Christian: ... because of those specific faculty, taking a lot of time out a little extra care to figure out what's your story? What's going on? How can I help?

Kenny: In the past I've done an assignment in my speech class called 'Family Stories' where you tell a story from your family that when your family gets together what stories do they share. And watching this presentation today made me realize that many students may not have those kinds of stories, they are just understanding that their family may be something totally different than what I have in my mind about what a family is.

Liesel Reinhart: Welcome to the Magic Mountie podcast. This is a podcast that's dedicated to helping faculty and other college employees as they try and navigate the challenging fabric of serving students especially at Mt. San Antonio College. But everyone's welcome.

Christina Barsi: Hey there, it's Christina Barsi here and today's episode is a very informative overview that addresses the needs of students that may be foster youth or that may be affected by trauma and the sensitivities of that student and how faculty can incorporate some best practices into their teaching style and their communication style with these students.

Christina Barsi: It is presented by Rigo Estrada and Bri Maciel who are representing the REACH Program and at the end of this episode you'll catch an interview by Liesel with a former Mt. SAC student and former foster youth Christian Green, he had to call from a coffee shop so there is little background noise but his story is just too good to pass up.

Christina Barsi: So stick around for this presentation from Fall Flex Day entitled 'working with foster youth on campus, trauma informed care best practices.'

Rigo: My name is Rigo Estrada. I am the programs specialist with REACH Foster Youth program. My educational background, I have a master in social work. I have been a professional social worker for the past almost five years working predominately with youth in foster care.

Bricella: Good morning everyone. My name is Bricella Maciel. I am the students success coach with the REACH Program. So a little bit about myself, I was a former foster youth, and I first started community college here at Mt. SAC, I then went on to Citrus College for some time until I was able to transfer out to Cal Poly Pomona in where I got my BA in sociology and there's nothing more rewarding for me than to have a position that allows me to pay it forward and work with students.

Rigo: Mt. SAC loves numbers. They love to crunch numbers just to give you an idea, last year alone we had 422 students who took a class and identified as foster youth. Out of those 422 we were able to service and engage with about 192 students which is about 45% of them. Some of the numbers that we were able to gather from last year that are impressive, that we like to talk about is the GPA of our students compared to those students that were not part of our programing, may not seem like a big difference, obviously for us it is, it's our students within REACH were able to get an average of about 2.0 as compared to 1.67 for students that are not engaged in the program.

Rigo: And more importantly the retention and persistence numbers. Specifically the persistence between our students that joined in the fall and continued on to the spring. For us in the REACH Program that was about a 70% resistance rate compared to only 39% of those that did not engage with REACH.

Rigo: We just wanted to put those numbers in your head to give you a perspective of the number of students that we personally work with and perhaps the number of students that you may encounter through out your job here at Mt. SAC.

Rigo: Our objectives today are going to be simple. We want to help understand trauma and stress. We want to help recognize trauma in students perhaps provide you with some strategies you might find helpful to implement either in your classroom or in your counseling office and then discuss the importance of self care for you as a professional and as an educator.

Bricella: Before we discuss trauma and some best practices, we wanted to acknowledge one very important thing, we don't want anyone here thinking that students with trauma are beyond hope that is not the case at all. Our brains develop well into our twenties and there are a lot of opportunities for us in education to influence the development of children who experience or have experienced trauma. Resilience is what keeps our students going, resilience is strengthened when students have recurrent relationships with trusted adults along with being taught resilience through skill building.

Bricella: This resilience in turn can moderate the effects of trauma and stress and lead to healthier outcomes and just to add to that, I myself can attest to this, resilience is the strength that really took me time to build up and create for myself. It was because of this that I was able to successfully navigate the challenges and complexities of the university.

Rigo: And at REACH we work hard to try to provide our students with some of those skill building opportunities for them to strengthen then resiliency. And you as an educator we want you to realize that you are that trusted adult that can also continue to support our students and strengthen the resiliency.

Rigo: We are very proud to say that last year we were able to graduate our first official cohort with 10 students graduating or transferring out of Mt.SAC. We have students going to USC, UC Santa Cruz, UCLA, Cal Poly and we're extremely proud of that.

