

Renae Blackwater Helps Plan Inaugural Native Youth Football Camp at MCC

Renae Blackwater graduated from MCC in Spring 2022, and served as an intern at Tempe-based LLC Indigenous Health over the summer. While there, she played an integral role in the organization – hosting an inaugural football camp for Native Youth at MCC in July that was coached by members of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Bruins Football team.

She recently spoke at the American Indian Institute’s anniversary celebration, offering praise of her experience at MCC. “After I spoke with an advisor at MCC, I became part of a community who cared.”



Renae Blackwater,
Associate in Arts,
Emphasis in American
Indian Studies, 2022

A particular member of the American Indian Institute who offered Renae guidance was manager Sam Stevens, who stayed connected with her after graduation.

With help from Sam, the Institute, an extended professional network, and a number of MCC students, Renae helped find volunteers for the football camp, hosted by Indigenous Health and its affiliate organization, United Natives.

THE UCLA CONNECTION

Crystal Lee, Ph.D., is founder and CEO of Indigenous Health and United Natives, a nonprofit (all staff from both organizations are 100% Native, as well as 95% of their clinical team).

She completed her postdoctoral research at UCLA and is personally connected with quarterback Dorian Thompson-Robinson’s family. For Lee, the camp was a natural progression of a shared mission of overall health promotion for Natives.

Lee, an entrepreneur-scientist and once student athlete of Scottsdale Community College, believed the organizations could use sports as a catalyst to promote good physical and mental health, along with self-discipline, among Native youth.

UCLA teammates Thompson-Robinson, Zach Charbonnet, Jake Bobo, and Titus Mokiiao-Atimalala headed for the Valley in full support of this mission.

MCC HOSTS THE ACTIVITIES

MCC Athletic Director John Mulhern was asked if MCC could host the camp. John collaborated with Sam, who contacted Renae for help organizing the event. “We were very excited to use this event to showcase MCC and its commitment to Native American students and their presence on campus,” Sam said.

Native youth between middle and high school ages were coached in drills and other football activities at MCC’s John D. Riggs Stadium. After the camp, attendees gathered in the Theo J. Heap Gymnasium for a Q&A with the organizers and UCLA teammates, who shared a message of hope and inspiration.

A pow wow group then performed for the audience, sharing the rich tradition and culture of Native dance (courtesy of Indigenous Enterprise).

The event as a whole was a huge success and brings the hope of an even bigger turnout next time. The goal is making the football camp annual.

HEALTH PROMOTION AS CENTRAL MISSION

A health-centered event such as this one is a cornerstone for the physical wellbeing of Native youth, and also for a sense of community and representation of Native peoples. “There are rarely opportunities for football camps like this

one for indigenous youth groups,” said Renae. “It was important that we made it free and accessible, and also representative.”

In reference to receiver Titus Mokiiao-Atimalala, who is native Hawaiian, Renae continued: “Indigenous kids can look up to him and say, ‘if Titus can do it [be a Division-1 college athlete], then I can, too.’ Something like that can make a big impact.”

Renae hopes to continue living out her mission. **“I want to help kids on reservations. I want them to have the support that helped me so much.”**

MCC has the largest population of Native American students in the state of Arizona. Every one of the 22 registered tribes in Arizona is represented at MCC, and the college ranks eighth in the nation for the successful degree completion of Native American students.

President's Message



Dear Alumni and Friends,

Mesa Community College welcomes students to the spring 2023 semester. The new year brings hope and enthusiasm to all of us. I am pleased to share exciting news regarding historic educational opportunities for our students. Final approvals and procedures are nearly complete for the first bachelor's degrees that can be earned from MCC. It is our belief that our new Bachelor of Applied Science in Data Analytics and Programming, and Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Education - Dual Language are going to be highly sought after as they are much needed in our region and beyond. MCC has added the world's first college-accredited program for disc jockeys, a Construction Trades Program, and an Apple IT certification program in response to industry needs and expanding career choices for our students.

MCC is increasing opportunities in our Allied Health Department. We have recently introduced Patient Care Technician and Behavioral Health Technician courses to offer students opportunities to build their health care career foundations. We are anticipating final approval from the Arizona State Board of Nursing to launch a Licensed Practical Nurse program in fall 2023. The LPN program takes less time to complete than the Registered Nursing degree, providing students a faster entry into the workforce with the possibility of working in the field while continuing to pursue their RN education.

