

DR. BRAD BALUKJIAN – October 2017

Lesson Plan From New Bug-Collecting Biology Professor: Discover Nature in Oakland!

How many of us get to turn our childhood sense of wonder into a career? Dr. Brad Balukjian, new Merritt biology professor, was fortunate enough to do just that. With a love of nature from an early age, he grew up experiencing and studying the environment—and even had an insect named after him (see photo)! Today he is excited to be sharing his experience and knowledge with students this semester in his new class, “Biology of the Living World.”

“I was lucky to grow up in rural Rhode Island on a lake with blue herons, bullfrogs, largemouth bass, and a wide variety of insects,” he says. “Many of our students have not had the same opportunities to connect with nature even though it is all around us in urban Oakland.”



Biology Professor Brad Balukjian . . .

and namesake *Felisacus bradi*

That is now changing for Brad’s students who regularly get to leave the classroom with their instructor to wander into nearby Leona Canyon and regional parks throughout the area to get up close and personal with the nature they may have been missing.



“My students love going outside,” says Brad. “I teach them early on about a whole field of research called ecotherapy that shows how just being outside makes you healthier by reducing levels of stress hormone and blood pressure.”

While outside, the students are told to make basic observations and keep track of their discoveries in their field journals. “I want to get them to start thinking scientifically as they identify the plants, animals, fungi, and other organisms that are among the 9 million species that are our roommates on Earth,” he says. “What are the characteristics of a certain tree? Is it native to California? Why are there thorns on the branches?”

Brad’s love of nature began around age 8 when he would ask local fishermen to drop him off on one of the state’s many islands to explore. His interest grew through high school and onto Duke University,

where he designed his own major, Island Biogeography. Then, at UC Berkeley, his doctoral thesis in entomology took him to Tahiti where he discovered 20 species of “true” bugs on the small island of Moorea and documented how the species formed. As part of the project, he also taught biodiversity to local 5th graders who also helped him collect the insects.

While the research he conducted furthered his knowledge and earned him a Ph.D., it was the teaching experience that Brad fell in love with. He went on to teach Intro to Biology for three years at Laney College before heading to Merritt where he now has the opportunity to teach his specialty.

In the future, he hopes to teach more natural history classes. “I get a lot of emotional fulfillment from teaching that research doesn’t provide,” says Brad. “It’s gratifying to see students’ brains opening up and to be able to help them along the path. By exposing students to nature and to environmental issues, they can understand that our lives are dependent on the natural world. The only way to protect the environment is to first learn to love it.”

And it is teaching at a community college where Brad believes he can get this message across and have the most impact. “The beauty of being at a community college like Merritt is to be able to focus on teaching and mentoring and helping students tap into their own potential. I’m excited to be here.”

—Susan May