

## **Cindy Preto: Following your Interests and Passions<sup>1</sup>**

Spring, 2014

Cindy Preto paced around her kitchen, then carefully measured the water for coffee and once again rehearsed what she would say to her professor. She had been raising brown marmorated stink bugs for a supervised USDA project the last couple of months as a part of her MURALS project and she was very much enjoying the work.<sup>2</sup> The USDA even wanted to keep her on and pay for graduate school. Although Cindy loved bugs and doing research, she knew that a project with these particular creatures wouldn't have any bearing on the work she ultimately wanted to do after she completed her degree.

Cindy poured a cup of coffee and took a sip, then walked towards the window, still thinking about her research. She knew her professor had an upcoming project that would be more related to her chosen professional goal to become a consultant on vineyard pests. She knew it would make a big difference if she could tell future clients, 'yes, I've done research on an insect or disease that is in your vineyard,' rather than on something like brown marmorated stink bugs that did not currently pose a problem to grape cultivation. And now, after considering it for over a week, she had finally decided to just go ahead and ask if research on 'red blotch,' a grapevine virus, could be the project for her Masters degree.

Cindy hadn't always been so focused on academics, but when she did put her mind to something she always followed through. As a child, she had excelled in school and never found the work to be difficult. She had even enrolled in junior college after high school and completed two years. But when opportunity called she had left that behind to pursue

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<sup>2</sup> Mentorships for Undergraduate Research in Agriculture, Letters, and Science (MURALS) is a UC Davis pre-graduate opportunity program designed to enrich the research experience of students situationally disadvantaged in their access to graduate school. See <http://success.ucdavis.edu/programs/murals/>

interests and adventures she thought might only be open to her in the early part of her life. Now, 13 years later, she had nearly completed her undergraduate degree and was considering graduate school.

Arriving with a goal in mind, Cindy had pursued her studies rigorously. A little bit of serendipity had helped her get involved in MURALS and things had worked out surprisingly well. (See Exhibit A) But now, she needed to pause and assess what she really wanted to do and what mattered most. Talking first with her professor about the possibility of research on 'red blotch' was the next step.

### **Early years and Foster Care**

Cindy's early years were somewhat tumultuous. She and her sister lived with her father after her parents divorced, but then were moved into foster care after her father got into legal trouble. After a short time in foster care, the girls and their younger brother went to live with their mother but were again placed in foster care when Cindy's mother became unable to care for them. Finally, after another 8-9 months in foster care, Cindy and her siblings returned to live with their mother.

Cindy received good grades in school without much support from either her family or teachers. Due to a course of independent study, she was able to work at her own pace during some of her high school education, ultimately returning to a public high school as a junior at the age of 14. "I was really independent in high school and didn't need much support," Cindy said. "I got good grades without having to really try hard."

As the first in her family to be interested in higher education, Cindy wasn't sure what tests to take or how to apply to college so she never went through the process. "I looked into it, but I didn't really know how to do it. I really didn't have the resources to help me do it," she said, "and there was no one around me saying, 'let's work through this together.'"

### **Junior College, Life Experience and Moving Forward**

Cindy attended junior college while living in San Diego during her early twenties and majored in biology. She was accepted to UC San Diego as a transfer student but instead decided to take a break from school. Somewhere in the back of her mind, however, she always intended to return, a desire that became important ten years later when she was living in New York.

"I knew I had the capability of doing anything that I wanted to do so I tried to imagine what I could do everyday and it wouldn't feel like a job," Cindy said. At first she considered various food industry related professions because of her love of cooking. She thought about becoming a chef, but having dated a restaurateur and knowing the difficult lifestyle involved in that profession, she decided not to pursue that line of work. She also considered catering but knew that cooking for strangers was not the same as cooking for family and friends. "Finally I thought longer and asked myself, what else? What else do you love to do? And that's when I settled on wine. I love how I feel when

I'm in a vineyard," Cindy explained. Once she had settled on the notion of becoming a winemaker, Cindy began to explore how she would go about entering that profession.

"I had been wine tasting in Europe and South America and wine was a big part of my life, but I wasn't sure how one went about becoming a winemaker. Was it an apprenticeship? A degree? Or a certificate program?"

Cindy conducted some research on the web and discovered that UC Davis had a wine making program. Knowing she had completed the IGETC requirements and had been admitted to UC San Diego, Cindy believed she would also get admitted to UC Davis. "I didn't want to pay out of state tuition and even though I was living in New York, I was still a resident of California," she said. "When I thought about where I wanted to make wine, it was in California, not in another state."

