Yolanda Haro: There is a monk who says "you are the sky and everything else is just the weather". So I tried to analyze that, what does that mean we are the sky. So it means that when we are boggled down and belittled by our problems that we can look up and look at the sky and go, "Wow, we're like immense. We're like huge. We're unlimited. We're eternal." And to look at the sky and say, "This is how big we are and everything else is just the noise of our lives, but that we're really big." So going outside helps me to think about that.

Liesel: Welcome to the Magic Mountie Podcast. This is a podcast that's dedicated to helping faculty and other college employees as they try and navigate the challenging fabric of serving students, especially at Mt. San Antonio College, but everyone is welcome.

Sun Ezzell: Hi. This is Sun Ezzell with the Magic Mountie Podcast. We're back with our final episode in our summer mini series featuring favorite nature spots on campus. We'll go barefoot in the grass and join Yolanda Haro from POD under her favorite tree on campus.

Sun Ezzell: In this episode, Yolanda shares a childhood memory of spending time in nature with her grandfather as well as how teaching mindfulness classes at Mt. Sac impacts her own mindfulness practice, tips for busy people, for finding a few minutes to soak up some sunshine and how mindfulness can support us and our students. Here's Yolanda.

Yolanda Haro: My name is Yolanda Haro and I am the coordinator at POD, the POD office in building six. I have many favorite spots on campus, but one very close to me is in front of building six facing south. And there's these beautiful trees here that I come out, I usually will have lunch here and I sit and I eat my salad or my food. And oftentimes I have visitors. The squirrels come and we chat and they climb on my legs at times.

Sun Ezzell: They climb on your legs?

Yolanda Haro: Yeah. And if I have almonds or a couple of nuts, they just love to share with me.

Sun Ezzell: Those are Sassy squirrels.

Yolanda Haro: Yes.

Sun Ezzell: [crosstalk 00:02:12].

Yolanda Haro: Very unreserved.

Sun Ezzell: So how do we do this? So we take our shoes off?

Yolanda Haro: Yeah. So you take your shoes off. Sometimes I have a yoga mat or if I don't have anything then I just sit just with my pants. I really enjoy being outside because I start paying attention to the wind. The wind on my skin. I start watching people walk...like the students as they're walking. It gives me a chance to just look straight and you see the flags like the US and the California and the Mt. Sac flag. There's so many birds in the trees and I started hearing their singing.

Yolanda Haro: So it just brings me back to my childhood when I was a little girl. I was born in Zacatecas, Mexico in a ranch. We call it El Rancho. It was called El Durazno. And at this ranch, my grandfather, he had a lot of fruit trees. So we would go to the fruit trees or he would sit outside on the patio surrounded by all the flowers that my grandma would plant and play with the cat.

Yolanda Haro: I remember he always would do that around 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon. He would sit in the chair. His name was Papa Nico. He would sit on his chair in the patio when the sun was right at 3:00 or 4:00 and he would play with the cat and he would just soak in the sun. This man lived to 98 years old.

Yolanda Haro: So I remember the animals and I remember him being in the sun every day. It was like vitamins. It was like taking his vitamins and truly his vitamin D that we're taking in when we're outside in the sun. I was with the Earth. I was walking barefoot on the dirt. So it's very familiar to me.

Yolanda Haro: And as a matter of fact, when I teach mindfulness, there's so many ways to be mindful, and one of those ways is to do like mindful walking meditation. So I've often thought of coming out here and I have done it a couple of times where I come out here just stressed or have a lot of things on my mind.

Yolanda Haro: Just take off my shoes and walk on the grass and just walk from one side to another. But very purposefully, one step at a time and then noticing the wind and the sounds of nature. That really disconnects me from the screen in the computer in the office and just gives me a break from that ambiance and brings me very close to nature.

Yolanda Haro: And you know what's interesting, I'll be out here and I'll take off my shoes and I'm just sitting here with my professional clothes under the tree. A lot of faculty or people that know me, they'll come up and they're like, "Oh, it's so nice that you're sitting here." And they'll start talking to me. I think the fact that we're just out here is important to really get away from ...

Yolanda Haro: I mean I just saw Laura Martinez the other day. She's walking, she's like, "Oh, I should do that. I should eat my lunch outside. I'm usually in the office." I said, "You got to get outside. You got to get outside." So I think it's a reminder for all of us to just take a break.

Yolanda Haro: If we can take 10, 15 minute break and come outside and just take the shoes off, walk on Earth, and that really kind of grounds us. I think it's really key. I mean just to be still because our brains are working so hard. We have so much stimulation at work, but just to sit down and be still is where we really can calm ourselves down. It's very soothing. And nature does that to us. It's very healing. It heals our souls and I do really believe in that.

Yolanda Haro: If I'm really pressed for time and I don't have that 10, 15 minutes to come out here, what I do is when I go to the bathroom, I make sure that I exit through the back of the building and then I make myself walk around the building. And so while I'm walking around the building back to the office, I look up. I look up at the sky, I look up at the trees, I begin to hear the birds. And even that, just that three, four minute walk is a moment of mindfulness. And I connect with the Earth and with the animals.

