

## Scholarship Success Stories

### Shayla Salzman's Story

2010 recipient of the AAUW Healdsburg Branch SRJC Scholarship



I received the Healdsburg American Association of University Women Scholarship when I was finishing my Associate Degree at Santa Rosa Junior College. My background up until then had led me to believe that I was not academic material. The support of the Healdsburg chapter of the AAUW was one of many things that changed the direction of my life and directly impacted my future career. I am now a UC Berkeley and Harvard graduate, and I completed a National Science Foundation Post-Doctorate at Cornell. Prior to arriving at Santa Rosa Junior College, I was a high school dropout who had

spent years working in organic agriculture. I began attending SRJC in order to participate in their sustainable agriculture certificate program. In my first semester I took a Plant Science course, followed by a Soil Science course, and I fell in love with science. I feel that organic agriculture is really all about understanding and manipulating plant-insect interactions and, at SRJC, I began to see the science behind those interactions. Through the support of faculty, my goal changed from a certificate program to an Associate Degree and eventually to university transfer. Because I was a high school dropout, I had to take many remedial courses that did not even count for college credit but were necessary stepping stones for the required university transfer courses. In these classes, I saw many people like myself: those that had chosen to make their lives harder by returning to school in order to achieve a goal that was often many years away. This was a long road and could have been a time full of uncertainty and doubt. The support of AAUW showed me that I did belong and that I could succeed. Seeing that women I looked up to and aspired to be like some day supported me and believed in me was exactly the emotional support that I needed to continue on my path.

In 2012, I transferred to UC Berkeley where I graduated in two years with a Bachelor of Science in Genetics and Plant Biology. I then worked at a plant science lab at UC Berkeley for eight months before taking a job in an entomology (insect science) lab at Harvard University. At the end of that year, I was accepted to the Organismic and Evolutionary Biology PhD program at Harvard where I continued to study plant-insect interactions. My Ph.D. research focused on the species interactions of a group of endangered plants called *Zamia* cycads. During my Ph.D. study, I married and had a daughter who is now five years old. I am currently a post-doctoral researcher supported by a National Science Foundation Fellowship at Cornell University. I am continuing my study of *Zamia* cycads and their symbiotic insects. I hope to find a faculty position at the end of this fellowship where I can continue researching, teaching and mentoring. Through this path and the people that have supported me along the way, I have learned that I do belong in academia and I have truly found my home in the world. It is my goal to pay forward what was given to me and make sure that everyone feels welcome and supported in academia. I cannot thank the women of the Healdsburg Chapter of the American Association of Women enough for giving me that when I most needed it.