

**Christine Hernandez: Ready to Meet New Challenges After Overcoming a Lifetime of Them**



For those of you students who may be overwhelmed by the challenge of getting an education with real-life pressures getting in your way, consider the path taken by Christine Hernandez, Merritt’s Vice President for Student Services. She started what would become a decades-long academic climb from the very bottom and is grateful to her community college experience for finishing on top. Today, a month into her new job, Christine sits in her office in the Student Services building gazing out the window at the beautiful view of the Bay Area, and talks about that journey.

The sixth of seven children born to migrant farm workers in Hanford, California, Christine became the first in her family to attend college. Through that accomplishment, she would end up serving as an inspiration to hundreds of students she would meet throughout her career, many of them facing some of the same obstacles she once did.

“I first went away to college at 17, but due to a variety of factors, I came home and got a full-time job, and did my part to contribute to the family,” she says. “Then six years later, I got married and moved to Florida for my husband’s job.” When her husband was transferred back to California a few years later, they moved with their 6-month-old son to Ridgecrest, an arid military town in the Mojave Desert with no big cities anywhere near. “It was 112 degrees and in the middle of nowhere,” she recalls. “But there was a community college in town, so I applied for a job there and ended up staying for the next 15 years. It was one of the best decisions I ever made.”

Located on a hilltop with a coyote for a mascot, Cerro Coso College would become Christine’s entry to the community college system where she would gain the experience and knowledge that would begin the path to her career. “I started out part-time serving as a liaison between the faculty at the main campus and our high school campus,” she says, “and ended up getting promoted throughout the years to both instructional and student service positions. So I gained a lot of knowledge about the college operations.”

Several years into her a job of helping students reach their goals, she realized that she could be one of those students herself. “As I was working at this community college and providing academic advising and support service,” she says, “I started realizing the opportunities that were there for me well.”

So she enrolled in college and, along with working full-time and raising her growing family of three children, she began taking classes in the spare time she had left – one class per semester. By the time she received her AA in General Education, she had already decided what her next move would be: to transfer to a four-year college. Now she just had to figure out how to do it. The closest college was CSU Bakersfield, 125 miles away. But she wasn’t deterred and she used her resources wisely, turning her four-hour commute into a mobile classroom. “I was lucky to have an understanding boss and an incredibly supportive husband, and I started commuting and taking classes two days a week,” she says. “I’d record my notes and then listen to them while I drove. And whenever it was time for finals, my husband would put the kids in the car, and he’d drive so I could spend the extra time studying.”

Tens of thousands of miles later, Christine had earned her B.A. in Sociology with a minor in Organizational Studies. Then she went on to Pepperdine University in Los Angeles where she obtained an M.A. in Educational Technology. When it was time to decide on her career, Christine knew where to look: community colleges—where she had gained enough of an expertise to know that she could make a difference in students’ lives.

Christine came to Merritt from Sacramento City College where she had served as Dean of Financial Aid & Student Services. Prior to that she had worked at Truckee Meadows Community College as Associate Dean of Student Enrollment Services. Her decision to apply for the vice presidency at Merritt came after much research that convinced her it was the right time and the right place to be after her years of combined experiences at other colleges. “I’ve worked in instruction and in just about every aspect of student services, and one of my goals at Merritt is to see both areas working collaboratively and to help develop a more seamless process that will benefit everyone,” she says. “There are challenges ahead, but I’ve had challenges all of my life and I thrive on them.”

—*Susan May*