



**MESA
COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
A MARICOPA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Alumni & Friends

FALL 2023



Creating Your Own Tradition: Monica Trejo's Educational Path from Hardship to Triumph

Monica Trejo was not a traditional student, nor is she a traditional doctoral candidate. "My journey is my journey, and I'm very proud of where it's taken me," she explains.

From dropping out after her first semester at Mesa Community College, to returning while she worked a full-time job, Trejo slowly returned to the space that best contributed to her personal growth: education. Now in her All but Dissertation phase in Urban Educational Leadership at Columbia University, she has her sights set on helping others reach their full potential.

"I learned early on about the reality of education: it can set people on the path to their future," she says.



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“ Trejo began this journey in the small town of Dudleyville, AZ and eventually moved to South Tucson where she attended a high school with a low graduation rate. She and her friends lacked many of the educational opportunities in comparison to their larger city counterparts. Yet despite these struggles, Trejo graduated high school as the first in her family to do so.

She then moved to the Valley, wondering what to do about her future. “I didn’t have the knowledge, expertise, money, or GPA to attend college,” she says, “but I decided to take a placement test at MCC since my godfather lived in Mesa.” Starting off as a psychology major, she dropped out shortly after she began due to a lack of direction.

She was discouraged but persisted and eventually was hired full time by a pharmaceutical company. When the company would eventually offer tuition reimbursement for their employees to attend college, Trejo decided to give school another try. She returned to MCC as an anthropology major. “It was important for me to learn how my background and heritage informed who I am and how that could possibly help me guide others into their own identities,” she says.

Trejo was initially enthusiastic about being back in a learn-first environment, but quickly became defeated when she wasn’t testing well in her core classes. Yet this time, something clicked for her at MCC and kept her going past the point of dropping out again. If she had to pinpoint it, was it an instructor, class, or assignment? Or was it a combination?

“I remember vividly my college algebra class and how my professor really invested in who I am. I had a Spanish teacher who was amazing and gave me hybrid flexibility since I worked full time.” She also had a strong ecosystem of support in this round of her studies. “One of the most beautiful things about MCC is how great it is at accommodating non-traditional students and the diversity of its students,” she adds. “Going to school is hard enough and here I was working full time as well. It took me a while to find that successful formula, but you know what? Your path is not going to look like everyone else’s. I was able to find what motivates and excites me.”

Trejo’s community college pathway was critical for getting into university, which she attended at Arizona State University earning a bachelor’s in global health and a master’s in special education. Her teaching experience would come by the way of special education at the high school level, along with a stint with Teach For America. She decided to pursue her doctorate at Columbia to continue to make a difference.

“I realize how much I love learning, and I never want to stop. If I could go to school forever, I would,” she laughs.

Trejo currently serves on the Tempe Elementary School District Governing Board. Among the many goals of her term are serving on the city council for free pre-school for low-income families, as well as establishing partnerships to create mental health services for students and families to get the resources they need. Also working for the Arizona Board of Regents as the Director of Community Engagement, Trejo was an honoree in the *Phoenix Business Journal’s* “40 Under 40” due to her widespread accomplishments and community impact.

In her current capacity, she hopes to use her skills and resources to focus on educational attainment for other non-traditional students, military spouses, and underserved communities.

Her advice for those who may find themselves in the position she was in as a second-time MCC student is to: “not get discouraged. You can be just graduating high school or even retired. It’s never too late and school will be there for you when you’re ready. I found a home at MCC and others can, too. I would not be where I am today without it.”

Benjamin Rundall's Passion for Education and Helping Others is Found at MCC

"Sorry if my phone gets disconnected—the cell reception might go in and out up here," says MCC alumnus Benjamin Rundall on a return trip from the Navajo Nation. A civil rights attorney, Rundall speaks of bidding on a proposal to do work on the reservation, a contract supporting the rights to tribal sovereignty under Federal Indian Law.

It's part of the demands of the job, yet fulfillment of the work he does that is fueled by a passion to help those in need.

Formerly of the American Civil Liberties Union of Arizona, Rundall is now senior counsel for the Zwillinger Wulkan law firm in Phoenix.

Rundall's journey toward becoming a lawyer was not an easy one. As a young adult, he struggled to figure out his next steps in education, and he did not have high hopes for his future beyond high school. "I grew up pretty poor, in a single parent household. My mom was a teacher, but I had little

interest in school past the 12th grade," he says. Originally slated to attend Arizona State University (ASU) on a scholarship, Rundall forfeited it due to poor grades and a loss of interest. "I wasn't going to go to college. I was taking things for granted and didn't want to pursue my education any further."

