

WILL SMITH - January 2016

From a Troubled Background to Helping Others, Student Thanks Merritt Mentors



Despite a rough childhood which led to a foster homes and eventual homelessness, Will Smith always wanted to stand for something. He took his first step to reaching that goal when he walked through the doors of Merritt College.

“Being a troubled kid and a high school dropout, I never even thought of applying to college,” says Smith. “I moved to Oakland from Sacramento because a friend said I could play basketball at Merritt. I came here with just a backpack. Most people didn’t know that I was living at a homeless shelter.”

When he came to Merritt, he was lucky to meet counselor Carlos McLean who took him under his wing and convinced him to change his direction from athletics to academics and look toward his future—starting with getting his GED.

“Mr. McLean was my biggest supporter, and he still is,” says Smith. “I took the map that he laid out and followed it. He helped me with my school and my personal life, and I finished my first semester with a 3.0., and I now have a place to live.”

Today, Smith is a popular fixture around Merritt, where he is either surrounded by friends, rushing to his classes, working with the Sankofa program, or helping students get adjusted to college in his highly regarded role as Student Ambassador. “Now I’m helping other students to become successful, and they all appreciate it. It’s a really good feeling.”

In fact, Smith is planning to continue helping people even beyond Merritt. He plans to graduate in about a year and transfer to a four-year university to study social work so he can offer guidance to those who may be a situation like he was.

And his own mentor won’t be far away. McLean, now retired, keeps in touch with Smith and says he probably always will. “When Will came to Merritt, I could see he needed somebody, and that somebody turned out to be me,” he says. “I am extremely proud of what he’s accomplished, and I think that the sky is the limit for him. If he sets his mind to doing something, it will happen.”

Smith himself is looking forward to his future and couldn’t be more grateful for his Merritt experience. “Besides the million-dollar view, Merritt has the most welcoming students, staff, and instructors anywhere,” he says. “They really did change my life.”

—*Susan May*