



The Merritt Connection

From High School Graduates to Mid-Life Career Changers, Merritt's Environmental Management & Technology Program Draws Students Interested in Issues Affecting Everyone



Fresh out of Skyline High School where he was active in the school's Volunteer Club, Marquis Parker's experience working with Friends of Sausal Creek on the restoration of the watershed changed his mind about his planned future as a computer scientist. "My volunteer work made me more aware and interested in environmental issues, so I decided to change my career path," says Marquis, 18. "I enrolled at Merritt because I knew it had the best environmental program around, and I hope to transfer to UC Davis to major in ecology."

At age 54, Eugene Casey had done all he could in his 25+-year career in the equipment supply business and wanted to find a new career he would enjoy. With a love of nature from spending time on his family's farm in Tuolumne, he began taking classes in Merritt's Landscape Horticulture Program and subsequently in the Environmental

Management and Technology Program. "I've been watching the changes to our environment through the years, and I wanted to get into a hands-on profession where I can make a difference," says Eugene. "The classes have been great. There is just amazing energy among the students and faculty."



Despite the age difference, Marquis and Eugene are both working toward the same goal in this spring's "Sustainable Environmental Systems" class taught by instructor and community environmental planner David Ralston, who was excited—but not surprised—to have a record number of students of all ages in his class.

"These days we are all bombarded with news about sustainability issues and climate change, and it can be overwhelming and leave people cynical about the state of affairs," says David, who co-teaches the course with Beth Teper. "This class puts a unique focus on positive action they can take to help retain the sense of hope. It's not just about a book or a lab, but they learn the core concepts of sustainability and find

out about hands-on, experiential projects in their own city that they can work on to make a difference. So it's pretty powerful."

Branwyn Bigglestone, 44, agrees and says the class has opened her eyes to opportunities she had never thought of. Originally enrolled in the class to fulfill the science requirement she needed to complete the SF State degree she started in the '90s, Branwyn enjoys the flow of the class, the location in the Oakland hills, and the field trips to see what can be done to help her hometown. "I learn much better when there is interaction and activity and I can be engaged," she says. "The Merritt campus is beautiful—we meet up the hill at the program's Self-Reliant House and spend a lot of time learning outdoors and going on field trips to learn about projects like the restoration of the San Leandro Creek through Oakland."

Growing up in a traditional Mexican family, Jessica Padilla, 20, was never made aware of environmental issues and is happy to be learning all she can in this class. "In my culture we don't often talk about those kinds of things," says Jessica, who is president of Merritt's Puente Club, which is geared toward the successful transfer of Latino students. "But as the first generation to go to college, I really value learning about these important issues from such a knowledgeable instructor. I'm hoping to incorporate some of what I've learned into Puente activities to educate others.

—Susan May

The Environmental Management & Technology Program offers three certificate programs—Fundamentals of Environmental Management, Greening the Urban Environment, and Urban Agroecology. For more detailed information go to www.merritt.edu/wp/envmt or contact Chair Laura Forlin at (510) 436-2418, lforlin@peralta.edu.

