Fiona Edwards (MES 2014) earned a BA in Philosophy and Cognitive Psychology from Bard College in New York in 2011. After considering a master’s degree in Liberal Studies from the New School, working at a plant nursery, and trying out her hand at marketing for a liquor company, she decided to move back to the west coast (she’s originally from Los Angeles) to pursue education in the MES program. Fiona had previously worked in prisons during her time at the Bard Prison Initiative and had enjoyed her experience. The Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP) was one of the major reasons Fiona decided to attend Evergreen, and she eventually accepted a position as a student Program Coordinator there during her 1st year in MES.

SPP was one of the highlights of her time in grad school. She started in an outreach and media position, writing blogs, curating websites with maintenance and updates, and building SPP’s presence on social media channels. She quickly developed skills in a variety of areas, and was therefore moved into working directly with incarcerated individuals at Cedar Creek Corrections Center, leading the Oregon spotted frog captive rearing program. She was the first student coordinator in the Western Pond Turtle Recovery program, where incarcerated men provided routine care for endangered Western pond turtles suffering from a fungus that dissolved their shells. After having the infected tissue removed, and some TLC in veterinary care, inmates at CCCC kept the healing shells clean, and monitored the turtles regularly for weight gain and increased activity – both signs of improving health.

SPP opened many doors for Fiona, and she credits her success there through countless networking opportunities. At SPP she also gained many experiences developing her skills in areas like frog biology; skills she didn’t previously have any experience in.

In addition to SPP, Fiona took full advantage of other opportunities in MES. In the summer between her first and second years, she traveled to Cuba as part of an elective course studying sustainability. Students attended a conference on the environment and development and had the chance to travel the island and talk with locals. Fiona’s thesis focused on Disaster Management (inspired initially by Hurricane Sandy in late 2012, which devastated her previous home in New York). Fiona talked with many local Cubans about how they might respond to a disaster, and was able to gain many new perspectives for her thesis research. In describing that trip, she says, “I can’t believe I got credit for that. It was so much fun.”

Fiona is currently a Wildlife Biologist at Joint Base Lewis-McCord (JBLM). After graduating from MES in 2014, she stayed on at SPP to help develop a new program specifically for inmates with special needs at the Washington Correction Center in Shelton. In early 2015, she started an internship position surveying for Oregon spotted frogs at JBLM, an opportunity that would not have been possible without her experience at SPP. She worked her way up to her current role as a Wildlife Biologist in the Avian Program, where her work focuses on three threatened bird species: the streaked horned lark, the western bluebird, and the Oregon vesper sparrow – all of which have some of their largest populations on the military base. In her work, she performs annual surveys from May through June on the occupancy and abundance of these species, and partners closely with scientists from the Center for Natural Lands Management (CNLM). The surveying work is crucial for determining population size, and in turn, adaptive management strategies.

Fiona is quick to mention that she was lucky that her time with SPP turned into such a great professional development opportunity. To current and incoming MES students, she highly recommends pursuing internships and taking advantage of those opportunities to network with people who can help you find jobs or provide future references. She continues to work closely with one of her previous faculty members, Sarah Hammon (who is a restoration ecologist with CNLM) who she took a Restoration Ecology course with as a student. The principles and skills she learned in that course she implements regularly in her work at JBLM, and she finds she collaborates with previous faculty and MES alumni regularly.

When she isn’t surveying for birds, Fiona does prescribed burning on base through the summer months, leads a streaked horned lark nest predator study using game cameras, and supports her co-workers in the Ecology programs as they survey multiple threatened or endangered species on Base, including Oregon spotted frogs and Mazama pocket gophers. She remembers her very first field trip to JBLM in her first quarter of grad school. There, she met two of her future coworkers who described their work as “looking for frogs in the winter and burning stuff in the summer” and Fiona thought that sounded pretty amazing. “And now,” she says, “that’s my job. It’s crazy.”