

July 10, 2020

To my Riverside Community College District Family:

My name is Maha Ibrahim and I am a proud RCCD Graduate. In 2004, I transferred from RCCD to UC Berkeley. After graduating with honors from UC Berkeley in 2006 I worked for several years in the United States Congress and in the California State Assembly, respectively. I then attended UCLA Law School and graduated with a Juris Doctorate in 2015. I am a member of the California Bar and a full-time practicing Civil Rights Attorney. Yesterday, I learned of the recent horrific events at the Norco Campus of RCCD. Today, my heart aches for my first and forever California community, the students, educators, and leaders of RCCD.

I came to California in 2001 from Northern Indiana, where I had grown up in a small town as one of the only mixed-race children from a mixed race and mixed religion family.

I came to California full of desire and gumption but without a plan. I knew I had to leave Indiana and I knew my mind and intellect yearned to thrive, but I did not have adults in my life with the experience of a successful attempt at higher education in the United States under their belts.

I had no money. My sister had just moved to Riverside from Arizona and was working a retail job at the Galleria mall. She offered to let me live with her if I could figure out the rest.

I picked up the phone book and I looked up "College" in the Yellow pages. That's how I found RCCD. The day I walked onto campus for the first time to inquire about registration was the day I learned that, in California, community colleges can make your wildest dreams come true – that the California Community College System was built for people like me to get us to where we could go on our own merit even though we had not been born to the privilege that stands as the gatekeeper to elite educations, lucrative careers, and meaningful seats at the table. I was simultaneously blown away and spurred to dogged determination.

A few weeks later, at age 18, my first class on my first day of college was a political science class taught by the first Middle Eastern American I had ever met in the United States that was not a member of my own family: Dr. Dariush Haghghat. By the time I graduated from RCCD I had a loving adult cheering me on, mentoring me, and convincing me time and again that I belonged in places like UC Berkeley and UCLA, the U.S. Congress and the California Legislature, in spite of the imposter syndrome and self-doubt that plagues and follows every first-generation student through every door they dare to enter into the halls of power and influence. It was him, my Professor, Dr. Haghghat.

While at RCCD I lived in Corona, California. Therefore, I took at least a full half of my courses at the Norco Campus and, while I was RCCD Student Trustee, worked as a student tutor, and was involved in other roles in student government and clubs, the Norco Campus was often my home base for those activities.

The MAGA protests at the Norco Campus attempting to intimidate, threaten, make unwelcome, “warn” and dishearten the Black people, indigenous people, people of color and allies that participated in the BLM march in late June 2020 illustrated in high relief both what RCCD is and what it is not.

The actions of these counter protesters who choose to display their hatred, prejudices, bigotry and ignorant fears embodied in human form the very opposite of the sophistication, liberation, abilities in examination and analysis, and self-actualization my experience at RCCD granted me and so many other fortunate graduates for the last 100-plus years.

Hannah Arendt, whom I first read as an RCCD student, warned us of the banality of evil. The evil we face here has not even the composure to hide behind such ordinariness as the Nazi officers she was speaking of. They have been emboldened by a red-faced preacher of greed and hate, and they believe all spaces are theirs as of right due to the color of their skin and the targets of their spite.

I stand with current students, fellow alumni, and the entire RCCD community to say our institution is a sacred place of learning and opportunity, and it does not belong to you who seek to drown cries for freedom with shouts of hatred or close eyes of inquiry with visions of the brutality you threaten. We will not accept your version of history and we will not acquiesce to your desires for homogeneity, exclusivity, and domination of resources and access. We, the community of RCCD, believe in education and, because of that, we cannot, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. warned us against, passively accept either banal or blatant acts of evil.

Again, I am a very proud alumni of an RCCD that has the temerity and clarity to stand for its students, all of its students, in these difficult times.

RCCD and the California Community College system changed my life. Its campuses and the atmosphere on those campuses must remain fully accessible, welcoming, hope-giving, and dream-realizing for the millions of first generation, self-made, self-finding, students who need it still.

In Solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maha Ibrahim', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Maha Ibrahim, Esq.
Civil Rights Attorney
RCCD Alumnae, 2001-2004
RCCD Student Trustee, 2003-2004

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