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A group of Palm Springs High School FILM (Futures in Leading Media) students and teacher, Donnie Gerrell (front right) film a commercial for I Heart Mac and Cheese in Palm Springs.

CSUSB Palm Desert Campus alumna expanding media training opportunities at Palm Springs High School

PALM DESERT, Calif. – Donnie Gerrell graduated from the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus in the spring of 2018 with a bachelor of arts degree and teaching credential in career and technical education, arts, media and entertainment.

Now she is sharing her passion for all things media as a FILM Pathway teacher and technology department lead at Palm Springs High School.

Gerrell was excited to help give students at the high school more opportunities that are local to the Coachella Valley.

“Prior to PSHS, I worked for a local nonprofit where I would integrate digital storytelling into core classes,” she said. “I also freelanced creating short films for local clients and flying a drone for several organizations. I knew my next step in my career was to enter the classroom.”

At PSHS, Gerrell was given the opportunity to take over the digital media classes.

During this time, the Palm Springs Unified School District transformed her program into a CTE pathway that she and her students now call FILM (Futures in Leading Media). This four-year program has gone through an extensive transformation since Gerrell joined the program.

“My first year here, I had 20 computers, two cameras and 120 students,” said Gerrell. “I now have a full lab of 40 computers, 25 cameras and 190 students enrolled.”

There are 4 different classes that are part of the FILM Pathway. Students are added to the program per the request of their counselors, and the class fills up very quickly. All courses are also A-G certified.

Gerrell and her class are currently completing the postproduction process of commercials produced for the company, I Heart Mac and Cheese. Her students competed in creating scripts and made up the entire film crew at a private multi-million dollar estate in Palm Springs. This is a collaborative project between students, the restaurant, the community, and even the families of students, to produce several holiday commercials that will be featured on television. There are about 190 students working to complete this project, which is on top of their broadcasts and other assignments as well.

Last year, the group worked closely with the Desert Healthcare District & Foundation, where they made COVID-19 commercials with the Health Academy at PSHS to encourage students and the community to be COVID safe and get vaccinated. Students have also attended Youth Town Hall Meetings as Youth Ambassadors, competed in national organizations such as SkillsUSA, and won filmmaking competitions such as the FAFSA commercial competition for OneFuture Coachella Valley.

“My goal is to work with the community in some way that allows my students to gain stronger professional soft skills to prepare them for their future,” says Gerrell.

Palm Springs High School is also one of the only schools in the Coachella Valley that creates a daily pre-taped broadcast. This broadcast is made by the students, for the students. There are 37 students on the crew and they are proficient editors in Final Cut Pro and can use DSLR cameras.

Besides teaching FILM classes at PSHS, Gerrell also started a Photography Club with another counselor and she is beginning to pilot a drone racing program for PSUSD.

Gerrell credits the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus for providing her with the necessary skills to be successful.

“The valley is home for me and PDC gave me the chance to stay close to home and push myself to grow academically,” said Gerrell. “It’s the place where I made long-term connections that I will carry with me for a lifetime. I was heavily involved with student life at PDC, including president of the Communications Club, president of Club Educate, a member of the Student Ambassadors Society, an orientation leader and a student assistant for Information Technologies Services. I loved being involved with the entire campus. Walking down the halls felt like home and around every corner was a place that made me who I am today. I feel that if I had gone elsewhere to school, I wouldn’t have stayed in the valley after graduation. I am very thankful to have had the chance to attend a four-year university close to home.”

About PDC: The CSUSB Palm Desert Campus offers bachelor’s and master’s degrees, a doctorate in educational leadership, teaching credentials and certificates. Serving more than 2,200 students, it is the Coachella Valley’s four-year public university and plays a vital role in educating and training the region’s growing population.

For more information about the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus, contact Mike Singer in the Office of Strategic Communication at msinger@csusb.edu or (760) 341-2883, ext. 78107, or visit the PDC website at www.csusb.edu/pdc.