Rigo: Now what is trauma? Trauma as defined by a lot of the experts within this field is a negative life event or experience that occurs in a position of relative helplessness. It's an experience in which a person's internal resources are not adequate to cope with external stressors. Some of those stressors a.k.a traumas vary from sexual assault, racism, poverty and what we call adverse child experiences. Compared to the general population, youth in foster care are significantly more likely to have experienced violence specifically abuse and or neglect.

Rigo: As a social worker I can definitely attest, a lot of our kids get removed from the biological household because of general neglect or some type of abuse or violence. And approximately 90% of children in foster care have experienced a traumatic event with nearly half reporting exposure to four or more types of traumatic events.

Rigo: Trauma is based on our survival instincts. It's a chemical process of response to helplessness. Some traumatic experiences occur once in a lifetime and others are ongoing. Many have experienced multiple traumas and for far too many, trauma is a chronic part of their lives. It's a combination of events experiences and effects. It's important to remember that every student, every person perceives trauma differently. What is traumatic to some individuals may not necessarily be traumatic to others.

Bricella: So moving on, I'm going to go ahead and talk a little bit about the ACE study and as Rigo mentioned ACE standing for Adverse Childhood Experiences. Basically what they wanted to do was asses the association between childhood maltreatment and later life health and well being. It took place in San Diego with about 17000 patients and they were basically ask about 10 childhood experiences, about 36% of participants reported zero ACE's almost 30% reported at least one ACE and almost 12% reported having four or more of these experiences. Also keeping in mind that these patients were a high functioning group of individuals.

Bricella: Why is this important? They realized that the more ACE people have the greater the risk they have of starting health effects. So basically the more ACE's the higher the likelihood of missing work, of drinking smoking but also more great to have physical health issues like cancer, stroke and heart disease.

Bricella: There has been links that associate adverse childhood experiences and the way they play out later on in adulthood. And as Rigo stated, given the histories of maltreatment and complex trauma it is not surprising that youth in the foster care system have been found to have high ACE scores leaving them at risk to a mental health issues among others.

Rigo: Now we are going to speak about the brain. No science experience, no expertise at all, it's based on the research, so for the sake of argument let's ... "that's true Rigo good job good information" please.

Rigo: Trauma is based like I said earlier on our survival instinct. It is a chemical process in response to helplessness and how helplessness engages our instincts. The instinctive neurochemistry turns on the fight or flight reactions as protection to help us survive what the brain perceives as potentially life threatening. The cerebrum a.k.a prefrontal cortex, that cortex is on the standpoint of evolution, this is the new brain. The part that most distinctively makes us human. So that front part of the brain allows us to process what is happening in the moment, recall from past similar experiences which is memorization and I want you to keep that in mind, weighs pros and cons and then makes a decision and acts upon it.

Rigo: Underneath that part of the brain, exists other components of the brain that are considered the old part of the brain, the primitive function to what's keeping us alive and there's four structures within that part of the brain that are impacted directly by trauma. I'm sure that you've seen it or maybe experienced it when something traumatic happens, something scares you, a lot of us scream, some of us get timid, some laugh, some people giggle right? Again the point that we are trying to make is that these reactions are hormonally driven as opposed to us having the choice of whether to laugh or to cry or to react in any certain way.

Rigo: It's safe to point out that with the issues available that there's no choice in the response to trauma but responses like I said are hormonally driven. It's important to know that when working with victims with trauma, the memory of the event may be fragmented, inconsistent and more pieces may come with time. Trauma causes the brain to adapt in ways that contribute to it's survival. When a student experiences a trigger or a trauma, the feeling brain dominates the thinking brain and students have symptoms that became behavioral problems in school or in the classroom.

Rigo: Often without realizing it, you as educators have been responding to traumas impact for generations. What is new however is that trauma researchers can now explain the hidden story behind many difficulties that hamper our education system. And research from developmental and cognitive psychologists as well as advancements in neuroscience shows that you as an educator, you as a counselor and professor can moderate the affects of trauma. And that's an important point that we wanted to illustrate.

Rigo: Students displaying any of the following may be experiencing trauma or triggers or may be coping with that trauma or with that trigger. Whether it's a student having difficulty focusing, missing class, challenges with their emotional regulation, fear of taking risk a.k.a joining a group project, picking up in class, having anxiety with deadlines, anger, helplessness or disassociation with stress, withdrawal and isolation or involvement in unhealthy relationship. I think it's safe to say that we all as educators have seen these symptoms in our classrooms right? One way or another we've seen them.