So, what got him back into school? Of all things, his dating life. "My girlfriend at the time was going to MCC and threatened to break up with me if I didn't go too," he recalls. Nearly late to register for classes that semester, Rundall rushed into the enrollment center. "One employee stayed past closing time to get me my classes," he says.

As a new student at MCC, he had no idea what he wanted to study. He would go on to start with standard introductory courses and soon discovered a vested interest in the humanities: English and anthropology in particular. "At MCC, your classes are catered to you and your experiences. Here I was, now out of high school, but my classmates were from all walks of life. Some had been working all day and still showed up to a 6 p.m. class, others had families of their own. I saw that the faculty was really amazing and down to earth, and they wanted us all to succeed," he says.

"Being at MCC reinvigorated my passion for education."

One assignment in an anthropology course had a lasting impact: he had to maintain pen pal contact with a student in China for the

duration of the semester. "We had to learn about this person from the other side of the world, about their experiences and culture."

This sparked a renewed interest in wanting to work with people, and learning about individual experiences. With the effort he put in at MCC, Rundall was re-awarded his scholarship to ASU and accepted it to study Political Science. "I'd never done much public speaking or political engagement before college, and was able to do both at MCC," he says. "I think they were really helpful in identifying what I would do in university."

He discovered how important the law is in helping people, and after some soul searching decided to continue on to law school. The foundation built from an education at MCC allowed him to pursue a career he enjoys to this day.

"I'm now able to use my education in a positive and meaningful way. You're able to give back if you see a wrong occurring. I'm very, very grateful that I get to do that every day."

Rundall's enthusiasm shines through the interview as he wraps up the call.

"I think MCC is a wonderful place and I have many amazing memories from my time there. It was foundational in my success to where I am now and I am very, very grateful I get to use my education in a positive and meaningful way every single day."



“

I feel very privileged as a lawyer to be able to directly represent someone in need," says Rundall.



MCC Hall of Fame

November 2, 2023

RSVP TODAY

Join Mesa Community College (MCC) for the annual Hall of Fame event

The Mesa Community College Hall of Fame honors alumni, community members, and MCC employees whose personal and professional accomplishments and positive contributions to the college and community set them apart.

Thursday, November 2, 2023

6 p.m. – Hors d’oeuvres Reception MCC ART GALLERY PATIO

7 p.m. – Program MCC THEATRE

Mesa Community College, 1833 West Southern Avenue, Mesa, AZ 85202

Free and Open to the Public • RSVP Required

RSVP at: mesacc.edu/alumni/hall-fame/2023-hall-fame

2023 Hall of Fame Honorees

Outstanding Athlete

- **Douglas Lewis, M.A.**, was an MCC basketball player for the 1985-86 season and the starting point guard for the 1986-87 team winning conference championships as one of the top five point guards in the country.
- **Sarah Moravitz, M.Ed. Admin**, played soccer at MCC in the inaugural 1996 and 1997 seasons, was named Junior College All-American, team captain, MVP, 1996 First Team All-State, and tied for leading goal scorer as a defensive back.. The team won the 1996 regional championship.
- **Keith Smith** (1973) was on the MCC 1973 National Football Championship team, earning First Team All-Conference and First Team All-American honors and then coaching youth football and literacy programs.
- **Thomas Watkins**, the all-time leading scorer in MCC basketball history, earned ACCAC honors during his 1997 and 1999 seasons, was an All-American and on the ACCAC 1998 First Team when MCC was the Region 1 Champions.
- **Brandi Steinke White** was MCC Female Athlete of the Year in 2005 as she led the basketball team in points, rebounds, blocks, and field goal percentage. Captain of the team, she was First Team All-American and First Team All-Conference.

Outstanding Coach

- **John Guerrero** coached the 2001 MCC women’s golf team to a run of 17 wins of 18 Region I titles, capturing 83 consecutive conference tournaments over 12 seasons. He took the men’s team to the 2017 NJCAA Division II National Championship win.

Excellence in Teaching

- **Carole Drachler, Ph.D.**, has earned a stellar reputation as an arts professor and acclaimed art historian over more than three decades and is renowned for her participation with Arizona arts councils and art galleries.
- **Kara Thomson, M.F.A.**, brought to MCC years of art direction, scene design, production, and consulting experience from Hollywood, major theaters across the nation, television, and the Kennedy Center American College Theatre.