The magnitude of Thunderbird philanthropy is enormous. Through this work, more than 1,000 students have received life-changing funds. More than \$1 million was contributed to the success of MCC students last year by our generous donors, many of whom are alumni. I invite you to review the MCC 2021-22 Donor Impact Report — mesacc.edu/philanthropy/impact-report. Entertaining and informative events are some of the great perks enjoyed by Thunderbird alumni. Please feel free to find upcoming activities and opportunities to engage with the alumni association at mesacc.edu/alumni.

All the best in 2023,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tammy Robinson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a horizontal line extending from the end.

Dr. Tammy Robinson

President

TRANSITIONS IN ALUMNI ASSOCIATION LEADERSHIP

As an MCC alumna, I have great pride in our alma mater. It has been an honor to serve as the manager for Alumni Relations for more than 20 wonderful years and to meet many of you. As I continue to serve MCC as Associate Vice President of Communications, Marketing, and Philanthropy, it is my pleasure to introduce the new team.

Julie Ellsworth is the Philanthropy and Alumni Engagement Officer, serving as the lead liaison for the MCC Alumni Association with support provided by **Julia Ruiz**. **Jeremy Byrum**, manager for Internal Communications, serves as editor for the *Alumni & Friends Newsletter* and emails with support from **Jennifer Biggs**, who has served the association for 20 years.

I'm excited about the new ideas, energy, and expertise they bring. Go Thunderbirds!

Marcy Snitzer, Associate Vice President



Between Dreams is About Wonder, and the Inspiration Needed to Create It



Between Dreams 2022
Oil and acrylic on canvas; 6' x 10'

Gingher Leyendecker and Nicole Collins have built a deep friendship over time. "It started when I was her department's liaison from the Counseling Department," says Collins. "Gingher's energy was calm, patient, kind, and understanding. I could see the passion she had as an educator."

*Leyendecker recently commemorated the friendship through her painting called *Between Dreams*, which depicts a dream-like state through the mind of a child. The child pictured is Collins's daughter, Madison.*

Leyendecker, Chair of the Art Department and Residential Faculty, describes her creative process:

How do you begin planning such a large-scale piece?

LEYENDECKER: I'll see the elements of the work and begin creating sketches. I'll start with individual parts that are going to be challenging. At the same time, I'm thinking about colors and how they will react to each other.

What was the next step?

LEYENDECKER: Once I felt good about this piece, Madison and Nicole came to campus and we took some photos. From the photos I created more sketches, taking

elements from different ones to create my final choice.

How does that idea transform into the final painting?

LEYENDECKER: First an under-drawing is required to make sure the layout is the way I planned it in my sketches. It can be tricky going from a page in a sketchbook to a large scale painting, and it takes a lot of standing back and thinking about ratios.

How long did this project take to complete?

LEYENDECKER: The actual painting probably took two months, but I'd say the concept took about five. I really wanted to capture the idea of wonder and growth.



Madison was the perfect subject because she is a young artist herself, and it was an honor to work with her and Nicole.

Leyendecker hopes to donate the piece to a children's ward in a local hospital.

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Between Dreams displayed at MCC's 2022 Biennial Faculty and Staff Art Exhibition. "In stepping up to this large-scale work, the viewer becomes part of the piece—a moment in the dream." ~ Leyendecker

Collins, Executive Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Counseling Faculty, reflects on the meaning behind the artwork:

How did Madison become the subject of the painting?

COLLINS: Gingher posed the idea, and I was incredibly honored that she wanted to capture my daughter. Gingher has been a mentor to Madison as she steps into her gift as a fellow artist; she couldn't imagine herself in a painting, but she trusted Gingher. That made her feel pretty special.

What was your reaction to seeing the completed painting?

COLLINS: As I walked into the gallery, I saw this enormous painting of my daughter flanking the opposite wall. I kept saying, "my baby," over and over again. I wanted to cry, but I was trying not to embarrass my children. However, to my surprise, they encouraged me to let my feelings flow, and I let it all go.

As I stood in front of that painting, I saw my baby being represented. I saw other historically underrepresented children connecting with her. From the details that showed the stunning complexity of her hair's coils, to the glow of her melanated skin that jumped off the canvas, I was in awe. I saw beauty.

What does this kind of project mean for us as part of the MCC Community?

COLLINS: So much of our day is devoted to working to continue the legacy of making MCC a great place to learn and work, but how much do we share with our colleagues what happens outside our campuses? We're all multi-dimensional beings, and that recognition creates a greater sense of belonging for us all.

