

‘Hamilton’ actor speaks to Moraga students about diversity and inclusion in the arts



Leslie Odom Jr.

By Jenn Freedman

The Moraga Education Foundation (MEF) hosted an inspiring conversation Feb. 26 with Leslie Odom Jr., acclaimed actor and singer who played Aaron Burr in Broadway’s “Hamilton” (and earned a Grammy Award and Tony Award for his role). Nearly 500 families tuned in to this virtual event where two Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School students, three Campolindo High School students, and faculty members from both schools talked with

Odom about diversity and inclusion in the arts.

Student panelists were nominated by faculty members and chosen by the school administrators. They discussed topics such as mentors, the value in taking risks, tokenism, color-conscious casting/hiring, why the arts connect us, the impact of performing “Hamilton” in front of the first Black U.S. president, and more. Odom was humble during the discussion, asking the student panelists questions and letting them shine.

When asked by a student

what they can do to make a difference, Odom said we should “start with our own corner of the world. Our homes, classrooms, teams, or bands. ... It starts with the people who are in direct contact with you. ... Whatever you want to see in the world, make sure you see in your own community.”

Another message Odom shared that was profound for students and parents alike was the idea of do-overs, that we have the chance to do better for as long as we are alive. He also shared his favorite

quote: “There is no failure, we either win or learn.”

“We are so grateful to Leslie for sharing his time with our students – this was such an inspirational event,” said Ana Moon, MEF vice president. The first 150 JM and Campo students to register were given a copy of Odom’s book, “Failing Up,” which was donated by an anonymous MEF donor.

To view the recording, go to <http://www.moragaeducation.org/videos>. To make a donation to MEF go to www.moragaeducation.org/.

Girl Scout creates Contra Costa native plant garden in Lafayette



Ceanothus



California Fescue

Photos provided

Acalanes High School senior Corina McTigue has always been passionate about the environment, and plans to study something that will help her protect or restore natural areas. As part of her Girl Scout Gold Award project, McTigue took out non-native plants and re-vegetated the land at Lafayette Community Park with a selection of local native plants.

McTigue worked with Greg Travers, the park maintenance supervisor in the Public Works Department for the city of Lafayette, to find an area and get the project approved by the city. The park includes a variety of plant species, all of which are native to Contra Costa County. She started the planting aspect of the project over winter break on Dec. 28 with just a few people from her family due to COVID-19 safety concerns.

“Native plants are beneficial to the native wildlife species and insects that depend on the plants for their survival. This native plant area will provide an ideal location for native insects and animals to live and thrive,” said McTigue. “Native plants are also beneficial because they are sustainable. They do not require excessive fertilizers or water to grow and are naturally adapted to the area’s climate and soils. Another benefit of native plants is that they are drought tolerant. Non native plants often need to be watered frequently and die during

droughts, creating fire hazards. The plants that are native to this area are naturally drought tolerant and can survive these droughts.”

The plants do not require as much maintenance as non-native plants, so McTigue will only be watering them every week this summer and once every month next summer. “After about a year or two, the plants that survive should be established enough to not only sustain themselves but to thrive on their own,” she said.

The plants will need some slight weeding until they are established. All of the plants in the garden are deer resistant but as they are so small right now, a deer just trying the plant can really hurt it. Since there are so many deer in the area, McTigue constructed and installed plant cages on many of the plants. “These plant cages will be taken off after the plants grow a little bit bigger,” she said.

“I hope that people visiting the Lafayette Community Park will enjoy the native plant garden and that some will consider adding some native plants to their own gardens because of the natural beauty that native plants have to offer and because of their many benefits to the environment and wildlife.”

McTigue wants to thank Orchard Nursery, which donated to her project.
– J. Wake

COVID increased the importance of diversity essays on college applications: Four questions to help you brainstorm

By Elizabeth LaScala PhD

Diversity statements are an increasingly common requirement on college applications. These questions are going to become even more common in upcoming cycles because of the ways the COVID pandemic has changed college admissions. With more colleges offering test optional admission, a far greater number of historically underrepresented individuals are applying to more selective and highly selective schools. Since schools are using this opportunity to expand racial and ethnic diversity on their campuses, diversity prompts are expected to increase in both number and importance.

