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Former President Joe Biden and Rhian Reyes at the Chuckwalla National Monument dedication ceremony at the White House on Jan. 14, 2025.

CSUSB Palm Desert Campus alumna introduces former President Joe Biden at Chuckwalla Monument dedication in Washington, D.C.

PALM DESERT, Calif. – When Rhian Reyes graduated from the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus in 2023 with a bachelor’s degree in history, she never dreamed that just two years later, she would be in Washington, D.C. introducing former President Joe Biden at a White House event.

Reyes was born and raised in the Coachella Valley, now lives in Indio, and works as a campaign organizer at Audubon California in Palm Desert, where her work focuses on community outreach, organizing and education.

Her role and efforts at Audubon California prepared her for this special moment of being a part of the Chuckwalla National Monument designation, which will protect and preserve more than 624,000 acres of land in the Southern California desert that holds diverse ecological, cultural and historical value.

“Being asked to introduce President Biden was an incredible experience,” said Reyes. “I had been involved in the Chuckwalla National Monument campaign since its launch in September 2023, so witnessing its official designation, and playing a key role in that moment, was truly unforgettable.”

The dedication ceremony was attended by tribes, conservationists, policymakers and environmental advocates, highlighting the importance of safeguarding America’s public lands. The event underscored the significance of continued collaboration between tribal governments, government officials, renewable energy, communities and organizations in protecting the nation’s ecological and cultural treasures.

In her introduction, Reyes spoke passionately about the importance of conservation, the monument’s impact on local communities and the broader national effort to protect public lands.

“I felt mentally prepared, at least until the moment I stepped up to the podium,” she said. “My easygoing nature kept me from feeling too nervous or stressed beforehand, but once I was in the room, the weight of the moment hit me. Still, I approached it as I would any other public speaking opportunity, focusing on the message and the importance of Chuckwalla for our community.”

Reyes says that the designation of the Chuckwalla National Monument is a major milestone for her professionally.

“I’m deeply grateful for the opportunity to speak at the White House, but even more thankful for the chance to contribute to the campaign and be a part of the incredibly dedicated and experienced team at the Protect California Deserts Coalition. Being part of the day’s events felt surreal - I’ve never experienced anything like it. It was a full-circle moment for me, as I had the honor of introducing our congressional champion for the monument, Congressman Dr. Raul Ruiz, at the campaign launch. To then have the privilege of introducing former President Biden at the proclamation signing was the culmination of all my advocacy and hard work throughout the campaign,” she said.

“This achievement is also a monumental moment for our community, and that’s what means the most to me personally,” she continued. “The Coachella Valley deserves recognition for its beauty, and I hope the monument helps people see that there’s so much life in the desert.”

Reyes hopes the monument will inspire greater awareness of the region’s natural beauty, especially among residents of the Eastern Coachella Valley. Many, she noted, are unaware that this remarkable landscape is so close to home. By encouraging more people to hike, camp and connect with the land, she believes the designation will not only promote physical and mental well-being but also foster a deeper sense of environmental stewardship, ensuring the protection of the area’s diverse plant and animal life for future generations.

“When I was in high school, I was the biggest critic of the Coachella Valley,” she said. “Having been born and raised here, I didn’t appreciate it at all. So, I left for college in Washington, convinced I needed to be somewhere else. But after experiencing Seattle’s gray, rainy weather, I quickly realized it wasn’t for me. I missed home more than I expected. When I returned, I saw the valley with fresh eyes. I noticed how the mountains glow almost golden in the morning sun, how the warmth on my skin felt comforting, and how

much I needed to be outside for my mental well-being. That's when I started exploring the public lands of the Coachella Valley, including what is now the Chuckwalla National Monument. I hiked alone, with family, and with friends, reconnecting with the landscape I once took for granted. Now, my favorite thing is hiking with my pug – I'm not sure which one of us enjoys it more!"

Reyes says that her education at the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus provided her with a wide range of skills that have been invaluable in her role at Audubon California.

As secretary of the History Club, she developed strong interpersonal communication skills, which she says are essential for working with the public and partner organizations. Serving as an editor for "History in the Making," an annual publication of the CSUSB Alpha Delta Nu Chapter of the Phi Alpha Theta National History Honor Society, honed her writing and editing abilities. She indicates that those have been crucial for public speaking engagements, whether introducing Congressman Ruiz at the Chuckwalla National Monument Campaign launch or writing the speech to introduce former President Biden. Additionally, other history courses at PDC gave her practical experience in public speaking, helping her build confidence in presenting to diverse audiences.

As an alumna, Reyes has some advice for high school students thinking about attending college.

"My biggest piece of advice for students is to network and take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way," she said. "When I was a student at the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus, I interned with the Institute for Watershed Resiliency as a Salton Sea intern. After graduating, I received an email about an internship with the Protect California Deserts Coalition to learn about national monument campaigns. That opportunity led me to Washington, D.C., where I spoke with legislators about the monument. The connections and experiences I gained through these opportunities ultimately led to me giving a speech at the White House and meeting former President Joe Biden," she continued. "For any young person starting their career journey, I can't stress enough the importance of putting yourself out there, building relationships, saying yes to new experiences, and embracing every opportunity that comes your way. You never know where it might lead."

For more information about the Chuckwalla National Monument, visit the [Audubon California](#) website.

About the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus: The CSUSB Palm Desert Campus is dedicated to providing a transformative educational experience in the Coachella Valley. With a focus on academic excellence and community engagement, the campus offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs designed to meet the diverse needs of its students and the region.

For more information about the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus, contact Mike Singer in the Office of Marketing and Communications at msinger@csusb.edu or (760) 341-2883, ext. 78107, or visit the PDC website at www.csusb.edu/pdc.