

April 18 - 25, 2019

What the county's talking about this week

- Book wonderland [9]
- Forced to shore [12]
- Strokes & Plugs [13]

## Cal Poly faculty try living on campus with their students

PHOTO COURTESY OF SADDIE ROGERS



**NEARBY SUPPORT** (From left to right) Oscar Navarro, Nathan Heston, and Nishanta Rajakaruna are the first three faculty members to participate in the Faculty in Residence pilot program.

Three Cal Poly faculty members were the first to spend the school year living among their students on campus through the university's Faculty in Residence pilot program.

Tina Muller, associate director of residential student experience for University Housing, said the Faculty in Residence program has been on the radar both at the University of California and California State University level. She said early national research shows that this program is having a big impact on student success.

"And so for us, we at University Housing really try to focus on not just creating that comfortable residence hall but really how do we create spaces for students to succeed both academically, personally, and career-based," Muller said.

The program—a collaborative partnership sponsored by University Housing, Division of Student Affairs, and Academic Affairs—seeks to foster a community of care and facilitate an environment where learning and living are intertwined. The three faculty members are spread out between yak?it?ut'u, Poly Canyon Village, and Cerro Vista Apartments.

Muller said faculty members are in the student residence complexes to assist students—especially incoming freshmen—with answering their questions, connecting them with other faculty, and being their point of resource.

The three faculty members—Nishanta Rajakaruna, associate professor in plant biology; Nathan Heston, full-time lecturer in the physics department; and Oscar Navarro, assistant professor in the School of Education—have dynamic personalities and interests that allow them to connect with students, Muller said.

Rajakaruna, known as Nishi to his students and new neighbors, began teaching at Cal Poly in 2017 but was already building connections with his students by going on hikes and holding group dinners with students. When he heard about the program, he said he knew it was going to be a perfect fit.

He currently lives in yak?it?ut'u with his cat and two goldfish. The idea of living on campus is something he's comfortable with. Rajakaruna said his father was a professor at Sri Lanka University, so he was born and raised on a university campus. When he came to the United States at 18, Rajakaruna continued living on or near campus throughout his educational career.

He said Cal Poly's Faculty in Residence program gives him the chance to make connections with students.

"I felt that I could have so many opportunities to shape student lives and also learn from students. I have also learned so much about Cal Poly and have connected with so many students and their families, and that's all really enriching," Rajakaruna said.

"Part of what I do is make students realize

that we are all in this together," he continued, "and that it's OK to go talk to faculty during office hours and it's OK to get to know them on a personal level."

Although the academic school year is nearing an end, Rajakaruna said he plans on participating in the program next year and working with students to create a botany garden on the yak?it?ut'u grounds, which will have plants that pay homage to the native people of the area.

Muller said the department will be doing assessment projects of the program in May and have already established funding to continue with the program next school year. ▲

—Karen Garcia

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