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News Release

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Cerritos College Receives Historic \$1M Commitment for Endowed Jain Scholar

First community college to boast Jain Thought Leadership

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Norwalk, Calif. – April 21, 2021 – Today, the Cerritos College Foundation announced it received a one-million-dollar gift commitment to establish the **Bhagavan Kunthunath Endowed Scholar of Jain Thought Leadership**. This is the first-known Endowed Jain Scholar at a United States community college. Thanks to the generosity of donors Drs. Jasvant and Meera Modi and Harshad and Raksha Shah, the endowment will further thought leadership on nonviolence, the environment, historical contributions, spirituality, meditation, food, and culture.

The Foundation named **Credit ESL Instructor Lee Anne McIlroy** as the College's **Endowed Scholar** for 2021. Lee Anne, who is also the College's Student Learning Outcomes Coordinator, has an extensive background in Jainism, having been introduced to the philosophy when she was eight by her father. Jainism has been a consistent influence throughout her life. In 2017, she adopted the five Jainist vows or *Anuvratas*, and she tries to use them in her daily life. She earned degrees in linguistics from UCLA and California State University, Long Beach and a certificate in French language and literature from the University of Neuchâtel. In 2013, Lee Anne was the Senior English Language Fellow in Tanzania and has worked as a Language Specialist for the U.S. Department of State and Georgetown University's Center for Intercultural Education and Development in Tanzania and the Comoros Islands.

Dr. Jasvant Modi, a prominent Jain philanthropist, was instrumental in the creation of this opportunity. "We want as many people as possible to be exposed to this philosophy; ideas which were promoted by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and many conscientious others who solved the great problems of the day with nonviolent approaches," said Dr. Modi.

To date, the Jain community has made a \$14 million investment in US education. The Modis, Shaha, and other Jain philanthropists have already established chairs and scholars in perpetuity at eleven universities and have termed relationships at another five. The Federation of Jain Associations in America (JAINA) assigns an official name to each Jain studies scholar to represent one of the 24 Tirthankaras, or spiritual teachers of the dharma (righteous path). Lee Anne will bear the name of the 17th Tirthankara, **Bhagavan Kunthunath**. Jainism is the sixth largest religion and one of the oldest in the world. However, most Americans are unaware of the religion and the impact it has had on nonviolent protest, peace principles, and sustainability.

"Our ability to establish the nation's first Endowed Jain Scholar at a community college is a testament to the incredibly strong relationship we have within our Indian American community across the District. The College is deeply honored to receive this generous gift that will enhance our diversity

efforts and expose our students, staff, and faculty to a more culturally rich learning environment. The Modis and Shahs have created a lifetime of opportunities for Cerritos College students, faculty, and community members to discover the beauty of *Ahimsa paramo dharma* and we are eager to continue working with the Jain community," said Cerritos College President/Superintendent, Dr. Jose Fierro. "This Sanskrit phrase, popularized by Mahatma Gandhi, demonstrates the universality of *Ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* means non-violence, *paramo* means topmost or supreme, and *dharma* means duty," he continued.

"We live in a world that is full of conflict. It is our duty to help as many people learn about compassion for their fellow man and for all living beings. We are delighted that Cerritos College is our first community college, and we'd like to work with more," said Harshad Shah.

"At a community college *Ahimsa* can reach returning students, veterans, future first responders, those learning trades, in addition to students who want to pursue Jain studies at a university. We have selected Cerritos College because of its great legacy and due to its proximity to our temple in Buena Park and the City of Artesia where many of our members reside," Dr. Modi added.

"The Cerritos College approach to the **Bhagawan Kunthunath Endowed Scholar of Jain Thought Leadership** will require input from the best minds across divisions and departments and be supported by the Cerritos College Foundation. In addition to supporting the work of a faculty Endowed Scholar, the gift will provide funding for a new Ahimsa Endowed Scholarship, an annual conference on Jain Thought Leadership, and professional development opportunities for faculty and staff interested in Jain studies," continued Dr. Fierro.

Professor McIlroy, the Bhagawan Kunthunath Endowed Scholar of Jain Thought Leadership, will also receive support from the Jain Thought Leadership Committee. Members include Mr. Hasendra Shah, Mrs. Mina Choksi, Dr. Nitin Shah, Dr. Sulekh Jain, Dr. Narendra Parson, and Dr. Jasvant Modi, all representatives of the Jain Center of Southern California (JCSC) or JAINA.

"Professor McIlroy as the new Endowed Jain Scholar represents an enhanced opportunity for students to learn how they can change their own lives and the world through pursuing Jain enlightenment in their studies," said Dr. Sulekh Jain.

"I am honored and humbled to have this opportunity to share a way of thinking that has changed and shaped my life for the better. Hopefully, the work we will be able to do with this endowment will benefit our local community, this campus, and especially our students," said Lee Anne McIlroy, Bhagawan Kunthunath Endowed Scholar of Jain Thought Leadership.

To make a contribution to the Endowed Jain Scholar Fund or *Ahimsa* Scholarship at Cerritos College please contact the Foundation at foundation@cerritos.edu.

About the Cerritos College Foundation: *The Cerritos College Foundation, a non-profit organization, serves as a charitable vehicle for the community, individuals, and alumni, to assist with the financial support of Cerritos College beyond that which state funding supports. Visit the Foundation online at www.CerritosCF.org.*

About Cerritos College: *Cerritos College serves as a comprehensive community college for southeastern Los Angeles County. Communities within the college's district include Artesia, Bellflower, Cerritos, Downey, Hawaiian Gardens, La Mirada, Norwalk, and portions of Bell Gardens, Lakewood, Long Beach, Santa Fe Springs, and South Gate. Cerritos College offers degrees and certificates in more than 180 areas of study in nine divisions. Annually, more than 1,200 students successfully complete their course of studies. Enrollment currently averages 21,000 students. Visit Cerritos College online at <http://www.cerritos.edu/>.*