

**Jeanne Neleka Marcelo (biologist and nursing student)**



Jeanne Marcelo worked as an intake coordinator for multiple home health agencies in the San Francisco Bay Area while going back to school full time to get a nursing degree. She is now on her final semester of the BSN program and is focusing all her efforts in preparing for the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX), a standardized, computerized adaptive test (CAT) used in the US, Canada, and Australia to determine if nursing candidates possess the entry-level competence required for safe, effective, and professional practice. Passing the exam is required for licensure as a Registered Nurse (RN), Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) or Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN).

**Her science journey** began when Jeanne was born in the Philippines in 1995. After graduating from Granada High School in Livermore, California in 2014, Jeanne (known to her friends and family as Lyka) enrolled at San Diego State University as a Hospitality and Tourism Management major. After three years, she decided to move back to the Bay Area and reset and refocus on her career goals. She completed her associate degree at Las Positas College in Livermore and then went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in Biology with a minor in Chemistry from San Jose State University in 2022. She is currently finishing her Bachelor of Science in Nursing at Nightingale College and graduating in April 2026. Her path was nowhere near linear, but every step-and every mistake-helped clarify what she actually wanted to do and why.

Lyka got interested in science back at Middle School. She loved that the science class was hands on-experiments, activities, actually *doing* things-rather than just sitting through PowerPoint slides and taking notes. She loved the interactive aspect of learning science in a way that other subjects did not have.

In high school, she took a chemistry class where her teacher literally blew things up, and she thought that was the greatest thing ever! She was actually stronger in chemistry than biology at that time, but when it came to choosing a major for college, she chose biology because it felt like the more traditional path for someone interested in healthcare.

She said that she really cannot say that biologist was her dream job in high school, she didn't really have a clear picture of what she wanted to be yet, but she did really want to understand how things worked. She believed that knowing and understanding complex science concepts was what being "intelligent" looked like and she was drawn to that challenge. Looking back, it wasn't about wanting to be a doctor/nurse or scientist as much as it was feeding her curiosity and wanting to prove to herself that she could handle difficult material.

She did not have a specific teacher or professor who advised her to take biology in college, but her earliest influence was much closer to home. As a young child, she used to spend time in her aunt's medical clinic in the rural Cagayan Valley in the Philippines. She would play with her medical tools and pretend to be a doctor alongside her cousins. At the time, it was simple play, but those moments have grown into something deeper. Those experiences made healthcare feel familiar, meaningful, and possible. That early exposure shaped her decision to pursue biology and, eventually, nursing.

Looking back, many of the challenges she faced during her first 3 years in college were internal rather than external. She struggled with indecision, accountability, and learning how to prioritize her time-things that had much more to do with where she was in her life than with her professors or the academic environment itself. Working through those challenges was uncomfortable and forced her to grow- by being more intentional and taking ownership of her education.

In terms of representation, she can't recall exact number from her early STEM courses, but she does remember seeing a strong presence of women in biology and

related classes. At the same time, it felt normal, but in retrospect, it's actually incredibly powerful to see women thriving in spaces that have traditionally been male dominated.

This perspective has continued into her BSN program where women make up at least two thirds of the student population. Being in this female-dominated field has been especially empowering. It highlights how the compassion women bring to healthcare doesn't conflict with leadership but instead strengthens it.

Lyka's first influential job was as a resident medication technician at an assisted living facility when she was 21 years old. She worked part time in that role while finishing her associate degree at Las Positas College. It wasn't a very flashy job by any means, but it was very grounding. The responsibility, routine, and accountability it required came at a time when she felt lost and it forced her to develop discipline and consistency.

## **WORK AFTER COLLEGE**

After finishing her BA in Biology at San Jose state University, Lyka worked as an intake coordinator for multiple home health agencies in the Bay Area. She was very fortunate to benefit from her mother's professional network. Her mother, Cherry Marcelo, is a nursing home administrator with over 20 years of experience and through her connections, Lyka was able to learn about opportunities that aligned well with her background. She worked full-time as an intake coordinator while also studying as a full-time BSN student for two years, which was intense but also very formative.

Her job as a home health intake coordinator looks on paper as entry-level - answering calls, responding to emails, coordinating referrals and follow-up with patients. While it started as a practical way to make ends meet, the experience was eye-opening! Working closely with patients, families, and clinical staff gave her an inside-look of the real demand for nurses and their central role in the entire health care system. It made her realize that she wanted a more active, patient-facing role and a career that had greater responsibility and growth.

During this time, she had the opportunity to help improve intake workflows related to organization, task delegation, and documentation. Those process improvements

contributed to stronger operational efficiency and were part of a broader effort that supported the home health agency's rise in CMS ratings from 2.5 stars to 5 stars between 2022 and 2025.

On a personal level, one of her biggest accomplishments was maintaining full-time work while being a full-time student for 2 consecutive years. Doing both requires discipline, adaptability, and resilience and it's something she is genuinely proud of because it reflects the work ethic she brings into every role.

Her goal is to build a career that she feels genuinely satisfied with, while also creating a life that is rich in experiences. She wants to do meaningful work and stay aligned with her values rather than chasing titles for the sake of them. As she moves forward in nursing, she is very open to where the path leads-as long as she is growing, contributing, and showing up with purpose.

## **WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

Balancing work, school, and personal life has honestly been very challenging. She has had to learn to give herself grace during especially stressful seasons instead of always expecting perfection from herself.

What has helped most was being intentional about rest and connection. Lyka made space for the things that genuinely fill her cup, like spending time with her family and taking care of herself. She also tries to disconnect from her phone and online spaces when she can, which has been uncomfortable yet grounding and helps regulate her nervous system. That balance between discipline and rest is what allowed her to keep going.



## **MENTORING OTHER WOMEN SCIENTISTS**

Lyka is not mentoring women scientists in any official capacity, but on a daily basis she is very supportive of young women who are interested in pursuing STEM

degrees as well as her female peers who are navigating their own academic and professional paths. She is currently a member of the Livermore Filipino American Organization, Inc. Scholarship Committee where she gets to talk to high school seniors about their college plans.

## **ADVICE TO NEW GRADUATES**

Lyka's advice is to take the time to understand *why* you're pursuing higher education. Many students go to college because it is expected of them, but without a personal reason, it's easy to lose focus or burn out. When you have a clear sense of purpose-whether it's curiosity, passion for service, stability or growth-it becomes so much easier to push through the inevitable roadblocks. Your path does not have to be perfect or linear, but it does help to make sure it's yours.

## **HOW CAN WE GET GIRLS INTERESTED IN SCIENCE?**

Representation matters! When young girls see strong, intelligent women excelling in STEM, it becomes easier for them to imagine themselves in those roles too. Beyond visibility, creating encouraging learning environments is key- spaces where curiosity and asking questions are welcomed. When girls feel supported rather than intimidated, they become more comfortable taking up space in STEM and start to trust their ability to find answers.

## **HER SCIENCE JOURNEY**

1995 - Jeanne “Lyka” Marcelo was born in the Philippines

2014- Graduated from Granada High School in Livermore, California

-Enrolled as Hospitality and Tourism Management major at San Diego State University

2016- Enrolled at Las Positas College in Livermore, California

2018- Received her associate degree from Las Positas College

-Enrolled at San Jose State University major in Biology and minor in Chemistry

2022- Received her bachelor’s degree in biology with a minor in Chemistry from San Jose State University

- Worked as an intake coordinator for multiple home health agencies in the San Francisco Bay Area

2024- Started nursing school while working full time

2026-Will graduate in April with a degree of Bachelor of Science in Nursing