
Midland College Profile

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Nontraditional student becomes nontraditional instructor

“Are you in a band?”

That’s what Midland College (MC) students ask Ben Ortiz when they see him on campus. “No one ever asks me if I teach math.” said Ortiz. “I guess it’s my ‘nontraditional’ look.”

In fact, however, the guy with the long hair, tattoos and “cool” clothes **does** teach math. Actually, Ben Ortiz just doesn’t **teach** it—he’s passionate about math, especially the math program at Midland College.

“Math at Midland College is where I found my place in life,” stated Ortiz. “When I graduated from Pecos High School in 1997,

I didn’t have a lot of motivation to pursue my education. So, I started working at fast food restaurants, hotels, convenience stores, movie rental places and other retail establishments. It wasn’t until 2011 when I was 32 that I enrolled in Midland College with the intention of pursuing a credential in a technical field. I was actually hoping to avoid taking a math class completely, but that wasn’t possible. I began in the first developmental math class which is now MATH 0481 called ‘Math for Statistics and Contemporary Math/Quantitative Reasoning.’ I was terrified of math; I wanted to be done with it as soon as possible!”

Under the patient guidance and mentoring of his math instructor Connie Sanchez, Ortiz soon came to enjoy his math class. His first developmental math course led to additional courses in math and science. He even began working with MC Biology Professor Dr. Paul Mangum in genetics research and presented his research work at statewide science symposiums.

“When I was ready to transfer from Midland College, I didn’t want to leave the Permian Basin, nor did I want to leave Midland College,” explained Ortiz. “Fortunately, I was able to take advantage of the Sul Ross State University program where I could take classes toward a bachelor’s degree on the MC campus. Because of the research work I had done at Midland College, I first decided to work toward a degree in science, but I was really obsessed with



math. I had absolutely grown to LOVE math. By my second year at MC, I was working in the Math Lab. So, I decided to major in math and minor in biology.”

Ortiz was able to pursue his baccalaureate degree by taking courses via teleconferencing with Sul Ross State University (SRSU) professors and hands-on lab courses with MC personnel working in conjunction with the SRSU program. He continued to work in the MC Math Lab and was a favorite tutor to many students who, like him during that first semester in college, were “afraid” of the dreaded four letter word—M A T H. In May 2016, Ortiz graduated with a bachelor’s degree in math from SRSU.

“The first time I actually set foot on the Sul Ross campus was at my graduation,” laughed Ortiz.

During the course of his studies and his employment in the MC Math Lab, Ortiz said he realized his “calling” in life was to be a teacher, specifically, a math teacher at Midland College.

“I am so fortunate to have had an opportunity to build relationships with the professors at Midland College,” said Ortiz. “The professors and staff in the entire math department have been very supportive. I can’t even describe the impact they have had on my life. Dr. Sonia Ford, who is now chair of the math department, was one of my professors, and I will always be grateful for her encouragement. She is the example of whom I aspire to be.

“My favorite part of teaching math is watching students when they get that ‘aha’ moment, and then everything ‘clicks’ into place,” explained Ortiz. “I don’t want to do anything except teach. After having worked at Midland College for 6 years, I can truly say that I love Midland College. So, I decided that I am going to teach and try to do it at MC!”

In fall of 2016, Ortiz accepted a job as an adjunct math teacher teaching the same developmental class where he first discovered his passion for math. This summer, he also taught “History of Numbers” to high school students during MC’s Summer Science Academy.

“I have really enjoyed teaching in the Science Academy,” explained Ortiz. “I’m able to tie my passion for math and biology together by addressing fractals and how fractals help to explain systems in the body.”

“Ben was a wonderful student in my classes, and I have enjoyed watching him grow into a passionate developmental math instructor,” stated Dr. Ford. “His love for teaching and helping students to reach their potential is inspiring.”

This fall, Ben Ortiz, now 38, will begin another new chapter in his life—pursuing a master’s degree in math through an online program at the University of West Florida.

“Online graduate programs in math aren’t as abundant as programs in other areas,” said Ortiz. “When I graduated from Sul Ross, my goal was to continue to study math, but I didn’t want to leave Midland. After doing some research, I found an online master’s degree in theoretical math at the University of West Florida.”

While he is working on his master’s degree, Ortiz hopes to continue to teach Math 0481 at Midland College. He generally teaches two sections each semester.

Ortiz is also very committed to his family, which is one of the reasons he wants to stay in the Permian Basin. His parents live in Pecos, as does his younger brother. His older brother is in the oil industry and lives in Odessa. His brother Joshua, who is ten years younger than Ben, said that Ben was his role model for causing him to obtain an associate degree in web design. Ben, on the other hand, cites his father as **his** inspiration for enrolling in college.

“When I first came to Midland College, I thought I might be too old,” said Ortiz. “I was already in my 30s, but my father was my motivation for starting college as a nontraditional student. He went back to college when he was in his 40s to pursue a nursing degree. Midland College does an exceptional job with nontraditional students. I never felt out of place; people never questioned my presence here. I’m glad it happened to me later in life. I was mature enough to handle the workload and to appreciate the opportunity to study what I love. Math is my life!”

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