Bricella: So although starting college is a positive exciting milestone for many people, negotiating new environments and responsibilities can also be stressful particularly for students with a history of exposure to trauma. So this requires a paradigm shift at the faculty staff at organizational level to refocus on understanding what happened to a child. So it's very simple as changing a question as "What is wrong with you?" To "What happened to you?". So I can definitely attest to some of the symptoms that a lot of the students go through. So for most of my life I basically learned to depend on myself and so when I faced several of these challenges, it was hard for me to reach out and ask for the help that I needed.

Bricella: As educators, counselors and staff we definitely have a tremendous effect on how things can play out for at risk populations. And then as foster youth, specifically we definitely are at a distinct academic disadvantage, many will experience like myself insurmountable obstacles that will cause many to drop out for some time or all together. Luckily I was able to return to school but many others won't have the same opportunity as they do lack a strong support system.

Rigo: Our goal with REACH is for Mt. SAC to be a trauma sensitive school. A school in which all students feel safe, welcome and supported and we're addressing traumas impact on learning on a school wide basis is that the center of this education mission. So how do we create a culture of trauma informed care? We go by and try to promote and execute the six core values: safety, trustworthiness, choice and control, collaboration, empowerment.

Bricella: And then Rigo, if you would just let me share, so for myself I have experienced, even though with the smallest things where I am just sitting in class and I had a professor come over to me and say "Hey I noticed you did really well on the exam." That really just empowers me to ... It makes a different between showing up to class and not showing up, doing the reading. So it's just even the smallest forms of conversations or comments, to me that made me feel special. Like "Oh, she's noticing" that I did really well.

Rigo: She just hit it on the nail, praise them right? Praise your students that begins forging a positive direction in their own lives. Be sensitive to family structures. You as professors must recognize that students have different family settings and they should consider changing their language accordingly. For example saying care giver instead of parents. A lot of our students, a lot of the kids that I deal with they have care givers right?

Rigo: Avoid romanticizing trauma narratives and subject content. Although some individuals experience post traumatic growth after successfully adapting to the follow of traumatic experiences, ensure your lesson content or subject matter does not depict trauma as romantic or desirable. Our students do have resiliency. We should foster that resiliency, but let's not romanticize it. Let's try to provide more support so that our students don't necessarily have to rely on their resiliency to get through the day or get through your classroom. And identify mentors and other support systems and consult with colleagues.

Rigo: Connect students to REACH or other special programs on campus who can provide them with additional support. Students are experts on their own life and feelings, do not expect instant trust. Normalize and validate feelings that come from experiencing trauma. Ask students what will help them feel more comfortable and how you can best work with them and I just want to point out that our students that we discussed while we are doing this research, they have pointed out some of the great things that you as professors are doing in the classrooms. A few students in particular mentioned one of their professors at the beginning of their semester passed out an index card, asked all the students to write down their names and asked a very simple question "During this upcoming semester, what are you personally dealing with or experiencing that may affect your participation or focus in the classroom."

Rigo: We have a few of our students who hate working in groups, and we have students who have been dinged because they don't like to participate in groups. There is really valid reason why some of our students do not like to work in groups, one of the biggest ones, they can't depend on people, they haven't been able to depend on people through out their time in foster care. So if I'm going to depend on you to help me succeed when people in the past may not necessarily have been there, that's going to create problems. We can agitate those problems by being extremely strict or giving that student opportunity to discuss those options.

Bricella: Groups projects did bring some kind of anxiety. I had mentioned I learned to depend on myself so even being open to communication, just communicating with them was hard enough right? So establishing that dialogue was very hard to just open and share my experiences. And I was also ... I also had to be careful what I shared right? Because I did confirm a different background, very untraditional, very harsh so even then sometimes we'd have group discussions in where I had to share a little bit about yourself, it gives me anxiety, it gets me thinking, it takes me back to where I came from. So it is very hard and it could be perceived that from professors as not participating and not sharing and everything like that so it could definitely relate to this so.

Rigo: Hopefully the information that we provided can enhance a little bit or support those efforts that you are already doing. We on the students services side appreciate everything that you all do and hopefully we can continue building a strong network and obviously focusing on our students success.

