REACHing For More with The Mt. SAC REACH Program Episode 150

00:00:00 **Jeze**

The REACH Program is a program designed to support current and former foster youths here at Mt. SAC. Our main goal is to help our students come to campus, support them while they're at Mt. SAC, and then supporting them on their way to graduate. We try to support them in three different areas. We try to support them personally, academically, and in a way, financially/emotionally.

00:00:23 **Christina**

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

00:00:24 **Sun**

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

00:00:28 **Christina**

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.

00:00:45 **Sun**

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

00:00:49 **Speaker 1**

And I know I'm going to achieve my goals, and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

00:00:55 **Speaker 2**

She's a sociology major and she's transferring to Cal Poly, Pomona! Psychology major, major English ...

00:01:00 **Sun**

From transforming part-time into full-time-

00:01:03 **Speaker 1**

I really liked the time that we spent with Julie about how to write a CV and a cover letter.

00:01:10 **Christina**

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

00:01:12 **Speaker 1**

To think of the natural environment around us as a library.

00:01:15 **Christina**

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.

00:01:26 **Sun**

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

00:01:31 **Christina**

And this is the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:01:37 **Sun**

Welcome back to the Magic Mountie Podcast, I'm your host, Sun Ezzell. In today's episode, I talk with REACH Program Director, Jeze Lopez, Program Specialist - Briseida Maciel, Administrative Specialist - Rebecca Cabrera, and REACH student, Richard Chavez.

00:01:52 **Sun**

The REACH Program supports current and former foster youth in their transition to college while attending Mt. SAC, and as they transfer to university. Thanks for joining us today to learn more about the REACH Program and how REACH is supporting current and former foster youth on their educational journeys. Enjoy!

00:02:13 **Sun**

Welcome back to the Magic Mountie Podcast. I am so excited to be here today with members of the Mt. SAC REACH Program. Welcome, all of you.

00:02:24 **Jeze**

Hello, Sun. Thank you so much for having us today.

00:02:26 **Rebecca**

Hello.

00:02:28 **Sun**

I was wondering if just as we're getting started, if you might each just tell us a little bit about yourself and your work with the REACH Program.

00:02:36 **Jeze**

Absolutely. My name is Jeze Lopez and I serve as the Program Director for the REACH Guardian Scholars Program.

00:02:43 **Briseida**

My name is Briseida Maciel, and I serve as Lead Program Specialist for our Foster Youth Program here on campus. I get to wear a lot of different hats, but if I can summarize it in one, is my main role is really connecting with our students and connecting them to essential key resources that's going to help them achieve their educational goals.

00:03:01 **Rebecca**

Hi, my name is Rebecca Cabrera and I'm new to the program. I've been here since December 6th, 2021, and I'm the Administrative Specialist. I support the program, I support the staff as well as the students.

00:03:16 **Sun**

Wonderful. I'm so glad that all of you can join today to share about the REACH Program and about how you all are supporting students at Mt. SAC. I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about the REACH Program. What is the REACH Program? What are some benefits to students?

00:03:33 **Briseida**

Yes, I can tap into that. So, the REACH Program is an educational program that supports current and former foster youth looking to attend Mt. SAC. And what's really nice about our program is that not only do we get to assist our students who are coming into Mt. SAC, but we also get to help them throughout their time at Mt. SAC, and as they look to transfer into a university, private institution, or just kind of help them accomplish their educational goal.

00:03:56 **Briseida**

So, we offer an array of services to our students. Those that get to be part of our program, some of the essential support that we provide is assistance in their financial aid application, specifically for our foster youth, with the Chafee Grant, which is additional financial aid money that they get to tap into as they're looking to attend higher education.

00:04:14 **Briseida**

Some of the other services that we provide is we do have counseling for students. So, they get to meet with our counselors and be able to create their educational plan as they look to start Mt. SAC. We do have, for example, some personal services - I don't know, Jeze, if you want to tap into those?

