When I was a little girl, I remember walking to school with my older brother, and along the way, he would collect every piece of scrap metal he could find. He became preoccupied with the story of how they got there—and especially how he could combine them to create something new. It came as no surprise when he chose metallurgical engineering as his career. He never abandoned his childhood passion, as so many of us do. His passion was the key ingredient to his success.

The same is true for Jenessa Stemke, UCR (B.S., M.S.) and UCR Extension alumna. Her childhood “obsession with maps” was the fuel that ignited her study of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which eventually led her to the UCR Extension GIS Certificate Program. Now a doctoral student at Oregon State University, her love for geography has been lifelong—and perhaps even generations-deep. Stemke’s grandfather was an aerospace engineer who worked on the Apollo missions, and she recently found out that her great uncle was an integral player in the creation of the first GPS system. When asked why she is so drawn to geography, Stemke replied, “Maybe my love for maps is in my blood.”

A run as a grade school geography champ expanded her studies. Stemke recalled, “Three-year old me was asking why Alaska is one-third the size of the continental US on some maps, but not much larger than Texas on a globe. My early enthusiasm led me to be “geolete” champ in 7th grade, and I’ve never looked back.”

As I sat down to interview this rising GIS star, I pondered an important self-reflection in the back of my mind: Did you pursue your earliest passion, or leave it behind with your childhood?
How did you discover UCR Extension’s GIS Certificate program?

My introductory GIS class whet my appetite, and I knew I wanted more in-depth training. That’s a key reason I went to graduate school. I couldn’t afford the price tag of other programs in the area, and my first instructor had recommended UCR Extension’s GIS Certificate program. I enrolled as soon as I finished my master’s degree.

In my opinion, UCR Extension’s program is the most affordable and still provides top-notch training. Most importantly, they encourage a hands-on approach, so I could dive deeper into the topics I found most interesting.

What were some unexpected hurdles you have encountered along the way?

There have been many, from heartbreaking loss to financial difficulties to being laid off from my first GIS job. The most difficult was my fiancé passing away about five months prior to the start of the program. I struggled with his loss, and I often felt as though I was barely keeping up.

I was putting myself through school, so it was difficult to come up with the finances to continue on my spatial science journey. Receiving UCR Extension’s Student Success Scholarship meant I could finish my GIS program and showed me that UCR Extension truly supports education.

What kind of work are you doing now, and do you feel optimistic about your trajectory in the GIS industry?

I’m currently using GIS to conduct soil science research in the Pacific Northwest. My team is working to determine the most effective way to manage potato fields. It will make a real difference in how we feed the world.

I was selected for this program because of my GIS background and the professional certificate I hold from UCR Extension, which is highly regarded because it is so closely aligned with Esri.

I am also very happy to be a new volunteer GIS analyst with the GIScorps for disaster response (hurricane damage, wildfires), and other humanitarian efforts.

What personal GIS goals are you working toward?

I am establishing a nonprofit called Access GIS (www.access-gis.org) with a mission to provide GIS services, consulting, and training to nonprofits and community organizations for free or low cost.

What advice do you have for others interested in pursuing a GIS career?

I think the most important lessons I’ve learned along my journey are: for whatever challenge you face, there is a mentor out there who can help you; and if you are determined to solve a problem, you’ll find an answer.

To learn more about Jenessa, visit her LinkedIn Profile. Check out her nonprofit at www.access-gis.org.

Do you see yourself making a difference in today’s world? Follow your passion to www.extension.ucr.edu/gis and learn more about our Professional Certificates in GIS and our 6-week GIS Fundamentals Intensive Summer Academy.