

Merced College's only Assistant To The President Retires

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It's been 42 years since De Merino first started working for Merced College. Now that she's retiring, it feels as if she's leaving home for the first time.

"I'm sad to be leaving, but excited about all the things that await me," Merino said. "I have had to put things on the back burner, so to speak, because there wasn't time. Now, maybe I'll take a college class again, travel, and try my hand at pottery—just enjoy life and what each new day brings."

Merino, who is officially retiring July 31, is the administrative assistant in the President's Office. She has served all of Merced College's presidents from the first one, Dr. Lowell Barker, to the current president, Dr. Benjamin Duran. Merino, who began working for Merced College as an 18-year-old work study student in 1965, has seen the College grow from its initial temporary headquarters at the County Fairgrounds to the bustling campus it has become.

"One of the fondest memories I have of our time at the Fairgrounds was watching the transformation of the college when it was time to pack up the college in preparation for the Merced County Fair," she said. "For several weeks during the summer the college simply vanished and the fairgrounds staff madly landscaped, cleaned, painted and prepared the exhibit halls and animal quarters for the opening of the fair.

"During fair week, it seemed odd to walk the same grounds and see exhibits where just a few weeks before classes were in session. For our breaks, staff could walk the Midway for candied apples and cotton candy. Our Student Union became the place where fairgoers could pick up a hamburger or hotdog cooked by the Lions Club and the bookstore became the Floriculture Exhibit, etc. etc. What a unique time in our history this was!"

Merino graduated from her high school in 1965 as the Outstanding Business Student. Her goal was to become a secretary or business teacher. She enrolled at Merced College in the fall of that year and by the time the spring semester started in 1966 she had been hired as the full-time secretary in the College's Business Office.

"I was thrilled at the prospect of becoming a secretary at the college since this had been one of the careers I had considered when I left high school," she said. "I quickly accepted the offer and thus finished my A.A. by attending evening classes."

She eventually taught shorthand in the 1970s as a part-time instructor, fulfilling another one of her career dreams, but quickly realized that she was happy in her secretarial position. When the present campus was being constructed in 1965, Merino became the facilities and planning technician under Dr. Barker.

"The site for the new campus was at that time out in the country. Once you crossed Bear Creek, there was nothing but open land. In fact, the large lawn area that you see today at the corner of M Street and Yosemite Avenue was used by a rancher who leased the land from the college to graze his cattle. When we moved into the Administration Building in

November of 1967, the cattle were still there and were there for several more years before any landscaping efforts were begun in that area.”

It's fair to say that Merino is the best source for College history. If someone needs information about the early construction of the Merced Campus, or the formation of numerous academic programs, she will likely have the answers. She remains proud of her role in the development of the College and notes that “I've worked for three business managers, all of the college presidents, 26 Trustees, and I've attended 493 Board meetings.”

It's also fair to say that she'll be hard to replace. Merino has been lauded for her professionalism, her commitment to excellence, and her strong work ethic. With her retirement, an era has truly come to an end.

“I feel the best part of Merced College is that our doors are open to everyone and that we have something for everyone,” she said.

Many of the College's employees believe that without De Merino, the doors to Merced College would not have been open at all.