00:04:33 **Jeze**

Absolutely. So, the REACH Program is a program designed to support current and former foster youths here at Mt. SAC. We started in 2015, so this is our seventh year of being on campus. We have grown in that time. We have definitely done a lot of learning, a lot of implementing new services. And I would say the last four years or so, we are more of a full-fledge program.

00:04:57 **Jeze**

Our main goal, if you wanted to put it into one sentence, is to help our students, our foster youth students come to campus, support them while they're at Mt. SAC, and then supporting them on their way to graduate or transfer to a four-year university. And the way that we do that is we try to support them in three different areas. We try to support them personally, academically, and in a way financially/emotionally.

00:05:23 **Jeze**

And so, personally, obviously, we want to make sure that we want to provide an opportunity for them to grow in their identity and their management of their personal finances, of their personal thoughts, of their personal - just how they handle relationships per se.

00:05:41 **Jeze**

And so, we do that through our social workers. We have students that are able to ... we refer them to our social workers whenever there's a specific need that maybe our staff do not have the skills to do so, and support them in the best way possible.

00:05:54 **Jeze**

And so, then we have our social workers in that aspect. We have our counselors who are supporting them academically, and not just what classes take, but what the sequence of those classes, what's the major career exploration that you should have. Something that's pretty common with our students, is that they are not sure about what their major should be.

00:06:15 **Jeze**

They're not really sure what their career paths should be. Even the understanding of the difference between an educational goal and a career goal. And that's a lot of the time that's spent with our counselors basically peeling that onion in a way of asking those questions and helping them build that educational path.

00:06:30 **Jeze**

And then finally, financially/emotionally is we have a life skills component. A lot of our students have not had a consistent relationship with an adult that was emotionally invested with them to provide that everyday learning of why is it important to be on time? You know, what are the proper things to follow to develop good work ethic? How is it that you develop housing relationships with people? How is it that you say no sometime, that you say yes? How can you be reliable?

00:06:59 **Jeze**

And then obviously, that insecurity, food insecurity, housing insecurity. And so, we try to build those components by supporting them with housing, by supporting them, trying to find a job, doing a lot of the life skills development: employment, financing, grocery shopping, whatever maybe. We try to be a one-stop-shop as much as possible.

00:07:16 **Jeze**

It doesn't mean that we provide all the services ourselves. But what it does mean is that if we don't have the service internally, we refer out. And then finally, the last thing I want to mention is our peer mentor component. We hire former foster youths that are Mt. SAC students that have had at least one year at Mt. SAC that have above a 2 . 0 GPA for them to be peer mentors to our students.

00:07:40 **Jeze**

And the idea is for these students to simply guide our students and tell them their story, sharing their past and telling them, "Hey, this is what I did, this is what I learned. This is how I did it." And in a way, walk hand by hand to whatever it is that they want to do. And we found that peer-to-peer relationship, that peer-to-peer trust has been key. We like to call it the heartbeat of our program.

00:08:07 **Briseida**

I'd like to add too, that, the REACH Program overall serves as a physical space on campus, that students who identify as current or former foster youth can come to you and get the support they need as you're looking to get through school. And so, we have staff that are ready to support them and connect them to the resources that it's going to allow them to help them continue that journey here at Mt. SAC.

00:08:29 **Sun**

Well, this sounds like such an incredible thoughtful program. And I just like want to pause and say, thank you all for the work that you're doing to support students. And I'm so glad that we get a chance to talk today so that folks who listen to the podcast maybe can learn a little bit about the program as well.

00:08:46 **Jeze**

Thank you. And this is truly a team effort. Everyone plays an extremely important role. We have, for example, Rebecca, who's in a way our quarterback for our program. She's that pillar that supports us that makes sure that things run on time, that we get the things that are necessary.

00:09:02 **Jeze**

And she's only been working with us since December, but when you see the output that we've been able to create during this time, it's very, very clear what she's brought to the table. And for example, we have a great event in May that I think without Rebecca, would just simply had not happened.