Rigo: With that, thank you so much for being a part of our presentation.

Christian: My name is Christian Green. I am a first generation. I'm African-American, former foster youth and I graduated from Mount SAC in 2014, or more so ... Well, I did graduate. I got my AA in psychology and I transferred to UCLA in 2014. So I was born in a prison cell. I was born in a jail. A San Bernardino County Jail to an incarcerated mother, and a father that I've never met. I was raised by my grandmother who picked me up at two days old from the jail, and I was involved in a legal custody so that realm of foster care a lot of people don't know about. With her, basically her and my grandfather, they nurtured me and took care of me until I was 15 and then they passed away when I was 15-16, leading me into actually being adopted into another foster care system.

Christian: It was different, growing up for me. And so I'm very appreciative of my grandparents. I wouldn't say that I had a bad life. But definitely there was always this void missing. What if my parents were there? Where were they at? Did they even care? Did they want to be there? What was my mother feeling while she had me in a jail? Did she hold me? All these different thoughts have arisen in my head, but I've learned how to just deal with them and try to encourage and empower the next person.

Liesel: So how are things going for you right now?

Christian: Things are going good right now. After transferring to UCLA in 2014, I graduated with my BA in sociology from UCLA and then I just recently got my masters in African-American studies, concentrational education from UCLA. Throughout this process, I worked heavily with foster youth as well as African-American student unions and first generation, but right now I'm currently teaching as an adjunct faculty looking to going to nonprofits, looking to potentially go ... Still go after my PhD or a double joint program with the JDR PhD, but it's still in the air. For me, just like the transition from last June until now, I finally just got a job maybe about a month ago, so I kinda went through a little mild depression or whatever, because it just wasn't happening fast enough.

Liesel: What can faculty do to help support foster youth?

Christian: I feel like it should be more of a mentoring, like a one-on-one. Like in the customer service world, you go over and beyond for the customer in a way. But I feel like faculty should make it a priority to try to think about what is it that the student needs? I know, for me, having you, Danny, and then also a few others, Linda Diaz being there to even just be a listening ear was a whole lot, right? Because then I was able to build that relationship with you all, foster that relationship, and then essentially that would help down the line with letter of recommendations, figure out how to navigate the space at a community college.

Christian: There is the imposter syndrome, right? So you get into these new, acclimated spaces, you're trying to fit in, but then you going around ... I know for me at ULCA there was a lot of wealthy kids. So it comes with this level of intimidation this level of fear, anxiety, and then which also leads to depression and suicide. I didn't have my parents to call on. I didn't have that money, that access to money and what not, so I worked full time while also going to school, which is a lot of the stories of community college students, because we just don't have funding.

Christian: It shouldn't always be about money, but the reality is that a lot of foster youths just don't have money. Or is not knowledgeable of the funding that is available for foster youth.

Liesel: How's your safety net?

Christian: I still have my foster youth mentors from UCLA that I stay in contact with. I also have you all at Mount SAC that I consider you all my safety net. My foster family is still available. I feel like I have a good safety net in a way, that I built and nurtured, so it's okay. It's just me, as an individual, letting my pride aside and actually reaching out.

Christian: If you don't have that social support system, you said the safety net, a person can really go through ... They've already been through a traumatizing experience of not having their parents or being adopted, or been to four to five different group homes. Who knows what their story is, because it's not monolithic. Everyone has their own story within the foster care experience. However, I believe that if you have at least a good, strong support system, like with you ... You're one of the ones that I will call on in time of need, right?

Christian: I've called you many times or texted you just to see how you're doing, just to let you know, even four or five years later, after the whole Mount SAC experience, I'm still connected with you because we built that relationship. Because of those specific faculty that took a little time out, a little extra care to figure out what's your story? What's going on? How can I help? And actually have a sense of care and compassion? That's what it really boils down to.

Liesel: Hey thanks so much for joining us for the Magic Mountie podcast. We love your likes, we love your shares and we love your comments. So please engage with our community, download from wherever you'd love to get your podcast, iTunes, Google, rate-my-professor, we're there and we want you to be back with us next week. Remember any opinions that are expressed in this podcast do not necessary represent Mt. San Antonio college or any of it's agents. We'll see you next time.