

# The valley finally gets a community college

## College of the Desert got its start in 1958

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“Every rancher, realtor, resort operator, retail merchant will tell you the desert lives, and grows on three things — land, water, publicity. Nature gave us the land, although it has been subject to considerable improvement these past 50 years. Science is giving us the water and the skills to use it best. The publicity, we must make for ourselves.” Phil Stone writing an open letter to the newly seated College of the Desert Board in 1959 offered some advice, “you must think — and Think Big — about publicity.”

The desert’s increasing population warranted a community college, and in 1958 the voters overwhelmingly approved a bond issue to create a college district with a five-member board and a two-year institution.

The board sponsored a naming contest, publicized by the Desert Sun and the Date Palm and News of Indio. “In the speedy creation of tradition, your Board already has indicated approval of the name suggested by a young Palm Springer, 16-year-old Douglas Ferguson Crocker, son of California Electric’s desert manager, Francis Crocker ... with a college scholarship going to Douglas for his winning suggestion.”

With the name in place, the board proceeded to set its first year budget at \$370,477. They hired key staff, and were “in process of selecting an architect for the college buildings from more than 20 you have interviewed.” The board didn’t just interview, but eventually hired multiple architects.

Harvard graduate John Carl Warnecke would, to his credit, go on to design the John F. Kennedy Eternal Flame Memorial gravesite in Arlington, Lafayette Square in Washington and the



**A late 1960s aerial view shows the expanded College of the Desert campus.**

PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

master plan for the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

At College of the Desert he designed the lecture hall and the liberal arts, library, maintenance, and science and technology buildings in May of 1961.

Local John Porter Clark is credited as the coordinating architect for the aforementioned buildings and additionally designed the North, South and East entrances and walk and paving. Stewart and Roger Williams, in collaboration with Clark, added technology, nursing and business buildings over the next few years as well as the gymnasium and pool, to round out the offerings. Albert Frey and Robson Chambers designed the all-important dining hall and the administration building. Donald Wexler and Ric Harrison also contributed.

The open letter continued, “Every realtor in the entire Coachella Valley is busy offering you the ideal site for the

new Junior College — from Desert Hot Springs to Mecca, and particularly from Thousand Palms and Palm Springs areas.” After three years of study and planning, construction began on 160 acres at Monterey and Avenue 44 (now Fred Waring Drive) in Palm Desert. The first students arrived in the Fall of 1962.

“In school colors, green and gold are inevitable. Gold for the sunshine and desert sand, green for the sage and palmy date groves. And green and gold are approved shares for successful color television.” And that seemed logical enough, but then the letter gets tongue-in-cheek, whimsical and silly, even by 1959 standards, in hopes of manufacturing publicity.

The “Coachella Valley’s publicity-conscious junior college certainly must adopt the colorful Arabian theme ... the Date Festival’s camels should always be a part of the scene ... Men students, ob-

viously should be called ‘Camels,’ girl students, very properly may be referred to as ‘Dates.’ In matters of dress, all lower-classmen, male or female, should be required to wear shorts on campus, with only the exalted seniors permitted the off-beat desert privilege of dressing formal.”

These conventions would bring photographers from the leading magazines and national wire services to the college regularly, “and probably will impose a special entrance requirement unique in the history of public institutions. Obviously, all female freshman should be required to show measurements of say, 35-25-34 besides their academic qualifications. For male students, average height and weight should be sufficient, if accompanied by deep tans and clear-cut features.” The publicity would likely end in “Life Magazine goes to the Coachella Valley Junior College in six pages of color pictures.”

The letter was intentionally silly, and those who wrote it couldn’t have contemplated all the publicity the college would actually come to enjoy.

The guest speaker at the commencement in 1976 was Bob Hope, desert denizen himself. Hope and bandleader (and inventor of the famous blender) Fred Waring would receive honorary degrees that year.

In the 1980s the college would allow the building of the McCallum Theater on the campus. Further expansions in its offerings continued in the ensuing decades, serving an ever-expanding desert community.

But all silliness and publicity aside, the “community college” has been wildly successful beyond all aspirations set in at its inception, and it has garnered not just publicity, but much-deserved accolades, far beyond the imaginations and musings of six decades ago in 1959. In that tradition, the new west campus, adjacent to the high school in Palm Springs, is underway. Named by a high school student, College of the Desert goes forward.