



The Merritt Connection

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Dr. Marie-Elaine Burns, Interim President

Jason Seals Credits His Mother and His Mentors for Helping Him Choose a Path to Success



As coordinator of this year's Black History Month activities, Jason Seals drew speakers from the Oakland community where he grew up. Many of the authors, teachers, leaders, activists, and artists who spoke to the Merritt community had either mentored him or shaped his future in some way.

Jason credits their influence with who he is today: a newly tenured faculty member and chair of the African-American Studies Program at Merritt College. As he talks about the decisions he made early on, he knows that his life could have turned out very differently if it hadn't been for the people who had influenced him the most—starting with the one living right there in his home growing up.

“My mother was a single parent raising me in Oakland when it was the murder capital of the world,” he says. “Most of my friends were getting into trouble, and I could have walked left or walked right. But my mother always wanted me to go to college and told me to be the best I could be, and I never forgot that. It was because of her that I went in the right direction.”

While at San Jose State University studying sociology, he got connected with Leadership Excellence, a nonprofit organization committed to empowering African-American youth for social and personal change (now Flourish Agenda) that would jumpstart his career.

“I held every position in that organization working with kids, from basketball coach to camp director, and I also worked in the YMCA, mental health organizations, and Juvenile Hall while I was in college,” says Jason. “Being in those environments began to shape my love for working with youth.”

He also could empathize with many of the youth he was working with, knowing how easily his life could have turned out the same way.

“My father was incarcerated for the first 10 years of my life,” says Jason. “One of the hardest lessons to learn without a man in your life is how to become a man.” Jason says he could identify with the boys he worked with, adding, “I never looked at their case files because I didn't want to be influenced by what they'd done. I just wanted to see the good in them.”

Through all of his experience and education, Jason also realized how much he loved to teach. So after completing a master's program in Africana Studies on a full scholarship from CUNY, Albany, he packed up his Volkswagen, drove home, and started his career as a “freeway flyer,” teaching part-time at colleges scattered all over the Bay Area.

Jason was introduced to teaching at Merritt College in 2007 by an acquaintance named Siri Brown who asked him to teach a dual-enrollment class in “Racism in America” at Skyline High School. And, after following that class with several more both off- and on-campus, Jason was hooked. He became full-time at Merritt in 2013.

“I loved the students at Merritt, and I became passionate about developing my own style as a teacher to help them,” he says. “I respect the fact that most students here have other responsibilities in addition to getting an education. They want to be here, but they have ten other things on their plate. So we need to take that into account but also have high expectations for students. So it's a balancing act. I want to create a safe space for the students. Because if they don't feel safe, how do they learn?”

In his role as department chair, Jason sees one of his strengths as working and helping the community where he grew up. “I want to address some of the disparities on this campus and in the community and create a pipeline for our young people who don't think they can go to college,” he says. “If they can develop skills and cultivate leadership in their communities, they will be more likely to say ‘I have a future’ instead of foregoing success for doing something they will regret.”