I encourage our MCC community to invest in seeing the "whole person" and not just what they do at our college. Our mindfulness of this not only humanizes folks, but gives us an opportunity to be more compassionate in our thoughts and actions toward others, and that's the heart of DEI work.

A Life Led to Encanto: Why MCC 'Charmed' Alumni Angel Ruvalcaba

Throughout his early life and as a first generation college student, Angel Ruvalcaba was captivated by comics and movies, and loved to tell stories through his digital art and drawings. Today he is a production assistant at Walt Disney Animation Studios in Burbank, California, a career move that he said could not have happened without Mesa Community College.

Born into a large Latinx family in California's San Fernando Valley, Angel and his family came to Arizona, which brought not only new opportunities, but culture shock as well. "Suddenly everything that was cramped and small in California was spacious and wide in Arizona," he explains. Settling in East Mesa, Angel attended Skyline High School, graduating in 2013. "And I did not skip a beat to go straight to MCC."

As a digital art student, Angel's classes were artistic ones—painting, digital illustration, photography, and ceramics. "MCC really allowed me to try a little bit of everything," he adds. "I was not super great at ceramics, but it was a great class!"

Faculty member Kai Y. Kim was Angel's favorite MCC instructor. "I believe I took three classes with her and she was just so supportive but also very honest with me," he notes. "I went into college looking to draw the same things I was used to and she challenged me to think outside the box! I just loved all of her classes; they were all so relaxing and open."

One of his best memories of MCC is its expansive nature. "I loved the spaciousness of the campus," he says. "I spent a lot of time there thinking and working between classes. Whether I was drawing in my sketchbook on the green field listening to some music, or doing homework in the library, I really got to grow in a comfortable space and beautiful surroundings."

Angel found it difficult to forge friendships in high school since he always felt different from others. "I always cared what others thought and how I presented myself," he notes. "But when I came to MCC, I felt like there were so many people focusing on themselves and their passions, and I didn't have to worry about being myself anymore. I could draw anywhere without judgment. I had friends in college, but I really learned to find myself. I'll always have MCC to thank for that."

Angel earned an Associate's degree in Digital Arts and a Certificate in Digital Illustration in May 2017. He would later earn a Bachelor's degree in Film Practices from the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University in Fall 2019. Just prior to attending ASU, he found that MCC offered a semester working at Disneyland or Disney World. "I knew I had to be a part

of that! Once I spent that semester away, I fell right back in love with the Disney of my childhood, and I think the experience helped in the long term as I currently help design attractions for both theme parks. I've come full circle!"

He continues with appreciation for his experience: "I am loving my time here at Disney and currently I'm getting to work on some exciting projects! I definitely could see myself continuing to work at this great company for many years and learn as much as I can about filmmaking. Who knows what opportunities lie ahead of me!"

One career highlight was his work as a production assistant on the Academy Award-nominated animated film *Encanto*. The film is very special to him not only because he played a part in its production,

but for personal reasons. "My father just passed away, and I'm so grateful that he got to see his name in *Encanto* while he was still alive," Angel notes.

While he, his mom — whom Angel considers his major inspiration — his late father, and his family have been thrilled about his career, to this day, Angel is most proud of graduating from MCC. "I was the first in my family to finish high school and college. Because so many people put so much on the line so that I had the opportunities and education that I have now, everything I do is for them. I'm so thankful for my grandparents, my mother, and all of my family for supporting me."





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EXCITING START, EXTRAORDINARY RETURN

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MCC ALUMNI BOARD

The Mesa Community College Alumni Association (MCCAA) is overseen by a volunteer board of alumni. The board serves in an advisory capacity, working closely with the Office of Alumni Engagement and Philanthropy to carry out the MCCAA mission. Board members are appointed to three-year terms and the MCCAA convenes quarterly.

JOIN US ON THE BOARD

Now it's your turn. If you're passionate about helping to direct the future of MCC, guiding the college's alumni family, and cultivating a rich college experience for students, consider becoming an alumni board member. You can also nominate someone for board membership.

To learn more about the application and selection process, visit mesacc.edu/alumni/membership/alumni-board-committee-interest.

MCCAA MISSION STATEMENT

The Mesa Community College Alumni Association (MCCAA) is committed to serving and uniting alumni for the purpose of promoting the interests of Mesa Community College, its alumni, current and future students, and the community.