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SALLY RIDE SCIENCE

Junior Academy Supervisor Christine Morales on how to engage remote learners with innovative online classes



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June 29, 2020 (<https://sallyridescience.ucsd.edu/sally-ride-science-junior-academy-supervisor-talks-about-engaging-remote-learners-with-innovative-online-steam-classes/>) by Sally Ride Science

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By Margaret King

When the coronavirus pandemic forced this summer's [Sally Ride Science Junior Academy](https://sallyridescience.ucsd.edu/junior-academy/) (<https://sallyridescience.ucsd.edu/junior-academy/>) to move online, the Junior Academy team saw an opportunity to help families during a difficult time by creating a high-quality remote learning program.

"We didn't just quickly throw together online classes," says Program Supervisor Christine Morales. "We thought about the student experience. We are working to have the same top quality we had in face-to-face classes and bringing it to an online format where students still get a personalized experience."

Junior Academy classes combine live Zoom sessions each day with individual work on the Canvas online platform. Morales says Junior Academy instructors have embraced the challenge of creating engaging online classes. "We are making sure students are involved," she says. "They will not just be sitting back and passively watching something on their screen."

Sally Ride Science, cofounded by America's first woman in space in 2001 to promote diversity in science education, became part of UC San Diego in 2015 and launched the Junior Academy in 2016 under the direction of UC San Diego Extension. Past Junior Academies were held at Mission Bay High School and University City Center.

This year's online Junior Academy once again offers a wide variety of STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) classes for girls and boys entering grades 4-12. The program, which runs from June 29 to July 24, has four sessions of week-long classes. Although the first session is under way, students can still register for the three upcoming weeks. (See [class schedule](https://sallyridescience.ucsd.edu/junior-academy/) (<https://sallyridescience.ucsd.edu/junior-academy/>))

Morales, who is in her second year as Junior Academy supervisor, has spent 29 years as an educator, including 22 years as a classroom teacher and a stint as an assistant principal. She currently teaches in the Alpine School District. When her classes went online in March because of the pandemic, it was a learning experience for both Morales and her students.

"Having done distance learning with my own class, I have used those experiences to figure out how to make the Junior Academy a high-quality program," she says. "We're all new at this. Everybody is learning from this together."

Morales says her experiences have shown the value of making connections in an online environment: "I've learned that it's important for online instructors to foster a relationship with students but also to encourage student-to-student relationships, and to make the class interesting enough and engaging enough so the student wants to come back."

The online Junior Academy lineup brings back popular classes from past academies – such as Messy Science, Slimy Sea Creatures and Filmmaking – and introduces innovative new offerings. Morales points to a few new classes she is excited about.

- **Intro to Ocean Science and Marine Biodiversity:** “The instructor adapted hands-on activities to give students a really involving online experience.”
- **Leadership in the Digital Age:** “This is an important topic for our times. How do you demonstrate leadership and become a leader in this age of digital devices?”
- **Intro to 3D Modeling with Blender:** “Students are going to be exploring 3D modeling and printing. I will be very interested to see the creations that come out of this class!”

Past Junior Academies focused on hands-activities; students might dissect a squid or build a Mars rover model or program a robot. In moving the classes online, the Junior Academy team looked for ways to allow students to do hands-on activities at home, but without the need for costly supplies.

“We were careful to construct classes where parents don’t need to purchase a lot of expensive items to replace the activities from the in-person classes,” Morales says. “By having instructors pare down their supply lists to the bare necessities, we were able to keep the cost down.”

For some activities, instructors will give step-by-step demonstrations during Zoom sessions, Morales says. For other projects, students may be called on to be creative and find their own materials around the house. “We’re trying to look at ordinary materials in a different way,” she says.

Morales is proud of how instructors have reached out to welcome students to an unfamiliar environment. “Instructors are sending out welcome videos to their students to get a jump on helping kids feel easier about an online class,” she says. “I am so excited about that. It just shows how we’re making this a more personalized experience for our students.”

She says parents can take an active role in ensuring that their students get the most from online classes. “When it’s time for the daily Zoom session, a parent can make sure their child is ready and willing to ask questions and speak up and not be shy or timid in this new learning environment,” she says.

“It helps for parents to have an open discussion with their children about what’s happening in the class,” she adds. “If parents have questions or concerns, they can take advantage of the instructors’ office hours.”

To help improve future online programs, the Junior Academy team is gathering feedback through a parent survey. “We’re hoping, from this experience and from parents’ input, that we can build upon this to create something we can do year round,” Morales says.

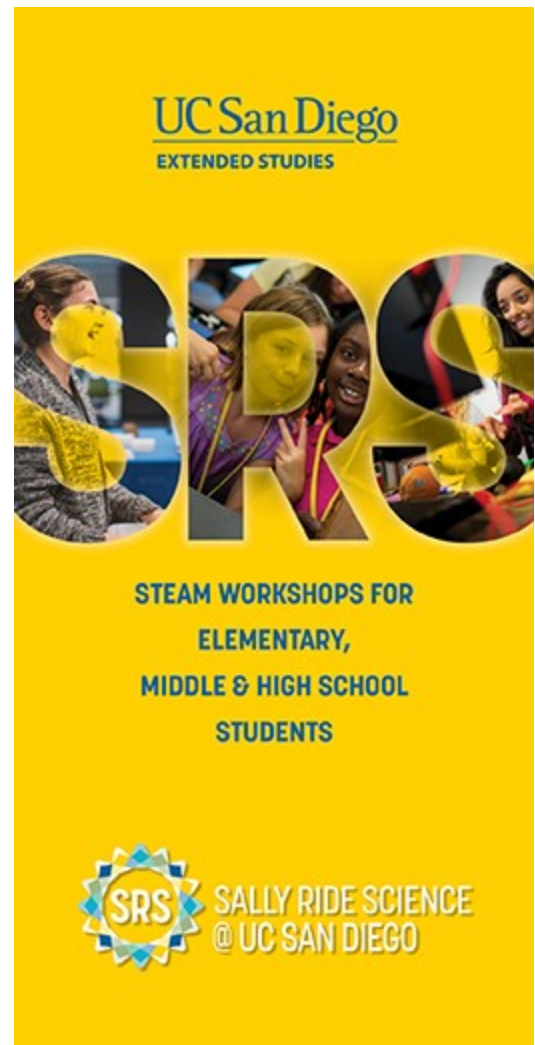
This year’s online Junior Academy attracted national attention when it was singled out by TeenLife as one of “[15 Awesome STEM Programs for Summer 2020](https://www.teenlife.com/blogs/15-awesome-stem-programs-summer-2020) (<https://www.teenlife.com/blogs/15-awesome-stem-programs-summer-2020>).” Morales notes that enrollments have come from other states and even from Canada, Asia and the Middle East. “It’s so exciting to see how far this is reaching and to look at where people are coming from when they register,” she says.

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