

Community News

## Merritt College seeks to empower students who have struggled, new president says



“I love Merritt, this campus, these students, they’re students I grew up with in my neighborhood, first generation, single parents. I know what the streets can do to folks, and I wanted to make sure I was part of a system that would assist students like that,” says new Merritt College President Dr. Marie Elaine Burns. (Sarah Tan/For Bay Area News Group)

By **SARAH TAN** | Correspondent

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OAKLAND — Merritt College President Dr. Marie Elaine Burns, who was raised in San Francisco’s Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood and has been a single mother, said she understands where many Merritt College students are coming from and hopes that she can help them persevere in their educations.

“I love Merritt, this campus, these students, they’re students I grew up with in my neighborhood, first-generation, single parents,” said the new college president. “I know what the streets can do to folks, and I wanted to make sure I was part of a system that would assist students like that.”

Before coming to Merritt, Burns was a vice president for student services at San Jose City College, and she’s spent 40 years in a variety of higher education roles. She said she’d always admired Merritt College because it was the birthplace of the Black Panther movement and she wanted to be able to empower students of color. When she saw that Merritt College was looking for a president four years ago, she applied immediately.

She didn't get the job, and for a while she debated retiring. But then, an opening for an interim president came about at Merritt College and she seized the opportunity. She credits her never quit attitude to her mother.

"My mom always persevered and perseverance really pays off," she said.

In a press release, Herbert Kitchen, president of the Peralta Association of African-American Affairs, said the board expressed its support of Burns.

"She has been in the trenches of higher education for more than 40 years and is the right person at the right time to lead Merritt College forward," Kitchen said.

Burns said she is looking for ways to raise the profile of Merritt College so more students will consider attending, and she'd like to raise awareness about Merritt's current academic offerings. The college was recently re-accredited, and Burns said there are many world class programs offered at the school.

"I want the world to know that Merritt College is back in the saddle," she said. "This campus epitomizes what I'd like my legacy to be, supporting students in the community."

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Sarah Tan

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