Dan Wheeler: If you work just for the money, you will never make it. But if you love what you're doing and you always put the students first, success will be your...

Christina Barsi: Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

Sun Ezzell: And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to the Magic Mountie podcast.

Christina Barsi: Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak, by bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

Sun Ezzell: We bring to you the voices of Mt. SAC, from the classroom to completion.

Speaker 1: I know I want to achieve my goals and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

Sun Ezzell: She is a sociology major and she's transferring to Cal Poly Pomona. Psychology Major. English Major.

Christina Barsi: From transforming part-time into full-time-

Speaker 2: Like the time that you spent with Julie about how to write a CV and a cover letter.

Christina Barsi: ... to just finding time to soak in the campus-

Speaker 3: Think of the natural environment around us as a library.

Christina Barsi: ... we want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mt. SAC, but most importantly we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni and producer of this podcast.

Sun Ezzell: And I'm Sun Ezzell, Learning Assistance Faculty and Professional Learning Academy Coordinator.

Christina Barsi: And this is the Magic Mountie Podcast.

Sun Ezzell: Hi, this is Sun Ezzell with the Magic Mountie Podcast. This week's episode is about coming full circle about second chances, about making a life and figuring out where you want to be. It's about figuring out what you love and doing what you love. It's about helping others and giving back. In this episode, Mt. SAC, faculty and classified staff, who are also a Mt. SAC alumni, share their stories of finding belonging, connection and purpose at Mt. SAC.

Elmer Rodriguez: My name is Elmer Rodriguez. I've been at Mt. SAC now for 13 year, working here full time. Prior to that, actually, I came to Mt. SAC in the year 2000. I remember still coming to campus and being lost. I was accepted to the Bridge program during that time, so I didn't know where to go. I ended up in Student Life. The orientation was actually happening in there, but I didn't know that was the building.

Elmer Rodriguez: I was, literally, about to walk away when someone came out and say, like, "Are you lost?" They talked to me in Spanish, which, to me, that was great. Because I came to this country when I was 17 and I had only been here for two years during that time, so I was still learning English pretty much. So, when they spoke to me in Spanish I was, like, "Oh, my God. Somebody is talking to me in Spanish," so that felt good.

Elmer Rodriguez: That was actually Patricia Maestro, who actually became my advisor first, my counselor, then my supervisor. Then also someone who has supported me a lot as well throughout my academics and all that, so a great mentor-supporter. I have met so many individuals here who really, truly have made an impact in me.

Elmer Rodriguez: I think that one of the things that I attribute a lot of my success is because of who I have met in the past, from Laura Muniz, who [inaudible 00:03:02] to other individuals like our vice president of student services, who I have the privilege of knowing personally, Dr. Audrey Yamagata-Noji, so I feel privileged to be here at Mt. SAC. I can definitely tell students that it is possible and I see that reflecting in myself that where I started and where I was able to accomplish.

Elmer Rodriguez: I spent four years here at Mt. SAC because of the fact that where I started. But I think that that time really helped me to sharpen my English skills to really feel more comfortable and to also... You know, I call it the toolbox. I felt that I had an empty toolbox and when I came here I was able to get that toolbox really filled and when I transfer I knew what to do with each tool.

Elmer Rodriguez: Going back a little bit. I had some challenges here at Mt. SAC in the sense that learning a new language and adapting and all that was not easy. I used to take the bus for three years and then when I was coming to Mt. SAC where it was raining. However, still, I walked for 30 minutes to get the bus to come to Mt. SAC.

Elmer Rodriguez: I spent almost all day here at Mt. SAC because I didn't have a place where I can go back and study at home. I thought, "You know what? Spend the time in the library." Those are the things that I learned in the Bridge program because it really... You know, you are the ones who have taught me so many things that I'm really appreciative of that. Being a first-generation college student, being the first one in my family to actually go to college and be able to speak the language, I have been the translator, the doctor, the lawyer, the everything because, in a way, my family comes to me for everything, you know? So, having the executive mindset that making decisions, we need to just move on kind of thing. So, I think that has helped also in my success.

Elmer Rodriguez: Now, looking back 19 years ago when I was a student here and now being a counselor full-time here, I feel honored and privileged to be in this position where I can continue to impact students the way that someone impacted me as well, whether it is through academic counseling, whether it is through teaching or just to be there for our students in different ways.