00:09:18 **Rebecca**

Thank you, Jeze, I appreciate that.

00:09:21 **Sun**

I feel like a lot of times Mt. SAC students want to come back and work at Mt. SAC. And it seems like oftentimes, it's because of programs like this.

00:09:29 **Rebecca**

I was just thanking Jeze for his nice comments, so I appreciate that. But if I may, Sun, prior to coming to the REACH Program, I worked in the arts division in the instruction side of Mt. SAC. And I had no idea that the REACH Program even existed. And when I heard about it and what it had to offer, how it supported the current and former foster youth, I felt like this is a program that I wanted to be part of.

00:09:56 **Sun**

That's wonderful to hear.

00:09:58 **Briseida**

I don't mean to call out Richard, but in terms of the question of how does REACH support students, maybe you want to share a little bit about what that looks like if you're up for it?

00:10:07 **Sun**

That would be great. Hi, Richard?

00:10:09 **Richard**

Hello. Well, what I like about it? Jeze mentioned how it's like a one-stop-shop. I believe it's the same ... who mentioned it, Rebecca - how it's like, it's very here to support students, but it's also like a thing that doesn't exist. And I want to mention that how ... I would describe REACH as kind of like, it reminds me of Narnia, Harry Potter. You don't know exists, what people do is like, "I can't wait to actually can go back."

00:10:32 **Richard**

And as I said, there's so many wonderful things REACH offers to support students. And it is a place that like I said, I love going. And the minute I walk and I look to right, here are my people, here's why I belong. Here's my sense of home. Here's something where I'm having a good day, I'm having a bad day, I can talk to someone, I can get help, or I can just chill with people who are familiar.

00:10:50 **Richard**

People who I have a bond with more than my actual family, some of my actual friends. Where it's something that I wish that was like ... Rebecca kind of mentioned, that was advertised more. That people knew more about. It's kind of nice that, well, this is our place, but something where I feel like it should be more a beacon for fellow youth and people who want to help support it.

00:11:11 **Richard**

Because it's a program where I never really got the impression from people that REACH is something that they don't want to be a part of. More something that they want more. You know, I know it's a sad end when people transfer. They're like, "We want REACH though, to come with us."

00:11:28 **Richard**

I hear a lot from my prior mentors and my senior student staff who ... it's a program you never want to leave. It's a program you always want to be there because it's like no matter what, I know if I go to REACH and I have some problem, I'm going to get help I need - if not today, someday.

00:11:44 **Richard**

It's not going to be something, I don't know, I'm unfamiliar with ... now because I got scared, I got afraid, I sent the center, someone else is going to follow up me, make sure that I got the help I needed. And especially too, often in a timely manner. It's just something where I wouldn't normally have.

00:11:59 **Richard**

Someone ask, "Oh, how did your counseling appointment go? How did you get there? I dropped you off but how did it go?" It's not something I've had in my personal life, but it's something REACH can reschedule you. It's like "We look forward." I would get reminder emails, reminder phone calls - I have a meeting tomorrow to meet a counselor and such a friendly reminder that it's something where it's ... I wouldn't have on my own.

00:12:20 **Richard**

And it's something that you don't notice you're missing until you have. And I love how REACH gives me that and our students in many aspects of the program.

00:12:29 **Sun**

That's wonderful, Richard, thank you so much for sharing. It feels good to find a community and a place where we feel that we belong and we have that support and friendship. So, thank you so much for sharing that experience. I was wondering, would you share as well, how long have you been a student at Mt. SAC? And if you've chosen a major, what's your major?

00:12:51 **Richard**

Yes, of course. So, it's about three years going on to four, I've been here at Mt. SAC. And my major is ... technically, right now, it's mathematics, but I plan to transfer into engineering for an engineering major.

00:13:03 **Sun**

Great. Thank you so much. So, as you were sharing Richard, you mentioned about just kind of the challenge about knowing about all the different programs that we have at Mt. SAC, like REACH. And I was wondering if ... a question for anybody: one of, I think our challenges, is we have so many programs and so many events happening.