Yolanda Haro: And so I think it's important. And also, we need movement. I think the worst thing we can do is sit at a desk the whole day in a sitting position and just work at the computer. That actually is very damaging to our nervous system. It stresses us out even more. We don't give our eyes a break.

Yolanda Haro: So I think it's really important that even if at the minimum, if we go to the bathroom and just go outside, walk around the building and come back, that, that's really, really helpful.

Sun Ezzell: And so you mentioned that you teach the mindfulness classes. How did you start?

Yolanda Haro: Oh my goodness. I was working at a higher ed college in Pomona, a medical college, and we were doing mindfulness meditation there through the mindfulness-based stress reduction method. I used to go downtown Pomona and I saw a yoga studio.

Yolanda Haro: So I started going there and I would do yoga there. And then I realized that they had a yoga and meditation certification program that would last about a year. And so I thought, "Well, why not? I have so much free time, I should do this program." And I'm joking because I don't have free time.

Yolanda Haro: So I took the program for one year and I got certified in yoga and meditation and then I left that university and I came to Mt. Sac. So when I came to Mt. Sac, I didn't see any meditation being offered and I suggested it to my director one day that maybe we should try to offer some classes. I didn't think one session was going to be enough. I thought let's do a series where people really learn about meditation in different forms.

Yolanda Haro: So she was very hesitant at first. It just quite wasn't part of my job description. It really wasn't something that POD offered at the time, but she was willing to try it, so we tried it for five weeks and in those five weeks I had faculty attend, I had classified attend, we got to do a walking meditation, eating meditation, loving and kindness meditation. There's a lot of different meditations that we do and people started liking it.

Yolanda Haro: So since then, I've offered it at least four or five times in a series. I've done about 25 classes now. A lot of people come back, they come back and I've made great friends. I made great friends because of all those classes. People have thanked me like, "Thank you for teaching us how to take some time off. Thank you for teaching us how to calm down, how to relax our minds, how to pay attention, how to check in with ourselves internally."

Yolanda Haro: There's lot of things going on in ourselves and unless we stop, unless we quiet down, we're not in touch with what's really going on inside emotionally, psychologically, physically. So it's really good to just stop.

Yolanda Haro: And I want to get better at it, because meditating and sitting down and being quiet, it's not what we do. We really have to think about it and then actually do it. I take that home because sometimes when I get home, I'm so tired. I usually get home and I lay down about 20 minutes, whether I sleep or not. I just lay down and give my body some time to just be still. And then I go on and cook and do dinner and everything else, but having that quiet time is really key.

Sun Ezzell: How does teaching the mindfulness classes impact kind of your own practice of mindfulness?

Yolanda Haro: It keeps me a lot more connected because since I need to prepare for the class, I need to teach it, I need to think about my audience. I try to mix it up or change it a little bit from series to series, so it keeps me reading, it keeps me practicing, it keeps me trying to be creative and bring in new information. I listen to people's feedback and what they like, so I try to create things that people would enjoy.

Yolanda Haro: And one satisfaction that I had recently that just really put a smile on my face was the new faculty seminar. One of the faculty from the paramedic program told me that the session that I did for new faculty really inspired him to do mindfulness and to be even mindful of that kind of work. So then there's another colleague of mine on campus, Andrea, who was able to do a session for his class, these top guys and women who are in the paramedic program and they're in very high stress careers.

Yolanda Haro: And he had mindfulness at his program and the students said how much it really helped them, because it's a coping mechanism. So this faculty members said, "When I was younger, when I was getting started after a very stressful day, we would go out to the bar and just drink beer. And that wasn't really the best way to cope with our stress, so I'm trying to teach these students something different. And because you introduced mindfulness to us at new faculty seminar, I was able to provide that to my class."

Yolanda Haro: So I thought that's beautiful because he's paying it forward. We're learning something for ourselves and then we think, "Oh, who else can benefit from this?" And I think faculty are in a very key role to introduce something. Even Faculty taking five minutes at the beginning of the class to say, "Let's just have five minutes of silence." And you don't have to meditate, you don't have to think about any particular thing, but just relax. Relax your mind, breathe, focus on your breathing for five minutes before a class really centers, especially our students who are commuters. They're going from the freeway in traffic coming to campus or running from one class to another.

Yolanda Haro: Just having that little time is really key. And if you're having a bad day, go hug a tree. I really believe trees have energy and we go there and we hug it and we embrace it and I think that energy goes into us. So it's funny to do that, but I just came from Yosemite and I was hugging the trees in Yosemite. I'm like, "I need to get all this energy."

Liesel: Hey, thanks so much for joining us for the Magic Mountie Podcast. We love your likes, we love your shares, and we love your comments. So please engage with our community, download from wherever you love to get your podcasts, iTunes, Google. Rate my professor. We're there and we want you to be back with us next week. Remember, any opinions that are expressed in this podcast do not necessarily represent Mt. San Antonio College or any of its agents. We'll see you next time.