Elmer Rodriguez: But I've held so many different positions on campus. I actually worked in educational advising with Bridge, general advising. I've worked for Upward Bound before, too, when I was a student. I worked in financial aid also when I was a student. I actually started financial aid by doing free workshops, and I was hired immediately because they felt that what I was doing was so impactful. So, I was appreciative of the director back then, Susan Jones, who gave me the opportunity.

Elmer Rodriguez: The role that I've had more recently has been Outreach specialist, which I was there for eight years, so I used to go to the high schools and talk to students. Every year, I will work with at least 2,000 students or so. I know that I worked with a lot of students and so, you know, I meet students everywhere and like, "Hey, Elmer. Elmer." "Oh, hi." It feels good to know that I play a role in helping them transition into the college, so it feels really, really good.

Elmer Rodriguez: More recently, right before my counseling position, I was the coordinator for the Dream program on campus. It was a great opportunity and a big task also that was given to me. With the help of a lot of people, including Laura Muniz, who is our full-time counselor and other individuals, we were able to construct what we have now as the program. We started as a center and now it became a program. Our undocumented students on campus have a safe home because of the work that many of us came together and did.

Elmer Rodriguez: I always tell people that I feel privileged and honored to work at a place that I can say is like my second home pretty much. That's the reason why I came back to Mt. SAC because having done a full circle where I started as a student and then came back to work here is because I know what we have and I know that is great. I know that some people could be intimidated because it is a big place, but to me I'm just impressed on how much we have grown as a college.

Elmer Rodriguez: You know, educationally, after Mt. SAC I went to UC Riverside where I pursued my degree in business and sociology. After I finished UCR, I got hired immediately at Mt. SAC within a month and that's because of the people that I had met here back then. The dean of counseling, Raul Rodriguez, was someone who I respected so much. I worked with him already and he hired me as an educational adviser part-time. That was my first professional job that I had on campus and it felt really good to be able to contribute now, not as a student, but as a professional already.

Elmer Rodriguez: After that, I worked for a year there. After a year later, I applied for the Outreach position in 2007 and I was able to get that position, where I mentioned I was eight years there. Right after that, I transitioned into the coordinator of the Dream program and I was there again five years as well, so it's like five year window, and then now in counseling where I'm planning to retire from. I feel, and I call it, my last station in a way. Like, this is where I want to be and I feel ready, I feel excited.

Elmer Rodriguez: That's the reason, educationally, when I decided to continue my education after working in Outreach for two years, I pursued my masters in counseling because I knew that I wanted to work as a counselor. I told myself that I wanted to impact the population and that population that I wanted to impact was undocumented students. Because when I went through my entire studies, I saw very little data, very little research and support resources for undocumented students. So, that's what I said. I want to contribute to that.

Elmer Rodriguez: That was 2008 and now, we're 2019, 11 years later, there's so much support for undocumented students. I feel that now it's been accepted as another population or subpopulation of all of our students, just like first-generation student and so forth. There's still more work to be done, but I think that, especially in California, has been very progressive.

Elmer Rodriguez: But in my new career now as a counselor, I'm really excited just to work with my colleagues, continue to impact students because I always say that that's why I went to school for, to be able to contribute. I remember what it was like to be on the other side of the students, so that's why [inaudible 00:09:08] impact them. I'm going to make sure that I can be as welcoming, as supportive and as understanding as possible, so that we could be able to support and learn together.

Dan Wheeler: My name is Dan Wheeler and I am a faculty member on campus. Currently, I teach English 1A.

Sun Ezzell: So, when you first came here as a student, you were working as well, and you are a returning student, right? You had a break. You didn't come right after high school.

Dan Wheeler: Yeah, that's true. Yeah, I had a break between high school and when I finally showed up here. That was probably a 10-year break. For about 10 years I was working in retail. I hated it. I knew it wasn't for me and there was no path in front of me. I wasn't following any path. I was just working a dead-end job. It would always be a dead-end job. I didn't like retail. I guess, finally, I got so miserable then that I decided to give education a try.

