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**SALLY RIDE SCIENCE**

# College-student volunteer helps inspire kids in STEM during summer Junior Academy



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## **By Margaret King**

College engineering student Marco Pardo Rojas spent a big chunk of his summer volunteering to help younger students explore STEM subjects during [Sally Ride Science Junior Academy](https://sallyridescience.ucsd.edu/junior-academy/) (<https://sallyridescience.ucsd.edu/junior-academy/>). The experience left him eager for more.

“I would love to do something in the future to help kids see what kind of path they want to take,” said Marco, 21. “I think that’s a very important thing that was included in these workshops. They helped children, at a young age, to see what their interests are and where they want to focus.”

Marco’s assistance at the summer academy was much appreciated, said Megan Lancaster, who manages Sally Ride Science programs for [UC San Diego Extension](https://extension.ucsd.edu/) (<https://extension.ucsd.edu/>).

“The Junior Academy was beyond blessed to have Marco as a volunteer,” she said. “He was of invaluable help in not only supporting instructors, but also working with students to ensure they were fully supported and appropriately challenged.”

The Junior Academy began with in-person summer workshops in 2016, soon after Sally Ride Science became part of UC San Diego. The pandemic forced workshops online last summer. This summer’s academy, again conducted over Zoom, drew more than 1,000 enrollments, a record for the program.

Over the four weeks of the Academy, Marco assisted instructors in nearly a dozen workshops covering a wide range of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) topics, from space science and oceanography to engineering and coding. Workshops were offered for elementary, middle school and high school students.

Marco noted that the remote format posed challenges, but he was impressed by what he saw during Junior Academy Zoom sessions. “Even though it was digital, I was able to tell how excited the kids were,” he said. “The instructors were able to really adapt to being online.”

## **Eye on the environment**

Marco, who lives in El Cajon and graduated from Granite Hills High School, is taking classes at [Grossmont College](https://www.grossmont.edu/) (<https://www.grossmont.edu/>) and [Cuyamaca College](https://www.cuyamaca.edu/) (<https://www.cuyamaca.edu/>) while cross-enrolled at [San Diego State](https://www.sdsu.edu/) (<https://www.sdsu.edu/>). He plans to transfer to SDSU soon to complete his bachelor’s degree in environmental engineering.

He originally considered getting a degree in nursing but ended up changing directions. “I was talking to a community college counselor about what I like and what I dislike, and they suggested I try environmental engineering,” he said.

He knew nothing about the field, but once he started looking into it, he was intrigued by the range of jobs environmental engineers can do. "It's turned out to be something I really want to pursue," he said. "There's a broad spectrum of what you can do with it."

One aspect that interests him especially is developing alternatives to fossil fuels. "I want to shift my focus toward sustainable energy and how we can do better on that than we're doing right now," he said.

Marco was looking for summer volunteer possibilities when he ran across the Sally Ride Science Junior Academy on the UC San Diego website. "I was intrigued by the idea of working with kids," he said. "I was interested in what it would be like to watch them learn something new."

## **Memorable moments**

Marco's volunteer experience was largely positive. "The instructors were generous in asking my opinion or asking me to share my own knowledge on the subjects," he said.

A few workshops stood out for him. One class, Deep-Space Base Building, dovetailed in a surprising way with his research interests. He's hoping to work in a San Diego State lab that is experimenting with using sound to analyze the composition of compressed soil. The goal is to analyze soil on the Moon or Mars to identify suitable sites to build bases.

In the Deep-Space Base Building workshop, Marco noted, "Students had to design their own space base through software, and along with that, they had to create a report with citations about how they were going to survive in that space station and how that station was going to be built."

Another workshop he found particularly engaging was Amazing Asteroids, where students created a model of a bunker they could use to survive an asteroid impact. "That included a lot of math and measuring along with a lot of depth about the material," Marco said. "It looked like the kids had a lot of fun. They definitely had fun showing me their creations."

He also enjoyed Science of Harry Potter. "I was wondering what would be included in that workshop," he said. "I joined and saw that there was a broad spectrum of STEM in it. For example, they were using the Weasleys – they all have red hair – to teach kids about genetics. And they used *Fantastic Beasts* as a way to have kids write a report on a fantastic beast that lives in the world today."

Marco balances his classes and volunteer work with a busy schedule of activities. He plays soccer, boxes, lifts weights and hikes. "I also enjoy playing video games and I really enjoy reading," he said. "And I like making music – I like playing piano."

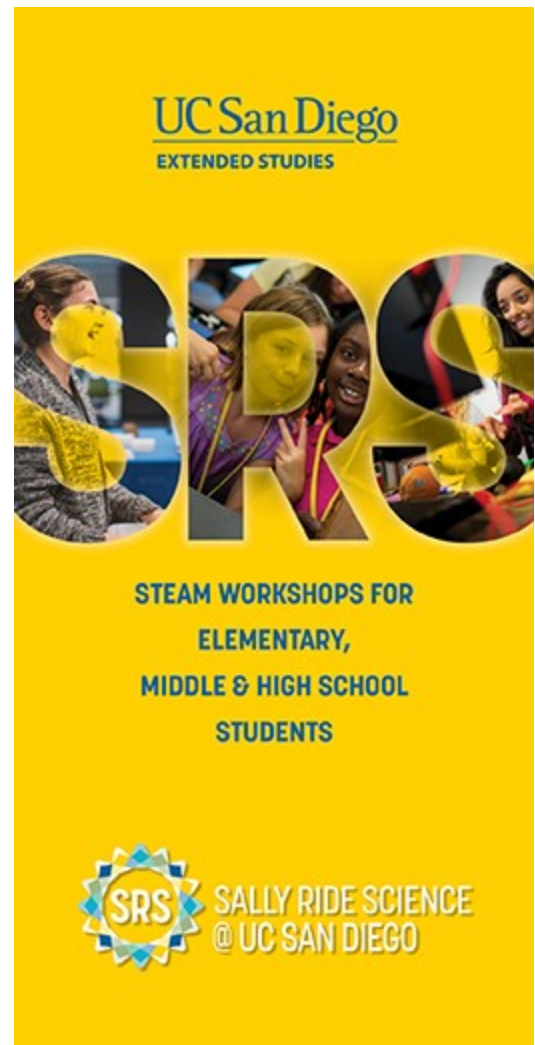
Asked if he would consider volunteering again, Marco didn't hesitate: "I really look forward to doing something similar next summer – definitely," he said.

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