00:13:24 **Sun**

Do you have any suggestions for folks who might be listening to the podcast about good ways to help students connect with the REACH Program? Like what have faculty or other employees done that have helped connect students with your program?

00:13:41 **Jeze**

So, I think that's a loaded question at times, because there's so many ways to collaborate. There's so many ways to connect. The best way that I can tell anyone is show up, reach out and we'll start from there. The best collaborations that we've had with faculty or with anyone that's trying to support our program or students directly, started with, "Hey, I heard about the REACH Program, I'm interested in being part of it or how can I support?" And then we started having a conversation.

00:14:11 **Jeze**

And then we started looking at where do your talents and interests intersect and need that REACH has. And we have always been able to find something that's fulfilling, something that is useful. Something that is extremely important later on for our program. And a perfect example is the REACH community garden that we just started a couple months ago.

00:14:34 **Jeze**

It started with a faculty member learning about REACH, reaching out and says, "Hey, how can I be of support? You know, this is what I do here, this is the experience that I have." And after 10, 15 minutes of speaking to each other, we found out that, "Oh, wait, you have this experience growing vegetables in your house, you have this experience doing these things."

00:14:53 **Jeze**

And it turns out that we had it in our plan that we wanted to create this community garden. And so, then this person has been instrumental for us to get there. So, I think that's what I would advise anyone: show up. Decisions are made by those who show up. And so, if you show up, then we can find something that works.

00:15:12 **Sun**

Great. Thank you so much. And did you want to share about any upcoming REACH events?

00:15:18 **Briseida**

Yeah. I can tap into that a little bit. I think one of the best ways also to find out about who we are and what our program does is by participating in our National Foster Care Awareness Month, which is May, it's happening next month.

00:15:31 **Briseida**

And so, we do have a few, quite a few actually events that it's open to our campus community as well as to our students. And so the very first one will begin on Tuesday, which is May 3rd. At 10:00 AM, we'll be doing the solidarity walk and we really invite everyone to just come out, support us, bring awareness, get to see our hard garden that we have set up as well. So, we're definitely inviting everyone to come out and join.

00:15:57 **Jeze**

And this event will be available from 10 to 1:00 PM on Tuesday, May 3rd, and Wednesday, May 4th. It is a self-guided walk in a way. So, if you come at 10 or if you come at 11 or at 12:55, you're still going to get the same experience.

00:16:14 **Jeze**

So, feel free, anyone that has that time to come at any of those two days, please do. You'll learn about foster youth, you'll learn a little bit about the REACH Program. You'll learn about some of the topics and the intersectionality of our students, how our students are not just foster youth, but they have different identities.

00:16:32 **Jeze**

And it's the kickoff of this month of events. We have the week after that from the 9th to 13th, a virtual week of action for people to be joining in through virtual events. Then after that, we will have on May 16 from 10 to 1, an open house at the Equity Center as well. And then on May 20th, we have a REACH Friends and Family barbecue at the community garden. And then finally, we close it with our end-of-the-year event on May 23rd, from 4 to 6:00 PM.

00:16:59 **Jeze**

And so, we'll be sending out flyers and we'll be sending out information where all these events take places. If anyone has any availability to come, I think that's a great starting point to learn about foster care, to learn about just the different topics, the different things that intersect, and issues that are important to our students.

00:17:20 **Jeze**

And this is a great starting point. So, that May is not just ... it's your starting point, but then it's also not the only time that you collaborate with foster youth, you collaborate with the REACH Program. But it helps you continue that throughout the year.

00:17:34 **Sun**

Great, thank you. And anything that you would like to include, we can include in the show notes for the episode as well. So, if you have links to an events calendar or anything, we'll make sure to get that in the show notes.

00:17:45 **Sun**

Well, I was wondering if there's anything else that you'd like to share about the REACH Program or anything that you'd like listeners of the podcast to know?