Dan Wheeler: I wasn't the greatest student when I was in high school, but for some reason, probably just maturity, maybe emotional maturity, when I went back to school after that 10-year break, I was a much better student and I got a lot more out of my classes.

Sun Ezzell: Do you think that having been a returning student yourself and having worked while you were going to school, does that impact how you work with students now?

Dan Wheeler: Yeah. It makes me a lot more empathetic because I was scared to death to go back to school. I really was. It just scared the heck out of me.

Dan Wheeler: So, now having been there and because I remember that feeling, I know that my students are feeling that, too, especially the returning students and they're pretty open about their feelings, you know. Very often after the first day of class, I'll have one or two of them come up and say, "I'm a returning student. I'm a lot older than these other kids in this class." I tell them, "Hey, I was in the same position so I know where you are. I'm glad you're here and this is the right place for you. You're definitely welcome here and I understand what you're doing." Definitely gave me more empathy for where they're coming from.

Dan Wheeler: So, yeah, teachers that affected me, they had a big profound effect on me, I did have a couple, and they're still here. One of them was Betsy McCormick, who teaches in the English department. She was huge because she was so hard. She was my hardest teacher. She was hard on purpose. She asked me early on, she knew I wanted to transfer to a UC and she said, "They're going to grade differently, you know. I could grade your papers as a UC instructor, if you want." I said, "Okay, yeah, that'd be great."

Dan Wheeler: So, she did. She was very detailed in her criticism of my writing, but she pushed me to work at a higher level when I'm writing a paper. Not just writing a paper to just turn it in to get a grade, but to actually put some real thought into it and put some pride into the product that you're making. You know, she instilled in me that idea that your paper mattered and if you're going to the trouble to write this thing, you might as well do a really good job of it. I think I'm trying to instill that in my students as well.

Speaker 7: I've been a student here at Mt. SAC for total of four years as a student worker in different programs, getting paid through kind of different pockets. Then I graduated through the associate's degree and went over to Cal Poly. I saw the opening for this position in the same department that I've been in for four years and I joined back into the family a month after I left. So, I feel I've never left and I'm in the same position I was then. I just get paid more and it's very much fun.

Sun Ezzell: That's so great. It sounds like having a job as a student worker really made a difference.

Speaker 7: Having a job as a student worker really made a difference in my educational life, to be perfectly honest. I was able to make a life here on campus through the week. Some students come and they have a few hours here and they leave. They go home and they don't put in what they really need to, they don't put in what they should put, and some do. But, really, stay on campus lets you have that ability to just dedicate yourself, to not have so many outside influences pulling your time and your efforts into different directions.

Sun Ezzell: Tell us what's your role on campus now and where do you work.

Speaker 7: Well, my role on campus is in the Academic Success and Achievement Center. It used to be the LAC. It's the largest computer lab here on campus. I am a lab assistant and I help clock people in. I help the students with any kind of technical difficulties they're having. I'm just really a concierge between technology and students, really filling a gap between the two. I'm luckily a Jack of all trades and I love to help people. We are a tutoring center. We have tutors that are assigned on the other side here for every academic.

Sun Ezzell: What was it that made you want to keep working at Mt. SAC?

Speaker 7: It really is the family-centeredness. It's people like Robin Cash or Bill Rawlings and the people in the department that have helped me and become mentors to me over the four years that I've been here. I wanted that to continue and I'm really glad I did.

Barbara G.: I'm Barbara Gonzales. I teach reading classes here, what used to be the Learning Assistance Center, but it's now called Learning Assistance Faculty, and the ASAC where the tutoring is. I liked the professionalism I saw here, the expectations were very clear and they expected you to pass your classes and move on.

Barbara G.: Tutoring was starting to grow and my second husband and I, we weren't married at the time, but we went in this center and saw a tutor for art history and you need one for art history. There's just so much to know and a lot of information, so I really liked the feeling of learning assistance at the time.

Barbara G.: It seemed really nice move when the job was first offered to me to be a tutor. I like our equity piece. I like the fact that just today I was able to help a student get some food and get on a list to find shelter and to have them be comfortable enough to come in and say, "I need help," and know that they're going to get help. That's one of the things I'm very proud of, Mt. SAC stands up for their students.

