**Essays for 15/16 MES scholarship recipients**

**Arielle (formerly Gabriel) Marks – 15/16 & 16/17 Bilezikian**

I am pleased to be considered for the Sara Ann Bilezikian Fellowship. I demonstrate a commitment to social justice through my support of food and environmental justice projects in underserved communities. My return to school is entirely motivated by my desire to expand what skills and knowledge I can offer as an advocate for equal access to environmental resources. While working in New York City for AmeriCorps, I restored and maintained parks and gardens in low-income neighborhoods, and I planted street trees to address high asthma rates. As a volunteer with Brooklyn Permaculture (BKP), I supported underserved residents seeking to transform vacant lots into community gardens. With BKP, I worked to amplify community voices and secure garden resources by coordinating meetings with city council leaders, researching vacant lots, and connecting new gardeners to free waste streams (woodchips, compost, pallets etc). This collaboration supported the community's own efforts toward justice and empowerment through increased ownership of environmental resources. I continue to practice this commitment in my current position with GRuB (Garden Raised Bounty) in Olympia. As an intern with the Kitchen Garden Project, I work on community outreach and garden building with low-income families. My goal is to support food sovereignty through garden ownership and community building. This work engages my passion for cultivating relationships across varied experiences. As part of this project, I am engaged in an effort to map 20 years of backyard gardens and create a directory for gardeners, which will increase program resiliency by decentralizing our network and expanding community ownership of the program. This project has drawn out my strengths and helped me define my professional path. Studying with the MES Program is an opportunity for me to expand the skills I have to offer. I intend to learn GIS mapping and apply this tool toward legitimizing collective land and resource claims. Additionally, I am excited to pursue classes in Political Ecology to better understand how my work is intertwined with issues such as environmental racism, climate change and global development policies. Lastly, I seek to expand my professional networks and enhance my research skills to better support and evaluate community projects. I anticipate applying my education toward professional work in youth empowerment and community mapping within the environmental justice field. As I explore both of these interests through my work with GRuB, I find these are areas where my passions and strengths as a community organizer and environmentalist coalesce. This could include becoming an environmental educator with a youth empowerment program like GRuB’s or working on land rights claims with a program such as the Aboriginal Mapping Network. I hope to explore these possibilities through my internship choices and research at Evergreen, and I expect to seek employment related to these interests when I complete the MES program. Thank you for considering me for The Sara Ann Bilezikian Fellowship. I am confident that I embody the social justice values recognized by this award and will remain committed to them far into my future.

**April (Danae) Presler – 14/15 & 15/16 Bilezikian**

Protesting is not like I thought it would be. Recently, I participated in a demonstration against the Keystone XL Pipeline. I posed for a picture among a crowd of smiling advocates holding brightly colored signs. This was a peaceful protest, but it still took courage to publicly oppose a project that would harm the environment. However, I would argue it takes more to stand up for nature when nobody is watching. This is what I strive to do in my daily life. As an environmental educator, I teach children to cherish nature. I engage the community in science projects that monitor marine mammals and birds in the Salish Sea. I discuss issues of climate change and toxics with visitors to our exhibits. I commute by bicycle, buy organic, non-GMO food (grown locally when I can), and have traded out my aluminum deodorant and carcinogenic shampoo for homemade concoctions. Of course, I also reduce, reuse, and recycle. Additionally, I worked on an initiative to protect tropical dry forest habitat in Ecuador. Through surveying bird diversity, we hoped to show the scientific community that it is a place worth saving. During my stay, I became acutely aware of the intricate ties between environmental protection and social justice. The village of Tabuga is home to roughly 60 families, a mere speck on the map. Natives are poor, even by Ecuador’s standards. There is no doctor, no medicine, and no phone. All around them, forests were clear-cut to provide barren pastures for starving cows. Runoff pollutes the river, making the villagers sick. Upon witnessing this injustice, I expected them to rise up against the industries that were hurting them and the environment. Instead, they continued to work to put food on the table and took care of their ailing children. Therein lies a valuable lesson: a person’s own needs must be met before they can focus on other issues. The sustainable future I dream of necessitates social reform just as much as environmental responsibility. It’s a daunting challenge, but I know I can help. I am highly motivated, good at public speaking, and enjoy organizing events. This combination of skills has gotten me recognized at the local and national level for leadership potential. A recent milestone was speaking at the Marine Science Center’s fundraiser, where I helped raise over $50,000 for conservation efforts of the Salish Sea. Looking forward, I plan to utilize my leadership skills to protect the environment in ways that will benefit those who suffer most. I will bring the voice of the impoverished and oppressed to politicians and researchers, and rally the public to take collective action against habitat loss and pollution. However, in order to be successful I need to explore additional perspectives and gain a better understanding of politics. Evergreen’s interdisciplinary approach, coupled with its location in the capitol, offers both. With the aid of this scholarship, I will be given the opportunity to become one of Evergreen’s next environmental leaders.