### **Returning to School with a Focus**

Cindy decided to return to northern California to pursue her Bachelor's degree in Viticulture and Enology. She packed up her UHaul in New York, drove to LA to empty out the home she still maintained in that city, and moved to Sacramento. She entered junior college to complete four missing classes, then applied and was accepted to UC Davis' Viticulture and Enology department.

The transition to the quarter system was hard and like nothing Cindy had experienced before. She wanted to hit the ground running when she arrived at Davis so she prepared as much as possible ahead of time. She loved how passionate her professors were, how much they seemed to enjoy teaching, and how approachable they were. Cindy was especially pleased by how dedicated her professors were to ensuring she understood the material. They were committed to students having a comprehensive understanding and a grasp of "the importance how of everything comes together." In contrast to her time in junior college, Cindy had an overwhelming array of great professors.

### **Conducting Undergraduate Research**

When she was six, Cindy had asked for a microscope for her birthday and then spent all of her free time in the backyard looking for bugs and examining them under her microscope. When she finally took an entomology class at UC Davis, memories of the simple enjoyment she found in this exploration came flooding back. All these experiences that had been lost during her difficult upbringing were now, once again, available. Not wanting to lose that feeling of joy and fascination, Cindy decided to combine her passion for wine with her interest in insects. Working in pest and disease management meant Cindy could bring her two passions together.

At the start of her second year at UC Davis, Cindy learned about doing research with the MURALS program during a meeting with her Guardian Scholars Program advisor. Within two weeks she had a project and was working with the USDA (See footnote about MURALS on the first page of the case). The director of the MURALS program had asked about her interests and suggested she find a topic in Viticulture and Enology. Cindy was

more interested in entomology though so she researched the entomology professors and found there was one that worked with grapes. She was prepared to talk about her goals when she sat down with the professor for a chat.

Participating in the MURALS program also allowed Cindy the opportunity to present her research findings at the Entomological Society of America Conference. Additionally, she helped the USDA write a paper on her topic. “Just being posed that simple question during the meeting with my advisor, ‘have you ever thought about doing undergraduate research?’ changed my entire academic path,” said Cindy. “Conducting research helped me find my passion and focus my studies by working on something I really cared about.”

### **Thinking through to the Future**

Although the USDA had offered to fund Cindy through the completion of her research on the brown marmorated stink bug, and this would actually cover the costs of attending graduate school, Cindy was hesitant. Although it was an excellent opportunity, she really wanted to work on something that would be directly related to her career goals. Cindy had heard about the project on red blotch through weekly MURALS meetings. Now all she had to do was talk with her professor.

## **Exhibit A: MURALS Statement**

My name is Cindy Preto and I am a senior at UC Davis majoring in Viticulture & Enology with a minor in Agricultural Pest Management. I am a reentry student, a former foster care youth, and a first generation college student. I am interested in pursuing pest management in vineyards. I am currently taking the courses needed to test for my Pest Control Advisor license upon graduation. This license will allow me to advise for pest management for any crop in the state of California although I plan on focusing on vineyards.

When I transferred to UC Davis I thought I wanted to be a winemaker. I have a passion for wine and I love being in the vineyards. After taking a few Viticulture and Entomology courses and partaking in an internship at a winery this summer, I gained some more clarity of what exactly I want to do in my field. I want to be in the wine industry as a Viticulturist. I am interested in taking care of the vines so that I can deliver quality grapes because I believe that good wine starts in the vineyard. As I have dug deeper though, I have rediscovered my fascination with insects. I realize that I am interested in pursuing management of insect pests in the vineyard.

Having an opportunity to work with MURALS would allow me to pursue research on the European Grapevine Moth, *Lobesia botrana*, in the Contained Research Facility at UC Davis. The European Grapevine Moth has the ability to do extensive damage in the vineyard causing substantial financial loss to the industry. This would be an exciting opportunity for me to do research on an insect that is a grapevine pest, yet not a lot of research has been done in the US due to its quarantine status. I plan on tracking the life stages of a population and setting up different trials to pinpoint the most susceptible life stage for control. This information is useful in the field for knowing at what time in the insect's life stage is the most effective time to apply a pesticide or other control agent.

Thank you for your consideration of my application.