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## EMCC celebrates 25 years

Submitted by Glenn Gullickson on Wed, 04/12/2017 - 12:00am

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ESTRELLA MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE in Avondale is celebrating its 25th anniversary. View photo by Jordan Christopher

*Avondale campus has developed with community since opening in 1992*

When Estrella Mountain Community College opened in Avondale in 1992, there was just empty land around a campus with three buildings.

Over the years, the city grew around the Dysart Road campus, which has grown to nine buildings as it celebrates its silver anniversary year.

The milestone will be marked Saturday with the Silver Anniversary Gala at the Wigwam in Litchfield Park, an event that will launch the Alumni Legacy Scholarship Fund.

EMCC President Ernest Lara, who has been with the college since its inception, remembered the landscape when the campus opened with 1,012 students.

“There wasn’t anything around us whatsoever,” Lara said.

Originally called Estrella Mountain Community College Center, a satellite of Glendale Community College, the school expanded course offerings for a student body that’s grown almost every semester to 14,000 students and earned accolades as one of the top community colleges in the nation.

More than 6,000 students have graduated from the school, which has 93 full-time faculty and 395 part-time instructors.

Lara, who was on the faculty of one of the other Maricopa County Community Colleges before transferring to the new school to be in charge of student services, remembered that recruiting students was one of the first big challenges.

**WHAT:** EMCC Silver Anniversary Gala.  
**WHEN:** Saturday; reception at 5 p.m., program at 7 p.m.  
**WHERE:** Wigwam, 300 E. Wigwam Blvd., Litchfield Park  
**COST:** \$250  
**INFO:** [estrellamountain.edu/25](http://estrellamountain.edu/25)

A year before the campus opened, Lara said the school operated out of offices in an Avondale strip mall and conducted classes in area high schools.

Lara said recruiters used “smoke and mirrors” to lure students to a college without a campus.

“We needed to show them we had quality programs,” Lara said. “Otherwise, they would drive right past us.”

Community colleges are an American educational innovation offering open enrollment to everyone for a program that can result in an associate’s degree after two years of study.

Lara said he tells young people “you’re going to need an education beyond high school,” noting that the college prepares students for some jobs that haven’t been created yet.

He said the key to building the campus population has been to engage potential students in high school, then see that they succeed in college.

“We’re trying to focus on student success with whatever we do,” he said.

Lara said the school that started by offering general education has developed what he called “hallmark programs” ranging from culinary studies to nursing and including STEAM or education related to science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics.

“We really wanted to make sure students could be prepared in those areas,” Lara said.

Lara said EMCC educators recognized early on the importance of technology, and a recent audit revealed that the campus has as many computers as Mesa Community College, which has the largest enrollment in the 11-school Maricopa Community College system.

The emphasis is also reflected in EMCC’s Makers Space, which opened last year as a 21st century-style shop class, where students blend their knowledge with technology and engineering tools.

A cyber security program that started a couple of years ago received certification from the Homeland Security Agency.

The school’s arts programs got a boost in 2015 with the opening of the Performing Arts Center, home to a theater program with expanding enrollments thanks to the new facility.

Lara, who is observing his own anniversary as EMCC president for 10 years, said the school's classrooms are full.

"We're actually running out of space," said Lara, who would like to add to the school's faculty and staff.

The school's history and success will be celebrated during the gala, the "signature event" of a series of anniversary activities that will continue through 2017, according to Jonathan Robles, director of alumni, corporate and foundation relations at EMCC.

The gala, which will include a reception, dinner, silent auction and exhibits of memorabilia and student art work, is an opportunity to thank the community, Robles said.

"We want to put the community in community college," he said.

Keynote speaker will be Harold Branch, who as a high school dropout, enrolled at EMCC as part of Genesis West, a program that offered students the opportunity to earn a high school diploma while pursuing a college degree.

"He's one of our success stories," Robles said.

In what Robles called a "talk show format," gala masters of ceremonies Dave Topping, coordinator of media services, and Tim Butterfield, coordinator of fine arts facilities, will solicit reflections from founding and current faculty members.

The college's first Distinguished Alumni Award will also be presented.

Also at the gala, Southwest Ballet Theatre will perform a scene from its upcoming show *Tarzan*.

Robles said the alumni association hopes to raise \$50,000 this year for the Alumni Legacy Scholarship Fund, which could start awarding scholarships next year.

"There is a real need," Robles said. "That's why these scholarships are so important."

Robles said the anniversary celebration was planned with the help of feedback from the campus, including a town hall.

Events that will continue throughout the year include movie screenings, a karaoke event, a holiday show and a time capsule ceremony.

Glenn Gullickson can be reached at [ggullickson@westvalleyview.com](mailto:ggullickson@westvalleyview.com) (<mailto:ggullickson@westvalleyview.com>).



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