



# The MetWest Mindset

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METWEST HIGH SCHOOL

FALL 2011

## The First Three Rows

*Graduates reflect on MetWest's role in shaping their college experience*

Pop quiz for college professors: Scanning the lecture hall on the first day of class, can you pick out the former MetWest student? 2010 MetWest graduate and Sonoma State University sophomore Andrea England can give you a hint. "I sit in the first three rows," she says. "It's the MetWest way."

If you need more to go on, wait to see which students come up to introduce themselves after class. A MetWest alum will surely be one. "At MetWest we learned to take advantage of every opportunity out there," says Andrea. "Networking with professors is one of those opportunities. I've had classes in a full auditorium, but the professor knows my name."

Andrea's nose for opportunity does not seem to rest – even in idle moments. One day earlier this school year, "bored in the dorm," she got to thinking about a public service commercial she'd recently seen. In it, the singer Toni Braxton spoke on behalf of the Autism Society – and her son, who is autistic. "I liked the fact that Toni Braxton shared that, and I liked how proud she was of her son." Inspired, Andrea had an idea.

"For our long-term internships at MetWest, we got in the habit of always

asking for a 10-15 minute informational interview," says Andrea. "So I wrote Toni Braxton and the Autism Society, requesting one."

One day soon after, the phone rang. "I guess my MetWest skills paid off!" she says. Andrea had landed a meeting in the Bay Area with Toni Braxton herself. (Initially, they offered to fly Andrea to New York, but she was unable to miss school.) "I definitely thank MetWest for that," she says. "I wrote a professional letter, and now I'm preparing questions and sub-questions for Braxton – it's all exactly what we did here for our internships. I'm using what I learned at MetWest in the outside world."

Furthermore, Andrea's interest in the autism cause is directly connected to her MetWest internship at Mission High School in San Francisco. Working with autistic students, Andrea realized that "in Special Education classes, they were just being isolated. That's where I came in."

Andrea began taking the students on outings, "getting them into the community where they could build self-confidence," and helped

the school explore the possibilities of "inclusion," or mainstreaming. For her culminating project, Andrea worked with her mentor to design and teach a three-



part workshop helping other students to better understand autism. "I explained the autism spectrum and taught them how autistic kids were being oppressed and misunderstood," she says. Finally, she brought these kids together with the school's autistic students to collaborate on a mural project.

Andrea is an advocate -- you can hear it in her voice. She cannot stand hearing people utter "the r word." "People saying *retarded* all the time, that really bugs me," she says. "Adults use it, students use it. I taught the high school kids not to use it, and they got maturity on that point."

If her connection with Braxton and the Autism Society evolves beyond the informational interview, Andrea has big plans. "I want to bring a youth perspective, my perspective as a responsible, mature youth. I want to learn more about what Toni Braxton does as an advocate, and see what we can do to get the word out to raise awareness even more."

**"At MetWest we learned to take advantage of every opportunity out there."**

- MetWest Graduate Andrea

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**"The internships prepare you so well..."**

Ana Villalobos, another MetWest alum (Class of 2007), speaks from the perspective of a college graduate: This May, she earned a Biology degree from Mills College in Oakland. "At MetWest I was actually asked what I wanted to do," says Ana, articulating the personalized nature of a MetWest education. "What I always wanted to do was be a doctor."



During her MetWest years she pursued internships (spanning Western and Eastern medicine) that put her on that path: a non-profit focused on health education programs for Latinas and youth in Oakland's Fruitvale neighborhood; Children's Hospital in Oakland (through Faces for the Future); and a yoga and Ayurveda studio in Berkeley.

"The internships prepare you so well," reflects Ana. "Being in operating rooms at the age of 15, doing rounds at Children's Hospital – if I could do that then, I knew I could handle a lot in college. MetWest always pushed me to take charge of my own education, and that's been essential in college."

"It's true that with college you're never quite prepared till you actually get there, but I had direction and knew what I wanted to do because of my internships. I got to learn all these things about myself in high school that made challenges in college easier to overcome."

Ana is now prepping for her next challenge: medical school. "I'm taking some time to study for my MCATs, and then I plan to go to med school," she says. "At MetWest, I always wanted to be a pediatrician, although I'm still open to different specialties. We'll see once I get there."

When asked about keeping up with the MetWest family, Ana says, "I knew you were going to call it that! 'The MetWest Family.' I go back whenever I can. If they need something translated, I help with that, and they still help me whenever they hear about opportunities. I'm really grateful for the people there."

"You can't help but come back," echoes Andrea. "I want to see current MetWest students succeed, and I know they're doing some wonderful work in their internships." As if on cue, a MetWest junior walks past. "That's one of them – I'm really proud of him," she says.

While she hesitates to say it for fear of sounding boastful, Andrea was seen as a leader during her time at MetWest, and she still is when she returns. "I want them to see all the work [MetWest alums] have been doing after high school, and let them know that even though it looks hard, we made it through and it's worth it."

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