**Amory Ballantine – 15/16 Alumni**

For gCORE’s interdisciplinary project, I wrote a technical paper on the meaning and application of “transportation justice,” using a local transportation initiative as a case study. I presented my work at the National Association for Ethnic Studies’ annual meeting, my first contribution to an academic conference. My workshop proposal was then accepted for the 4th annual Public Sociology conference. Through that conference, I met a graduate student who told me about a call for submissions to a book on “ecofeminist intersections,” which may become my first published work! Through MES I discovered critical geography, made connections with geographers across the country and internationally, and was prepared for advanced research in a Ph.D. program. I wrote my candidacy paper on environmental impacts of the biometric border, applying critical ethnic studies to environmental studies. This paper was accepted for presentation at the Critical Geographies Mini-Conference in Vancouver, CA and at an immigration panel at the annual Association of American Geographers’ meeting this spring. I am currently studying the qualitative methods I hope to use in my thesis research on settler colonial geographies in the Port of Tacoma tide flats (Puyallup land; Superfund site; location of a private immigration detention facility; and home to oil refineries receiving BNSF oil-by-rail). I am excited about the research I am doing in the MES program and its contribution to local social justice efforts. MES has opened many professional doors for me and helped me pursue my dream of teaching and doing research at the doctoral level.

**Joseph Burgess – 15/16 Endowed**

Although I am only in my second quarter, I am eager to share and apply the interdisciplinary knowledge and progressive momentum of the MES curriculum to an international career. I have gained valuable new perspectives through analyzing core environmental issues from economic, social, cultural, and historical frameworks. The MES program has already induced my removal from my comfort zone; I have become comfortable speaking in public and have enhanced my ability to work in groups. Our interdisciplinary group project on the Columbia River Basin’s Water Storage issue is something I hold in esteem. However, what I am most proud of is the trajectory I have been on since entering the MES program. I plan to apply my MES degree to assist marginalized communities with water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure. Through interfacing with professors and colleagues, as well as through curriculum, I have established an independent contract for spring quarter to learn the skills needed to perform a summer-long program evaluation of an NGO in rural Nicaragua. This project not only prepares me for post-graduate work, it allows me to do firsthand research for my thesis. In only a quarter and a half, I have streamlined the trajectory of my time in graduate school. MES has truly enhanced my capacity to meet my professional goals and make a difference in the world.

**Rhianna Hruska – 15/16 Endowed**

The Master of Environmental Studies program has allowed me to expand my knowledge of the environmental field. I did not previously have an academic background in biodiversity, restoration ecology, political ecology, and many other subjects covered in the classes I am taking, but now I have a core understanding of these disciplines. I have also improved my writing and communication skills through these classes. I have signed up for internships with MES credit to gain work experience to prepare me for a future job in the environmental field. Along with an improved skill set, I have been attending environmental conferences that allow me to network with professionals and learn about current research or projects being implemented throughout the United States. I want to work in Washington, DC for a government agency or environmental non-profit as a career. Washington, DC has a highly competitive atmosphere and from my experience interning for the Smithsonian Institution Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Santa Cruz, CA, all of the staff had either a Masters degree, Ph.D., or they were a post-doctoral researcher. The MES degree would open doors for me to apply for jobs in agencies where higher education is a prominent criterion for these positions. I want to gain a few years of professional work experience first, but I aim to apply to an environmental Ph.D. program and the thesis I write in the MES program will enhance my application to a doctoral program.

**Daron Williams – Emory Pyle**

My first year in the Graduate Program on the Environment has been an amazing adventure that started with a class in Fiji. I witnessed the struggles of the Fijian people in the face of climate change, and interviewed the chief of the first village to be relocated because of sea-level rise. This experience brought the real, present danger of climate change into focus, and I came to campus with a renewed sense of urgency. Though in my first year, I started designing my thesis research project, which focuses on changing land-use practices to improve water supply for climate adaptation. I was granted a field site at the UW Pack Forest, and I have applied for funding to purchase equipment to test my hypothesis. I presented my research project at CONFORWest 2015, where I won the “Most Interdisciplinary” research award. Deep change demands thoughtful direction and coordinated action. To that end, I have consistently strived for excellence both as a student and as a leader among my peers. I have worked to contribute fully in lecture and in the seminars, and taken advantage of opportunities to tap into my professors’ perspectives. I was chosen as a MESA coordinator, where I organize opportunities to engage other students in environmental issues, and I was hired as a restoration intern with Capitol Land Trust, where I independently design and implement restoration projects. As my adventure enters its second year, I will continue to embrace the education, research, collaboration and leadership opportunities it will bring.