Distinguished MCC Staff

- **Marisa Estrada**, as Box Office Coordinator, has been integral to the success of the MCC Theatre Arts, Music and Dance departments for more than two decades promoting and supervising production events.

Service

- **Monica Torres** (2010) is founder of the global company NXT Generation Mortuary Support and one of the funeral industry’s most sought-after speakers and one of the only Latinas recognized as an international expert in her field.

Alumni Achievement

- **Gary Ernst** (1968) coached Arizona High School Boys Basketball for more than 38 years, leading teams to state titles and inducted into the Arizona High School Athletic Coaches Hall of Fame.
- **Michele Johnson** (1995) is chair of the Litigation Department at Latham & Watkins and was named a U.S. Top Trial Lawyer with global clients including Apple, Peloton, Pinterest, J.P. Morgan, Allergan, Puma and Kohl’s.
- **Mike VanZutphen** (1977) made a career of coaching and directing sports organizations such as the United States Professional Tennis Association and Arizona Special Olympics, receiving humanitarian awards for his volunteer work.

President's Corner

When Dr. Tammy Robinson was selected to be President of Mesa Community College, one of the goals she shared with faculty and staff was to expand the college's influence and engagement into our local and global communities. More than a year into her tenure, Dr. Robinson continues to enhance the college's reach through attending a broad range of events, speaking at conferences, meeting with stakeholders, and accepting invitations by organizations who align with her leadership and education expertise. Here are a few of her recent outreach activities.

Advancing Equity and Inclusion in Education

Accepted an invitation to participate in the Department of Defense's Taking the Pentagon to the People (TPTTP) event at Arizona State University, September 12-13, 2023.

Was the featured speaker during a Juneteenth Lunch & Learn webinar hosted by the City of Mesa and the Mesa-East Valley MLK Committee. She contributed her insights on the transformative role education can serve as a vehicle for positive change in the continuing fight for equal opportunity.

Serves on the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Commission for the *American Association of Community Colleges*. Her term is 2023-2026.

Facilitator and faculty at the 19th annual Carolyn Grubbs Williams' *Leadership Development Institute* as *President of the National Council on Black American Affairs*. October 15 -20, 2023, in Kansas City, Missouri. Dr. Robinson is also faculty at the Thomas Lakin Institute for Mentored Leadership as a member of the *Presidents' Round Table*. The institutes take place concurrently.

Invited as a panelist for October 17, 2023 Webinar -- "Are current DEI tactics supporting or impeding progress?" as part of the panel discussion series, *"Operationalizing DEI - A Deep Dive,"* hosted by The Washington Center.

Presented a certificate by Seongil Ma, President of The Arizona Korean Association, to become officially appointed as an Advisor to the Arizona Korean Association.

Mesa as a Beacon, Agent of Change

Hosted a Peace Pole Rededication Ceremony on September 21, 2023, in recognition of International Peace Day and in celebration of the first anniversary of the City of Mesa becoming an International City of Peace.

On September 7-8, 2023, Dr. Tammy Robinson joined presidents of Maricopa Community Colleges, Dr. Kate Smith and Dr. Greg Peterson, representatives of the U.S. Secretary of Public Education, representatives of the Secretary of Education and Culture of the State of Sonora, and representatives from private higher education institutions of the State of Sonora at the Higher Education Forum in San Carlos, Nuevo Guaymas, Sonora.

Engaged with Valle del Sol by attending their Community Health's Profiles of Success Hispanic Leadership Awards Celebration, September 15, 2023. MCC alumnus Ivan Quintana, 2019 MCC Honors Speaker, was recognized.

Women in Leadership

Honored at the Maricopa County Branch *NAACP Annual Women's Luncheon and Expo*, Saturday, September 9, 2023 in Tempe, Arizona for helping to clear the path for the next generation.

Panelist for Women Leaders: Making their Mark and Making a Difference at the *Phoenix East Valley Partnership Annual Statesperson* event held in MCC's Performing Arts Center on September 20, 2023.

Spoke to college and high school students, as well as sworn and civilian law enforcement professionals, at the *Arizona Black Law Enforcement Employees Conference* September 20 - 22, 2023.

Speaking on "Surviving and Thriving as a Woman in a Multi-College System" at the *Women in Leadership in Higher Education Conference*, October 11- 12, 2023 in the Harvard Faculty Club, Cambridge, Massachusetts, sponsored by the National Diversity Conference.





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Alumni & Friends is published by the Office of Institutional Advancement (IA) for the alumni of Mesa Community College.

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**PHILANTHROPY AND
ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT**

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News, and Attractions
at MCC?**

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