

Proud Alumna Dedicated to Giving Back to Merritt by Creating Great Teachers



Jennifer Briffa is currently working on a pilot project that would create a pathway for low-level English speakers interested in child care to earn a certificate and find a fulfilling career. The plan is to start with a tuition-free, non-credit class combining Child Development and ESL.

With more than 30 years teaching experience, it is one of many creative ideas that the dedicated Child Development instructor, a product of

Merritt College herself, has developed to help the diverse population of students in the Bay Area meet their educational goals and find their dreams. “I have always had a passion for the well-being of children and also to educate those who would teach other children, multiplying my impact on children’s lives,” says Jenny. “I believe that many of the problems we face in the world would be less and easier to solve if more people had great early childhood teachers.”

Born of immigrant parents from Peru who arrived in San Francisco when she was four, Jenny learned English in the school system. She says she was lucky to have parents who valued education and sacrificed so she and her sister could go to good schools. That education included ballet lessons which led to a professional career performing and teaching dance spanning 18 years, the last half dancing with the Oakland Ballet Company. When she stopped dancing, her experience as a student and a teacher led her to Merritt College to find a new career by studying Child Development. It was there that she found the encouragement and support she strives to provide to her own students today.

“My heart is at Merritt because I came here myself and went on to get my bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Mills College because of the instructors who encouraged me, supported me, and believed in me. So what I enjoy is being able to do that for my students. It’s very motivating for students to know that their instructors have gone through some of the same struggles that they are going through.”

Jenny began her career at Merritt as an adjunct instructor teaching Childhood Development classes to Spanish-speaking students (which she also did at College of Marin for 10 years) and it became her expertise and her passion. Since becoming a full-time faculty member in 2014, she has continued to create multiple programs to help with student success. She is most proud of the program she created to support Child Development students at Merritt’s Fruitvale campus by offering classes, enrollment assistance, embedded tutors, counseling, and other services, including the above-mentioned pilot program which will begin this spring.

Her students praise her and follow her to whatever classes she teaches. They say they are very grateful for her support, appreciate her personal help, value her advice on being an effective teacher, are inspired by her encouragement to reach for their goals, and are thankful that some of her classes are taught bilingually.

For Jenny, that appreciation is what makes her chosen career worthwhile. “In Child Development, we try to support our students with bilingual classes, tutors, counseling, advisement, and office support. This makes all the difference in their success rate and is very gratifying for me. It motivates me to try and reach more students who may want to join our program. Merritt gave me a new chance when I began my second career, and I want to serve through the community college system now that I can.”

—*Susan May*