For some of you, talking about diversity might be easy. For others, it is often much harder. Here are four questions to ask yourself when brainstorming your diversity response:

- 1) What exactly is diversity? It’s easy to get stuck on a single definition of diversity. But diversity is, in a word, diverse. Sure, it includes traditional personal types of diversity, like race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexual orientation. But it also goes well beyond these personal attributes to include academic ability, physical ability, mental health, neurodiversity, cultural background, citizenship status, veteran status, adversity, and socioeconomic barriers. There are many other categories. Make a list of things using my recommended categories as jumping off points, and then go beyond as needed to consider how you might add to the diversity of the college. Go beyond the list you develop to write about how each category specifically applies to you.
- 2) How have I supported, advocated for or otherwise helped others who are diverse?

While this is important for all applicants to consider, it is particularly important for people who have low measurable personal diversity. For example, do not be tempted to claim hardship when you have largely experienced privilege; instead, acknowledge your position of privilege, and talk about how you have used your advantages in life to promote/support diversity. Colleges are interested in knowing that applicants accept others who are dissimilar to themselves and advocate for those who may have less chance to advocate for themselves due to systemic biases prevalent in our society.

3) How does a cause I am passionate about relate to diversity? This is a helpful question for applicants to ask themselves if their service projects or other endeavors do not directly align with promoting diversity. If this is the case, think about how your acts of service could be used to promote diversity goals. For example, you may not think that climate change and environmental causes are obviously aligned with diversity. However, climate change disproportionately affects minority groups and environmental justice is a current issue of importance. Deeper

reflection and some targeted research can help you make connections between causes you care about and how they may promote or at least relate to diversity.

4) What actions will I take going forward?

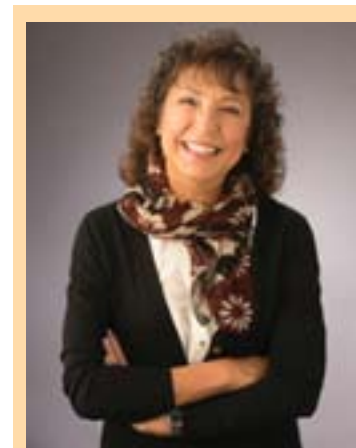
Diversity statements should not just state who you are and what you have done, but also what you will continue to do. Do some research into the service and other types of programs offered by the school you plan on attending or community-based organizations nearby the college that have similar missions. Explain how you will continue promoting equity, diversity, and social justice by getting involved as you earn your degree. Drafting your diversity statement: After brainstorming, pick one or maybe two clear themes that ring truest, fit the prompt and, if given, fit the university’s definition of diversity. If you are unique in many ways, it may still be easier to explain one or two aspects of your diversity in detail instead of spending a limited word count essay describing your many attributes.

Examples of Diversity Prompts:

“How does equity, diversity, and social justice shape an issue that is of interest to you. How does this issue relate to the field or major you are applying to at our university?”

“Tell us about a life event you personally experienced or that you witnessed another person or group experiencing that changed your viewpoint about social justice, educational barriers or other societal inequities?”

“How do you see yourself contributing to diversity at our college?”



Elizabeth LaScala, PhD personally guides each student through each step of selecting and applying to well-matched schools for undergraduate and graduate school study. Over the past two decades, Elizabeth has placed hundreds of students in some of the most prestigious colleges and universities in the U.S. The number of clients taken is limited to ensure each applicant has personalized attention. Contact Elizabeth early in the process to make a difference in your outcomes. Write elizabeth@doingcollege.com; Visit www.doingcollege.com; or Call: 925.385.0562.

~ Celebrations ~

Campolindo graduate on Broadway



Dr. Joseph A. Mele, M.D., FACS, made it to a marquee on Broadway in an unusual way. No, not for acting, although he did appear in a Moraga Playhouse production of “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.” The Campolindo High School graduate won The Top Surgeon West Award.

Dr. Mele has a private practice in Walnut Creek specializing in cosmetic and reconstructive surgery.

Community Service: We are pleased to make space available whenever possible for some of Lamorinda’s dedicated community service organizations to submit news and information about their activities. Submissions may be sent to storydesk@lamorindaweekly.com with the subject header In Service to the Community.

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