00:17:56 **Jeze**

I think something that I would like to share is we work and collaborate with a lot of programs on different campuses that specifically serve foster youths. And we have to mention how lucky and privileged we are to be at Mt. SAC by the overwhelming support that we get from our administration, from funding to positions to pretty much any need that we may have. If there's a possible way of meeting that need, we have always had the full backing of everyone here on campus.

00:18:26 **Jeze**

And that is not common. That is something that doesn't happen everywhere. And so, what that has translated, is into a program that is a lot bigger than other campuses. We have last semester, or last year, we serviced 267 students out of the 397 foster youths identified that came to Mt. SAC.

00:18:47 **Jeze**

And so, obviously, we want to increase that number, we want to make sure that we meet most of those students, but we are being given the tools to do that. And we are being given the opportunity to do that. And like I said, this is an effort as a team. It's not just the people here in the program, but it's everyone else. There's a lot of battles that are being fought before they even get to us. There's a lot of support that is being sent to us without us even having to ask for it in a way.

00:19:16 **Jeze**

And that's something really beautiful and that's something really great to experience because it shows that Mt. SAC has truly made foster youths a priority. And like I said, it's not common everywhere, but we're very happy and we're very lucky to be here at Mt. SAC for that.

00:19:32 **Sun**

Thank you so much. Anyone else?

00:19:35 **Briseida**

Yes, I'd like to just touch base a little bit on like what are some of the important life experiences that our REACH students bring to campus. And I think what comes to mind is that foster youth is a term umbrella that we use. But it's really important to know that each of our students has their own unique experience lived in foster care.

00:19:55 **Briseida**

And so, when they come to our campus, they're bringing that with us. And when they open up to us and we get to connect with students and get to know who they are, that is just such a privilege to be able to have as someone who serves in this position, and to be able to support our foster youth has just been really amazing to be able to do it at a campus like Mt. SAC.

00:20:15 **Jeze**

And Sun if I may add, as obviously, foster care awareness month's coming up on Friday, starting, there's several ways that people can support our foster youths. And it doesn't always mean that you have to donate money, but there's different ways; following institutions like the John Burton Advocates for Youth, registering for their listserv, so that you are able to be in tune with what legislature and what are the things coming up that might impact our students.

00:20:44 **Jeze**

The way that you vote: voting for candidates that support these types of programs, that support these types of populations. Obviously, yes, donating to places that support foster youths like Foster Nation or Together We Rise or even the REACH Program here on campus to create scholarships, all those things, obviously, help.

00:21:06 **Jeze**

But I think simply looking into your community, are there group homes, are there foster homes, are they foster family agencies that support our foster youth that are still in care? And then finally, the biggest commitment is become a foster parent.

00:21:23 **Jeze**

If you have the opportunity, if you have the privilege, if you have the willingness to do that, that is the ultimate support that you can do because we have a lot of students in care and children in care, but there's not enough foster homes. And so, looking into local institutions that can provide training and can provide even an informational session to see if that's for you.

00:21:46 **Jeze**

So, I highly encourage anyone that has been on the fence about it that would really want to learn more, there's a lot of places around our area that provide free informational sessions on what it entails, what is required, what you can do. And if that's something for you, that's something you should explore. And like I said, it's a great way to give back, a great way to support our youth, and to truly make the impact in the life of someone.

00:22:15 **Sun**

Well, I want to thank all of you so much for joining today to talk about the REACH Program. Thank you for your incredible work that you're doing to support students at Mt. SAC. And Richard, thank you for persisting through the technical challenges to join us. I really so appreciate it, and wish you lots of good luck and joy on your educational journey at Mt. SAC and beyond.

00:22:39 **Richard**

Thank you.

00:22:40 **Sun**

And I look forward to connecting again. We would love to have a chance to connect again for future events at the REACH community garden or other future events. Let's make sure we get to continue to talk and bring the work that you're doing to the Mt. SAC community through the podcast.

00:22:59 **Christina**

Thank you for listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast, and don't forget to share your favorite episodes.