the full cookie. But when an individual tells you that this work has impacted them, inspired them, or helped them, it’s just a completely different feeling. That’s getting the whole cookie.” SASA’s recent work has included publishing a magazine for survivors and allies of survivors. In addition to the magazine, SASA is also working on a project to help inform the community on the meaning of consent. While helping the survivor community will always be the center of Alia’s advocacy, she’s expanded her reach and dipped her toes into a variety of other issues as well.

Expanding Her Branches

“Sexual violence is everywhere. Sexual violence affects everyone. So, if you want to do the work to end sexual violence, you can’t just help survivors,” explained Alia when we began speaking about broadening her advocacy efforts. By learning about intersectionality, Alia was able to see that the arms of sexual violence deeply reach into society and touch all sectors of it. Issues such as housing insecurity, food insecurity, and mental health all contribute to sexual violence in one way or another. So, if Alia was going to work towards ending sexual violence, she was going to need to work towards ending systemic inequalities as a whole. One way that she has worked towards this goal, is by enrolling in the first year of the Intersectional Justice Facilitator certificate program at UCSB. Defined as “someone who has critical social justice language and understanding of the various intersecting systems of oppression harming communities” an Intersectional Justice Facilitator works to apply this knowledge through social justice work (UCSB PACE). This year’s coalition of students focused on the carceral system and its intersections with various systemic inequalities, with the goal of finding avenues towards the abolition of the prison industrial complex.

Alia decided to embark on this certificate program in order to supplement her own research regarding an intersectional restorative justice program for college survivors of sexual violence. Within the certificate classes, Alia was able to learn where these ideas of restorative justice and intersectionality came from. After believing that these concepts were relatively new, Alia was surprised to learn of their rich histories. She believes that there is great importance in learning of the legacies in which young activists are a part of. From climate justice, to criminal justice, to LGBTQ rights, youth activism is imperative in creating change. When young activists are aware of the history behind the movements they're participating in, they're less likely to repeat mistakes of the past. By learning about the historical roots of abolition, Alia has been able to apply this knowledge in her role as the External Vice President of Statewide Affairs (EVPSA) for Associated Students at UCSB. Specifically, right now as EVPSA, Alia is working with the police advisory board, convened by Chancellor Yang, in an attempt to get tangible recommendations for policing. Committed to an abolitionist perspective, Alia is hoping to help contribute to some sort of change within UCPD.

Helping Others Grow

The multifaceted, intersectional approach that Alia brings to her advocacy sets an example for young changemakers today. Simply put: A changemaker is someone who desires to change the world. It's integral that young changemakers acknowledge the importance of an intersectional approach. Whether it be climate justice, equal housing initiatives, racial justice, or criminal justice, these are not isolated social problems. As Alia found with sexual violence, in order to solve one of these social ills, changemakers must work to acknowledge how each social ill contributes to another. Education is essential in making this happen. If it wasn't for learning about intersectionality and the history behind the concept, Alia wouldn't have been able to make these connections. As young changemakers, we must situate ourselves as part of a lineage and acknowledge the legacies that came before us. By educating ourselves on the historical roots of social ills, we can attack the systems that nurture these roots rather than just attacking each branch.

Not only does an intersectional approach necessitate acknowledging how social problems are connected, but it also necessitates a community approach to advocacy. When speaking about those who support her, Alia commented that “An individual cannot change all of these systems. An individual wasn’t meant to. It’s supposed to be that whole community.” The community she found in SASA and student government at UCSB has allowed her to actively create change. She simply would not be able to do it without them. Similarly, coalitions are essential for changemakers to actually see the change that they are hoping to make. Not only are single-issue coalitions important, but these coalitions working together to acknowledge their intersections are of the utmost importance. The technological world in which young changemakers were raised, allows for increased interconnectedness. Social media offers users the capability of reaching across the world and creating global coalitions of changemakers. In her advocacy for Palestine, Alia utilizes social media to both gain and share information from activists that she would not have access to without social media. The far reach that social media offers enables globalized advocacy. As a result, we are able to form communities outside of our immediate peers and work towards globalized change.

Alia’s journey began with planting roots. It wasn’t until those around her began to support her growth that her branches began to reach towards the sunrays and her blossoms began to bloom. She began to notice that by supporting each other, we could grow whole gardens. Alia is not alone in this process. Each day a new young changemaker begins to plant their roots. By working alongside each other, we can make sure that each of these roots begins to grow, and eventually, their blooms will blossom too.