



2018 Merritt College Commencement News & Information

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Merritt College is proud to introduce our highest achieving students of the Class of 2018 who will be honored at the 63rd Annual Commencement Ceremonies on May 23rd. In a reflection of Oakland's diverse culture, they come from all over the world, have studied a wide range of academic interests, and have bold opinions of their own. But they all share the belief that Merritt has been a great educational start to their lives as they move on to help shape the world.

Valedictorian Alessandra Chimienti: Learning English and Earning Multiple Business Degrees with a 4.0 GPA



After just one semester at Merritt College, Alessandra Chimienti's business instructor, Fereshteh Mofidi, told her that she would be Valedictorian of her graduating class. For Alessandra, who had arrived from Italy just a few years earlier without understanding a word of English and was just getting accustomed to an American college, she found that hard to believe.

But on May 23, her instructor's prediction will come true as Alessandra is called to the podium and honored as Valedictorian for receiving the highest GPA in her all her studies. That includes the incredible accomplishment of completing three associate degrees and three certificates, all in business. "It's not easy for international students to leave their friends and family to pursue your education in another country," says Ms. Mofidi. "But it shows how strong they are about their goals. "Alessandra is so intelligent that she asked me questions that I've had to research myself. That's why I knew she was destined to be the valedictorian. I wish her the best of luck."

Born in Puglia, Italy, where she earned a bachelor's degree in education with highest honors, Alessandra came to the U.S. as an Au Pair for an Oakland family and had a future goal to study business. But her first challenge was to learn the language. She accomplished her goal by taking intensive English classes and following subtitles on Netflix shows. When she felt comfortable enough to start college, she ended up at Merritt and has never looked back. During her two years, she has served as Treasurer of Phi Theta Kappa, tutored children in the Oakland school district, and worked in Business Services where, she says, Director Dettie Del Rosario has been an inspiration to her. Her next goal is to get an MBA, and she doesn't hesitate to give credit to Merritt for getting her where she is today.

"All of my family in Italy is thrilled and so proud of me for my accomplishments," she says. "Even my mother is coming to my graduation—the first time she will be in America. "I couldn't have had a better experience and education than here at Merritt," she says, "I've loved my time here at this beautiful college."

Valedictorian Glory Awodi Oyanameh: Hoping for a Political Career and Making a Difference for Women



For Glory Awodi Oyanameh, Merritt is a family affair. She followed her sister and her father who attended Merritt and went into the medical field. But she has her own plans. For now, she is focusing on graduating on May 23 with the honor of being named one of two Valedictorians with a 4.0 GPA at the Commencement ceremonies. Her hard work and good grades in the Administration of Justice Program led to her receiving an Associate's Degree in that field. That is just the first step of her ambitious goals for the future.

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“My dream is to become a lawyer and then go into politics,” says Glory, who came to the United States from Nigeria in 2014. “There aren’t a lot of women going into politics, and I wanted to be one of the first and make a difference. Being an immigrant coming from a different country, I want to make sure people’s voices are heard from countries around the world.”

Glory’s instructor Margaret Dixon, who heads the Administration of Justice Department, has no doubt that Glory will do whatever she wants and be successful. “Glory is an amazing student, she’s very mature to be so focused and determined about her education and to know what she wants,” says Ms. Dixon. She was always engaged, participated in class, and earned straight As. Not only is she going to be a great lawyer, she is going to excel in whatever she does.”

Glory passes on her high-level academic skills to students as a teacher’s assistant and by tutoring math and statistics in the Learning Center. She also has skills in sports and has been on Merritt’s Women’s Basketball team with Coach Armond Gray but left the team to focus more on her studies which seems to have paid off. But she still loves to play basketball with friends in whatever spare time she can find.

As an award-winning student in her own country as well, she has only the highest praise for her new college. “Merritt is one of the best colleges I’ve ever been to. It is an amazing environment for studying and achieving success.”

Salutarian Wenshuo Yang: Excelling in Childhood Development as an Example to her Children



Working in an afterschool program in her native country of China, Wenshuo Yang dreamed of owning her own child care center. Today she is much closer to her goal as she will receive her Associate Degree in Child Development with high honors as Merritt’s Salutarian at Commencement on May 23.

Her educational journey in America began in 2010 when she started taking ESL classes at Laney and quickly moved to Child Development courses at Merritt. Besides her academic goal, Wenshuo learned many lessons that helped her raise her own daughter and son, now ages 12 and 4, and become a better parent. She has filled her requirement as a student teacher and is currently working in a child care center getting full-time experience before she heads to a four-year college to get a bachelor’s degree.

“As a student teacher, Wenshuo was a pleasure to teach; she embraced the role of a learner and was open to new ideas,” says Christine Olsen, instructor and chair of the Child Development Program. She consistently came to class well prepared with thoughtful lesson plans and enjoyed trying new activities that expanded her professional skills. As a member of the student teacher team at the CHDEV lab practicum, she contributed to the common good by looking for ways to help and build the group spirit. We are so proud of her accomplishments and wish her all the best as she pursues her professional and academic goals.”

Wenshuo feels the same way about her instructors, admitting they were strict but very helpful and gave her lots of resources to take her learning even further. Now she is proud to serve as a role model for her own children, especially for her nearly teenage daughter who will be sitting in the audience as her mother is honored on stage.

“My daughter has been watching how hard I study and staying up late doing homework to reach my goal and get good grades,” says Wenshuo. “She has been saying that she wants to follow me and is now getting straight As in all of her classes.”

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President's Medallion Winner Ruqaiyah Gilchrist: Studying Sociology to Bring More Tolerance to the World



Ruqaiyah Gilchrist originally came to Merritt to run on Coach Brock Drazen's track team. But she ended up also being inspired by both faculty and staff who helped shape her future career, her work ethic, and her personal goal to bring the people of the world a little bit closer together in harmony.

For her academic excellence and leadership skills, Ruqaiyah has been chosen for the President's Medallion Award which she will receive from Merritt President Marie-Elaine Burns at Commencement this month.

Ruqaiyah became interested in sociology based on her personal experience and beliefs by living in a world where some look negatively at minority populations. "Sociology is a field where I have been able to explore and express my passion as well as find understanding and solutions," she says. "I'm studying business as well because I want to someday open a non-profit, inner-city recreation center that offers workshops and activities where community members of all ages and nationalities can get a better understanding of the world and develop into better people."

She has been inspired by both faculty and staff at Merritt. She's worked alongside staff assistants Denise Woodward and Ne'Shawn Hayes in Division I who demonstrated a strong work ethic, and she's taken classes from Jason Seals in African-American Studies and Dr. Charity Clay in Sociology who have motivated her towards her goals. She's been a camp counselor at Merritt's Kids College where she's helped encourage the kids to go to college and to become leaders. And she's organized fundraising events to provide food, clothing, and toiletries to the homeless.

"Ruqaiyah is an excellent example of both academic commitment and citizenship," says Dr. Clay. "She has even applied the information she's learned in class to help address the social issues she recognized in her community around education and youth development. I look forward to seeing all the amazing things she'll do to help improve the world."

—Profiles by Susan May