Barbara G.: I was very well supported here as a student and there was value to going through the degree. There was value in getting the diploma. There was value in coming back and realizing, "Wow, I can use this and go somewhere else." It was so good to see that I could do that. I didn't really understand that, how important that terminal degree was in my situation. I tell students all the time, if you have a chance, then get a terminal degree. We have to value what we've done here and what we've built here. These things mean something and there's a richness here if we're willing to look at it.

Huu Bui: My name is Huu Bui and I work for EOPS, CARE and CalWORK work under the tutoring department. I look forward to coming to work every single day.

Huu Bui: What I love about what I'm doing? Just making a different, making a different on our student. I love to see them. I love the fact that I could be able to assist student in math, this particular subject where some people have a hard time passing the class. I feel like I do have that expertise to help student understand and an easier way to help them eventually succeed and graduate, as well as giving back to Mt. SAC since I'm also a student here since back in June of 2003. It's been quite a long journey and I love it.

Sun Ezzell: So, you were tutoring math when you were a student here.

Huu Bui: Correct.

Sun Ezzell: That's awesome.

Huu Bui: I was learning and also trying to help out.

Sun Ezzell: Were you a math major?

Huu Bui: You know what, that was the thing I have. I was never a math major. I grew up in a third world country where, you know, the Asian aspect is that Asian are always good at math. I'm the type of person that I don't really like to take that, like, "Oh, you know, you're Asian, so you're good at math," and that's pretty much it. So, me, I always go against it. Not for me. Nothing. Just be hard. Just trying to find out who I am, what am I here for, what makes me happy. I know I have to do something with helping people. That's what drive me. That's why I'm here for, that's my calling. I went ahead and I chose human services as my major. I finished that at Cal State Fullerton back in '08 and then I'm here.

Huu Bui: Throughout this whole time, I've been working for so many different department here. One of them was EOPS, which is currently right now. I also worked with the Bridge program for a few years. I also worked with Upward Bound program as well, back then the LAC MARC. So, based on all this experience, I just kind of narrowed down math as my thing. I feel like there was a lot of people been telling me, and it's been verifying to me that I do have some type of expertise in math where I could use that to my benefit and actually make a different helping students to pass their math class. Math is it, so I've been taking classes here, and I finished all the math classes here. I want one day to become a math professor.

Sun Ezzell: Maybe you'll be a math professor here at Mt. SAC.

Huu Bui: I hope so. That is the goal. I love all the math professors here. One person that stands out the most is Professor Jimmy Tamayo. One time during his class, one of our students that's enrolling in our tutoring, her name was Alana. She was taking a class in his class. During that day it was a study session or something where Jimmy said, "You could choose to go over the study guide before the exam or to go over with you guys, or you get take off if you got one." Alana, she stands up and she's getting her stuff ready where she's the one that need the help.

Huu Bui: Professor Jimmy saw that and he says, "Alana, where are you going? I think this session would be very helpful for you, for you to be here so you could be prepared for a test." She go, "No. Is there a way I could go? I'm going to go see Huu in tutoring. That's my tutor." He goes, "Oh, you can go see Huu. Okay, go ahead. That's fine with me. Just remember I taught him everything he knows."

Huu Bui: When I first got here as a student, he was my professor for Math 71. He just made that big impact on me where I'd like to one day be like that every student that I interact with, they always, like, wanting to know more about you. Just to feel that I guess sense of belonging, like where you're at, or you're not just... Like I'm also a human being. I'm not just like, "Oh, this guy is just good at math," or like, "Where did he go to school?" [inaudible 00:20:06] But as I share with them, open up and share with them a little about my background, my life story and whatnot, they feel more connected. They trust me more.

Huu Bui: Also they feel like, "You know what, if he could do it, I could do it. He told me when he came here, he didn't even speak English and look at him right now, I understand I'm fine and he's able to help out and give back." That right there is more than a million dollars. No matter what, no matter where I go, I think Mt. SAC is always going to be the biggest thing that actually changed my life.

Christina Barsi: Thank you for listening to the Magic Mountie podcast. Remember to subscribe on Apple podcasts, Spotify or wherever you'd like to get your podcasts so you can listen in the car, in your office, or however you like to listen. Once you subscribe, we'd love to hear what you think by leaving us a review and don't forget to share your favorite episodes.