

# ASU graduate proves the best science happens outside

By Kim Baptista, ASU News  
May 13, 2026

**Editor's note:** This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

Victoria Concepcion didn't come to Arizona State University just to earn a degree. She came tracking a Mars rover.

Concepcion, from Rancho Santa Margarita, California, is graduating this May from the [School of Earth and Space Exploration](#) with a Master of Science in geological science. She started with a clear goal: to work with the Curiosity rover's DAN instrument. Along the way, she discovered even more rewarding experiences.

"ASU's mission involved faculty and access to so many cool scientific instruments and fields," said Concepcion. "The proximity to a bunch of cool geology was a big bonus, but mostly I came here to work with [NASA's Curiosity rover](#) DAN instrument."

The Curiosity rover is currently exploring Mars, and Concepcion worked with one of its tools, the [Dynamic Albedo of Neutrons \(DAN\) instrument](#). This device uses pulsing neutrons to detect water content as low as one-tenth of 1% and can find layers of water and ice below the surface. Concepcion's research uses data from the DAN instrument to study subsurface hydration in Gale Crater.

While at ASU, Concepcion received two awards: the Ninninger Student Travel Award in 2025, which honors meteorite pioneer Harvey Ninninger, and the National Association of Geoscience Teachers Outstanding TA Award in January 2026. These awards show the positive impact Concepcion had on her fellow students.

Concepcion realized geoscience was her calling during her first year, when a Fundamentals of Planetary Science course made everything click.

"I realized I preferred a field where I can go outside and verify data," Concepcion said. "Especially when it involves hiking and looking at really cool rocks."

Her hands-on approach has shaped her view of science. One of her main lessons from grad school is simple: "Lots of science involves hitting something, a sample or a rock, with something else really fast and hard, and seeing what happens." This straightforward idea says a lot about

how discovery works.

One mentor who made a big difference during her graduate studies was School of Earth and Space Exploration Assistant Professor [Melanie Barboni](#). "She taught me to take a step back from the stresses of grad school and enjoy bird-watching on campus," Concepcion said. "Especially the rosy-faced lovebirds and the hummingbirds."

"Victoria has one of those rare personalities that genuinely brightens a room the moment she walks into it. Whether she was entering my classroom or I simply crossed paths with her on campus, she always brought this incredible warmth, positivity and radiant smile that made people feel instantly happier and more energized," Barboni said. "Beyond being exceptionally bright and thoughtful, her enthusiasm and passion are truly contagious — conversations with her always left me thinking, excited and reminded of why mentoring students can be such a joy."

When asked for any advice to current students, Concepcion said, "Don't be afraid of talking to faculty when you need help."

Looking ahead, Concepcion is not in a hurry, unless it is to get outdoors. After graduation, she plans to spend more time camping, hiking and enjoying the outdoors, especially somewhere with snow.

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Victoria Concepcion is graduating this May from the School of Earth and Space Exploration with a Master of Science in geological science. Courtesy photo