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## PROFILE

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# Battle with Illness Drives Mesa CC Student to Columbia and Princeton

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## NATIONAL TRANSFER STUDENT WEEK

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Beyond continuing to work full-time at the local Dairy Queen, when Robbie LeDesma graduated from high school in early Spring 2004, he was unsure about what he wanted to do next. He was hesitant to continue pursuing education because of his lackluster performance in high school, but over the summer months, he decided he had nothing to lose by enrolling at Mesa Community College (MCC).

“I was a first-generation college student who had never really had any set plans to go to college, so it was more of a hobby than anything in the beginning,” said LeDesma.

At MCC, LeDesma gave himself the freedom to study anything that sounded interesting to him. He took courses ranging from the main associate degree requirements to more niche courses in SCUBA diving, zombie studies, piano, and fencing.

“I remember that one of my favorite times of year was when the course catalogue was published for the upcoming semester, and friends of mine and I would go through the catalogue and find fun sounding classes we could take together,” said LeDesma.

To pay for school, and because he was passionate about working with animals, around the same time that he enrolled, LeDesma also began his own dog training and house-sitting business.

“My goal was to continue to learn without any endpoint in mind, which is why I stayed at MCC for so long and took so many disparate classes. It was affordable for someone in my financial situation,” said LeDesma.

**MCC was one of the most important institutions in my life. It’s where I met people who believed in me and didn’t just see me as a punk-kid or a criminal (I got into some trouble as a teenager that colored the vision of me to my friends and family that I found very difficult to change). It’s a place where I surprised myself at just how much I could excel and exceed expectations of my professors and even myself.**

While exploring his newfound love of learning and running his business, during the summer of 2008, LeDesma unexpectedly became critically ill with a case of viral meningitis. He was on a birthday trip to Las Vegas, and fortunately, his brother, who was with him on the trip, was able to rush him back to Arizona where he received an emergency diagnosis and care.

“The recovery was quite difficult, and I found myself increasingly drawn to questions surrounding microbial pathogenesis and how they interact with their hosts. These musings stayed dormant for a few more years, however,” said LeDesma.

After his recovery, LeDesma reflected on his, then, four years at MCC and realized the impact that earning a degree could have on his future success. He began to take his education and degree requisites more seriously. In addition to finding direction in his coursework, LeDesma became very active in Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), as the vice president of scholarship and community service coordinator, as well as other MCC outreach initiatives.

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With support from his own “cheerleading section” of professors and staff who, LeDesma says, believed in him more than he believed in himself, he graduated with an Associate of the Arts degree in 2010. He was valedictorian and, by the end, had earned close to 120 credits, almost double what the degree required—64 credits.

He was awarded the All-Arizona First Team Scholarship, a full-tuition scholarship awarded only to the top 20 community college students in the state to attend Arizona State, University of Arizona, or Northern Arizona University, as well as the Coca-Cola Gold Scholarship.

With such a high-profile scholarship, LeDesma planned to attend ASU after his time at community college. A fateful meeting with Dr. James Mabry, a Columbia GS alumnus, who served as the Vice President of Academic Affairs at MCC at the time, during the award ceremony for the All-Arizona Scholarship reception made LeDesma think of bigger opportunities.

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Dr. Mabry had stepped in to present LeDesma with his award in the absence of the MCC president. The pair hit it off during the reception, and Dr. Mabry urged LeDesma to consider the School of General Studies (GS) as his next step. He told LeDesma about a recruiting event that would be hosted on campus in a few weeks.

With Dr. Mabry's suggestion in mind, for one of the first times ever, LeDesma skipped class to attend the recruitment event hosted by Matthew Rotstein, the Director of Admissions. After learning more about the School, LeDesma probed Rotstein for more insight into what GS had to offer.

"I asked him directly, 'Can you sell me on GS? I heard the presentation and know that GS is an Ivy League university and everything, but why should I specifically apply?' His response changed my life: 'Because you can, but you don't think you can.'"

Rotstein offered LeDesma an application waiver, and soon after the admissions event, he applied and was accepted to Columbia.

"It's crazy to me to be able to think back on a definitive moment in time where a single decision changes your life. It was a whirlwind of a summer and I wouldn't change those events for the world," said LeDesma.

LeDesma had assumed that he would go on to say that he had applied to an Ivy League school, but not that he would be able to claim an acceptance to such a prestigious university. After learning about his acceptance, those close to LeDesma advised him against attending Columbia, citing financial reasons, not wanting him to leave, or just flat out doubting that someone like him could make it in place like that.

"I knew I couldn't live with a nagging voice in my head wondering what could have been different if I took a leap of faith and tried, so I ignored them all and enrolled. It was only after my acceptance that I received the PALS scholarship, and everything fell into place," said LeDesma.

In the fall of 2010, LeDesma began taking classes at Columbia. He relied heavily on the skills he had gained in community college to get by—including his work ethic, time management, research experience, and more.

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LeDesma says that the advising team at GS, and his advisor, Dean Ana Maria Ulloa, who is now at Carnegie Mellon Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences as the Associate Dean for Student Success, were incredibly supportive, offering him the personalized guidance he needed to find his path.

"Over the course of our regular meetings, Dean Ulloa was able to determine that all of my experience and interests gravitated towards the natural and physical sciences, despite originally intending to be a creative writing major," says LeDesma.



With her support, LeDesma changed his major to the natural and physical sciences and declared pre-med, so that he could get the necessary training to become a competitive applicant to medical school or Ph.D. programs.

“The intensity and rigor of the classes was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced, and they taught me a lot about how to ingest and process large amounts of complex information in a short amount of time. They also laid the foundations for how I view and interact with our world today.”

Once he knew he wanted to become a scientist, LeDesma recalled his previous near-death experience and his path forward became even more clear. He wanted to dedicate his life to developing treatments or cures to viruses that plague humanity, specifically viruses that affect marginalized populations.

**My time at either Columbia or my community college didn’t come without blood, sweat, tears, anxiety, heartbreak, frustration, and enough experiences of failure to last me several lifetimes. However, both experiences taught me different life lessons at different times, and without experiencing them subsequently the way I did, I don’t believe they would have been as impactful as they were.**

After Columbia, LeDesma was accepted to a Ph.D. program in Molecular Biology at Princeton University. He is now a fifth year graduate student conducting novel research on hepatitis E virus and Usutu virus, which is a *flavivirus* closely related to viruses such as Zika virus, yellow fever virus, and West Nile virus.

“I fell in love with conducting science in the lab during my time at Columbia, where I studied neuroscience and behavior, and conducted research in a laboratory studying the neural networks underlying the emotion of anticipation.”

In the last few months, LeDesma has spent his free time volunteering for the Princeton University Art Museum as a research assistant and tour guide. He co-curated a prescient exhibit at the Princeton University Art Museum entitled *States of Health: Visualizing Illness and Healing*. Before the pandemic, he founded a partnership with the art museum and the molecular biology outreach program where he led Science in Art tours. The program was a success, though it is currently on hiatus due to the pandemic.

LeDesma plans to continue working with viruses and understanding how they infect and cause disease, with an overarching goal of intervening and preventing their spread and severity of disease. He credits his time at MCC and GS with helping to prepare him for the work he is doing now and inspiring him to strive for more.

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*Forty-seven percent of students enrolled at GS transferred after attending community college. In honor of National Transfer Student Week, we are highlighting many of our students and alumni who transferred to GS, as well as offering insight into the unique role that community colleges play in making higher education possible for nontraditional students. [Read more about their stories here.](#)*

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