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Alumni in Focus: Kieron Slaughter

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Alumni in Focus

Kieron Slaughter (HSU Geography 1999)

CHIEF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

Office of Economic Development City of Berkeley, CA

Cassandra Avila-Estrada

Ever wondered what you can do with a bachelor's degree in Geography? Well, as it turns out, you have a lot of options! During the fall 2020 semester, I managed to interview three HSU Geography alumni pursuing meaningful careers in strikingly diverging fields, including **Isabella Knori** (2017), Geographic Information System (GIS)/Cadastral (CAD) Technician for the Salt Lake County Recorder's Office in Salt Lake City (see her update on Page 56), and **Sara Matthews** (2014), Program Coordinator at the Tahoe Resource Conservation District in South Lake Tahoe (see her update in 2020's *Humboldt Geographic*). Look for those full interviews next year.

The 2021 Alumni in Focus interview, however, features a person whose path to and from HSU Geography really stands out: **KIERON SLAUGHTER** (1999). Born in Berkeley, he has lived—in addition to Humboldt!—in various parts of the East Bay. Having earned a master's degree in Geography with an emphasis in Urban Planning in addition to his BA in Geography, Kieron works as Chief Development Officer in his birth city's Office of Economic Development. In addition to his current employment, Kieron can boast an impressive body of experience that includes involvement in local non-profit organizations, including the Dr. Huey P.

Kieron Slaughter (1999) draws on his HSU Geography education in successfully pursuing a career in the Office of Economic Development for the City of Berkeley.

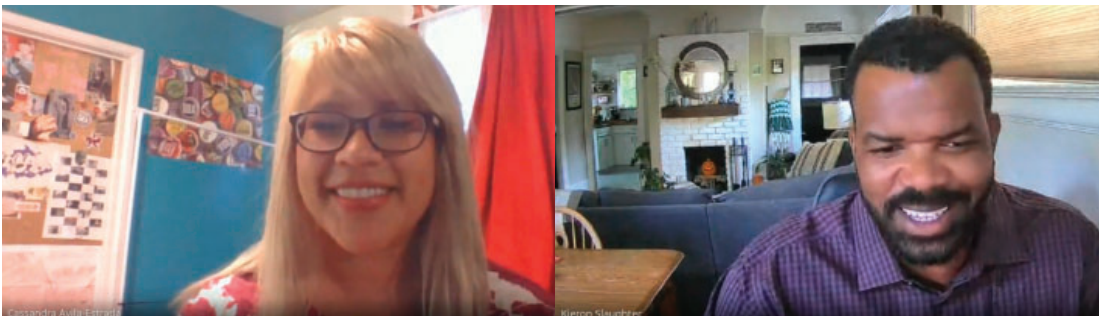


Newton Foundation, the 100 Black Men of the Bay Area, the Coalition of Black Excellence, the Trust for Public Land, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and numerous others.

Due to pandemic-related restrictions prohibiting in-person interviews, my discussion with Kieron was conducted remotely via Google Meets.

Cassandra: What attracted you to HSU Geography?

Kieron: Well, I started in Engineering at Hampton University [historically Black university in Virginia], then switched to Environmental Science. Then I returned home and met an awesome Geography professor at the College of Alameda who inspired me to study Geography. That led me to refocus on my academics as well as intercollegiate athletics. After two years, I was ultimately recruited to play on the basketball team at HSU. I fell in love with the



Lumberjacks for Life: In San Diego, her hometown, Geography major Cassandra Avila-Estrada interviews Kieron Slaughter at his Berkeley home.

location—the campus, the redwoods, the ocean, the North Coast vibe. It felt like the right fit.

Cassandra: Did you know that you were going into Geography and Urban Planning as an undergraduate?

Kieron: No. Like most students, I changed my major a couple times during my educational journey, eventually landing in Geography. Initially, I didn't know what I was going to do with that degree. I anticipated teaching at the community college level to give back and support students like me. It wasn't until I did an internship as an undergraduate with Transform in Oakland that I really fell in love with land use, city planning, equitable transportation, city planning, and the built environment.

Cassandra: You graduated HSU Geography in 1999. Did you land work experience right away that helped you develop the economic skills for a position like your current one?

Kieron: Right after earning my bachelor's degree, I actually wasn't ready to jump right in my career yet. I experimented with web development for a couple years because it was really "hot" at the time. I was also still involved with basketball and supporting young men by coaching at the College of Alameda. While working on my graduate degree, I was a Recreation and Social Services Director for several years in West Oakland. I eventually transitioned into my career in city planning with the city of Richmond after attaining my master's.

Cassandra: When you began your career, did your higher-ups expect you to arrive with all these skills? Or was it more like do on-the-job training?

Kieron: To a certain extent, but I think a lot of it is just the basics that you learn at any career. Like time management, interpersonal relationships skills, and working with the community, for example. What definitely prepared me for being a planner was interacting with the public. Whether you're working at the front counter or handling applications, from a fence to a subdivision, you learn to work with the community to help them achieve their goals within the framework of the zoning ordinance and CEQA [California Environmental Quality Act]. You also learn the political levers that are pulled and the entire ecosystem of a city. While I was definitely prepared to qualify for city

planning positions, every position still has a learning curve due to there being differences for each city, jurisdiction, or organization.

There are uniform standard practices in the planning discipline, but typically when you join an organization, most of the learning curve is adapting to how their systems work. Whether it's learning different programs, or software, or where to turn your time-sheet in. Being able to gain experience in creative placemaking through my public. Getting to learn the system about how they manage public places like sidewalks, plazas, and streets. I also learned to work with space managers in the private sector who partner with cities to create public activities such as street closures, street fairs, farmer markets, Sunday Streets, or parades for championship teams and schools. All those different things that occur in a city that most people don't consider have ties to geography and land use.

Cassandra: Do you supervise other people in your current position?

Kieron: We are a small division within the City Manager's office. However, I manage several boards and commissions, including our Loan Administration Board. In addition, I managed our emergency grant relief funding to businesses negatively impacted by COVID-19 and reviewed over 1,000 applications. We were only the third city in the United States to launch such a program, and it involved the management and coordination of numerous city staff members for a variety of departments to successfully complete the project. Ultimately, we provided over \$1.8 million in grants to 700 business and non-profits in Berkeley.

Cassandra: What does your typical work day look like?

Kieron: Our roles are informed by what happens in real time and in the specific industries and business sectors we support. Things can include getting called or emailed at any time by business district leaders, council staff, or prospective entrepreneurs in need of funding. We also attend policy meetings to serve as a representative of the city and our best interests. It's different every single day, which is one of the exciting things about it.

KIERON...Continued on Page 61.