

“Wow, the middle-school me would *never* believe this,” I thought to myself as I opened the box to my new full-frame camera. While a seasoned photographer would have just seen *another new shiny camera*, I saw pure opportunity. That moment was the accumulation of months of saving and riding a high consisting of doing well in my photography class, overindulging in motivational YouTuber videos, and ambition.

That high, however, was quickly met by reality: Being good at taking photos does *not* instantaneously make one a great photographer. Looking at Instagram hides the absolute grind that being a successful photographer requires, something I failed to fully understand until much later.

I was completely lost, and I had no help. So aside from annoying my brothers by randomly taking photos of them, my camera quickly accumulated dust on my desk. This lack of hope, however, made me desperate. I messaged a local photography influencer, Marco, asking him if he would be interested in helping me create a local photography community to help out new photographers like me. To my surprise, he loved the idea and asked me to handle the logistics. So I created the community’s Discord server, helped organize the first meetup, and helped build a space for photographers, models, and artists.

Needless to say, my camera stopped gathering dust on my desk. But that was far from the most important effect that creating this community had on me. What was more important to me was the responsibility that it forced me to take on. For example, I learned how to build a community from the ground up, which taught me how to take initiative, communicate with people from different backgrounds, and build a safe space for learners like me. What started as an effort to become a better photographer turned into a far more holistic experience: I found myself responsible for the growth of others as well. I realized this at our first large meetup, where I met other amateur photographers who thanked me and Marco for creating West Coast Creatives (WCC).

Building WCC taught me how essential it is to seek help from others, take initiative, and be part of a like-minded community. These lessons, while related to photography, helped me in college, as I constantly sought help from tutors and professors, eventually becoming a tutor myself. Creating WCC and being a tutor have given me the experience of simultaneously needing help while also helping others. Those experiences have shown me the importance of creating and protecting communities that are respectful, open-minded, and inclusive, something that is emphasized in UCLA’s Principles of Community.

The values that have contributed to my success in college are the same values that UCLA is committed to upholding. So, along with UCLA helping me become the economist I want to be, I will contribute to the productive academic community that UCLA has worked to foster.