

# Michele Stephens

## *A College of the Redwoods Success Story*



Michele Stephens, Assistant Director for the Humboldt County Department of Health & Human Services, and former Director of DHHS Public Health, is a proud alum of the College of the Redwoods and a staunch advocate for community colleges.

### **Addressing Common Misconceptions**

“I was pretty visible in the community as the director of Public Health during the COVID-19 response and many people were surprised to learn I went to College of the Redwoods (CR). They assumed I moved here at 19 years old to go to Humboldt State University (HSU),” Stephens recalled, adding that she has often heard the misconception that community colleges primarily cater to

the less motivated or economically challenged. “Lower tuition costs and fewer barriers to entry do make it easier for those struggling to make ends meet or who want to get a four-year degree but aren’t sure what degree they want,” she acknowledged. “But not every high school student knows what they want to do for a career at 18 years old. Community colleges give students time to explore options and take classes that count toward general education unit requirements without the pressure of high expenses and an expectation to finish quickly and move on with a degree.”

### **Taking time to grow.....**

Stephens took six years to earn her four-year degree, spending three years at community college and three at HSU, but said that time allowed her to grow personally by exposing her to a diverse range of people during her formative years. “College of the Redwoods actually offered more opportunities to meet people from all over the country and experience more cultural diversity than I had grown up with in Los Angeles. The campus culture encourages meeting new people and making new friends instead of getting lost in a sea of people,” she said. “It profoundly expanded my worldview and proved to be a life-changing experience.” Stephens said she also cherished random encounters with teachers and friends at the local grocery store and started putting down roots after realizing she preferred a smaller, more intimate community.

Fortunately, low tuition costs, financial aid and part time jobs also allowed Stephens to earn her bachelor’s degree in child development without loans. A job at North Coast Children’s Services then sparked her passion for social work and she decided to pursue a post-graduate education. “Being debt-free was essential to pursuing my master’s degree,” she added. “If I had accumulated debt from my undergraduate years, I might not have been able to achieve my goals.”

### **The Value of CR**

“College of the Redwoods remains an amazing resource for this community by catering to students from various backgrounds, regardless of their financial situation,” Stephens said. “CR also provides an easier path for re-entry into higher education for those who have been side-tracked by life.” The campus’s welcoming and less intimidating environment allows individuals to “dip their toes into the college experience” she added, without committing to the time and expense associated with four-year institutions.

College of the Redwoods, she pointed out, also provides a critical pipeline to the local workforce. “The institution encourages students to take enriching classes that expand their knowledge and exposure to various topics. This makes everyone more competitive in the job market and benefits us all.”