

STEFANI DE VITO - November 2018

Years of Advocating for Students Leads Counselor to Role in Finding Solutions for Success



Stefani de Vito was one of those English majors with no idea what she wanted to do with her life. But through years of soul-searching, informational interviews, advanced degrees, and experience working with disadvantaged youth, she not only found what she was looking for at Merritt College but has become a leader in a new state initiative to help students achieve their educational goals more quickly and efficiently.

A native of the Chicago area, Stefani went to Carleton College in Minnesota where her liberal leanings led her to become a student activist. “I was out there with my politics,” she says, “campaigning, marching, demonstrating, getting arrested. It was 1992, the first ‘Year of the Woman,’ and Dianne Feinstein was running for Senate for the first time.” But when Stefani graduated, she still had to find a way to pay the bills.

Disillusioned with her first post-college job as a fundraiser for left-wing political groups, she spontaneously answered an ad asking for volunteers to counsel women who had experienced sexual violence.

With the training and experience she gained there, Stefani was soon managing a nonprofit organization, Prevent Child Abuse Minnesota. After three years and a promotion to Acting Executive Director, “I realized that I wanted my volunteer job to be my ‘real’ job.” Her true calling had surfaced: she set out to become a mental health counselor.

“I realized how much I loved helping youth and families, so I started looking for a place to earn my Master’s Degree in Social Work,” says Stefani. “Since I had always lived in the Midwest, I decided to start a new life somewhere I’d never been. So I got out a map to find a place that was liberal enough for me, and that’s how I ended up in California going to UC Berkeley.”

Between internships and first jobs out of grad school, Stefani gained experience that would challenge the toughest in the field: she interned at a therapeutic pre-kindergarten (“for 4-year-olds who’d been kicked out of school”), a continuation high school for emotionally disturbed students, an agency where she provided 24/7 ‘wraparound’ services in homes with children with behavior disorders, and at school-based programs in Richmond and Oakland, where she worked with teenage boys who had committed serious crimes. Armed with this experience, she went on to earn her LCSW license.

“With my license, I could have opened my own private practice, but helping privileged people was never my goal,” she says. “I wanted to help people who didn’t have a lot of options. And after a lot of research, I decided that community college was my ideal place to work. Instead of working with kids who were at the mercy of the adults in their lives, I’d be working with adults: voluntary clients who had already taken this incredible step toward improving their lives by enrolling in college.”

Stefani set her sights on Merritt College and sought out Steve Pantell for an informational interview. While he was warm and welcoming, he told her that she wasn’t eligible for community college counseling positions because of her lack of experience in a college setting. However, he invited her to apply for a temporary position filling in for the CARE Program Coordinator, who was going on maternity leave. “I was thrilled and jumped at the chance to get the experience,” she says. “It was there that I really fell in love with Merritt’s students and its mission.”

The two-year stint in that position led to her next job as mental health counselor and de facto manager of the Merritt Health Center, a 20-hour-a-week adjunct position which combined all of her past experience to serve students struggling with every challenge imaginable. “I always wanted to provide mental health counseling in a college setting, so I had found my dream job,” she says. “It’s crucial for colleges to have a place to send troubled students,

not just for academic needs, but for personal and emotional issues like stress, financial hardship, homelessness, abusive relationships, and addiction.”

Although her position ended after nearly four years, Stefani’s allegiance to Merritt did not. After a year helping her parents back home with medical issues, she applied for several Peralta counseling jobs and was hired for her current full-time position as an academic counselor working with veterans, two topics she knew little about. “My learning curve was 100% vertical,” she says. “But my overall goal is to give students hope, whether it’s new students in college for the first time, reentry students looking for a second chance, or veterans readjusting to civilian life.”

Last summer, Stefani played a lead role in writing a successful grant for \$100,000 from the State Chancellor’s Office to create a Veterans Connection Center at Merritt. “The funding will go toward providing a one-stop shop for veterans services for our 219 vets and military families enrolled at Merritt,” she says.

Given all of Stefani’s experience, it seemed that Guided Pathways, the new statewide initiative to make student success more attainable, had her name written all over it. So she was excited to be invited to serve as Merritt’s Guided Pathways Faculty Lead, one of a 5-person core team, along with Samantha Kessler, Margie Rubio, Jason Holloway, and Doris Hankins. She hopes the entire college will participate.

“This is exactly what needs to be happening as the State Chancellor’s Office insists that we raise the number of graduates and transfers, reduce the achievement gap, and make sure our students are getting jobs,” says Stefani. “It’s all about reinventing the college from within, revamping the jungle gym of application and enrollment, communicating to students about what we have to offer—and making it super-easy to understand.”

For Stefani, working with students at Merritt fulfills her career goal, and now she has an opportunity to accomplish even more in a place that feels like home. “I admire these students so much for overcoming every roadblock to be here,” she says. “They are my heroes, and it’s an honor for me to help them find solutions toward their success.”

—*Susan May*