

Lilith Piri

## MES Statement of Purpose

I want to pursue environmental studies at Evergreen to make a positive contribution to the world my children will inherit. I am not comfortable waiting for other people to take care of our pressing environmental problems when I can help—even on a small, local scale. I want to be part of the solution to support healthier, safer, more sustainable ways of living on this planet.

For six years I coordinated a public-school garden rehabilitation in Tacoma, and this work sparked my interest in pursuing environmental studies. When I began volunteering, the garden was neglected, with weedy beds and a tree stump on an asphalt campus. When I passed the baton, leaving as a paid garden coordinator, the school had a thriving outdoor classroom featuring a bird and butterfly habitat filled with native and drought-tolerant plants, a sensory garden, free dig zone, class gathering space, compost and worm bins, and fruit trees, herbs, and raised beds for produce. I regularly brought students to the garden to plant, harvest, prepare and eat produce, as well as weed and maintain the space. More than greening an urban school, I inspired a culture that supported students learning, working, and spending time in the garden.

Growing a school garden was a complicated process that started with a big vision and depended on detailed, collaborative follow-through. I surveyed teachers, reported at PTO meetings, cultivated a productive relationship with administrators and worked with parents to petition district officials for changes to their policies banning students from consuming school-grown produce and using herbicide in garden areas. I edited a school garden newsletter for transparency and promotional purposes and jump-started plant sales to fundraise. I wrote and administered grants that helped fund the garden installation in manageable, project-based stages.

One project was simply called “The Bird & Butterfly Habitat,” which involved plant research, layout planning, budgeting, grant-writing, requesting donations and securing district approval before a single plant went into the ground. After weeding and demolition, volunteers built berms and paths before classes took part in the garden installation, receiving a brief habitat lesson and planting demonstration. Students then worked with volunteers to plant trees, shrubs, and perennials.

I repeated the process of building the garden in manageable stages; each project based on the needs of students, teachers, and the garden itself. For example, the project “Safe & Special Space” was designed to address ongoing theft and vandalism by installing fencing, prominent signage, and a huge mural to name, beautify and define the space and its rules.

Of course, I did not build the garden single-handedly—recruiting and managing volunteers to help with specific tasks and projects was a large part of what I did. I had the vision and the persistence to attend to the details that ensured success. The garden culture grew with the support and participation of the school community.

As with any volunteer effort, not everything went well, often because I accepted too much responsibility, lacked needed knowledge, or didn’t have reliable support. To remedy difficulties, I attended garden coordinator training; I reached out to a community church able to distribute our summer produce to neighborhood families in need. I did research and learned that a garden leadership team should have been the first step of the entire process. Belatedly, I recruited a team to promote long-term viability and start institutionalizing my practices, and this collaboration eventually enabled me to bow out while others continued coordinating the school garden program. It is gratifying to know that this team continues the work today.

As the primary caregiver for my children—the youngest of whom has a disability and needed more care—volunteer work was a good fit for me for a long time. After moving on from school garden coordination, I realized I wanted to learn, more formally, about plants and ecology. I enrolled in several botany classes at Evergreen and did well. I enjoyed multiple modes of exploring botany, especially using microscopes and scientific illustration as

observation tools and using a dichotomous key for identification. The intersection of human culture and plants was fascinating to me. I found research and writing was a strength of mine, and that I enjoy synthesizing information into a coherent narrative. I'd like to continue to build those skills, and if they can be used to increase understanding of and support for sustainable practices, I'll be pleased.

At this point, I want to know more—more about plants, more about restoration efforts here in the Pacific Northwest, more about how we can be effective stewards of our resources. How are different stakeholders, such as landowners and tribes, affected by ecological degradation and/or restoration efforts, what are the barriers to restoration, and how can we work together to solve our problems? Can we meaningfully connect restoration to environmental, social, and/or racial justice?

One insight I gained while studying effective ecological restoration was realizing just how many complex interactions are involved, from careful science to historical research to respectful acknowledgement of the perspectives of stakeholders. Long-term success requires long-term commitment and participation from multiple stakeholders; it requires institutional/government support and funding. One person, one organization alone cannot create lasting or significant change. Change requires that people work together, paying organized attention to the details that set us on the path to success, one step at a time. It's about how we get to the goal as much as it is reaching those goals.

I am applying to the MES program for access to Evergreen's institutional support, as a path for me to gain understanding and knowledge that will enable me to be an effective part of sustainable solutions to our environmental problems. I also hope to acquire some practical skills applicable here in our Pacific Northwest ecosystems, and to make useful connections. I'd like to turn this support into eventual employment that makes a positive contribution to efforts that create a more just, sustainable world.