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## Interview with Ron Merritt

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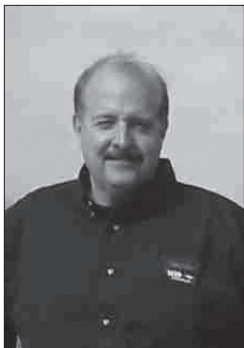
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Ron Merritt

## INTERVIEW WITH RON MERRITT

### President and CEO of Merritt Electronics

In the past thirty years Ron Merritt has worked for multiple foreign companies in the high tech industry. He is the president and CEO of Merritt Electronics where over a period of twelve years he refined a business model which created \$250 million per year and landed him on the cover of Forbes magazine. Mr. Merritt uses this same model to bring multiple products to market.

*Moebius: What is your background working with students at Cal Poly?*

**RM:** I have worked with students in the College of Business and the College of Engineering at Cal Poly for about eight years.

*Moebius: What kind of classes and organizations have you worked with in the past eight years?*

**RM:** I do not remember the names of all the classes and organizations, but there were several projects with marketing classes, lectures to engineering classes, multiple projects with your technical writing classes, the University Police Department (testing and critiquing our police video equipment), and other on-campus groups such as SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise), the Cal Poly Chapter of the AMA (American Marketing Association), C3RP (California Central Coast Research Partnership) Project, visiting attendee with the Electrical Engineering Department Advisory Board, Entrepreneurship Club, and Innovation Quest.

*Moebius: Was there a slow progression from inventor to mentor? Where there any milestones you noted as you switched gears?*

**RM:** I would say the progression was natural and happened pretty fast. After leaving SAES Pure Gas (local company producing gas purifiers) in 1998, I started my company and within a few years I had about fifteen Cal Poly and Cuesta students working for me. I often found myself mentoring employees in my own company. After a few years working in my company one of my Cal Poly students suggested that I give a lecture at her class. After I spoke to the class the line was out the door with students waiting to talk to me. This is how it started.

*Moebius: When you meet a graduate student who has an idea you think is smart, financially safe, and marketable how long does it take to help the student push product to market?*

RM: Honestly, every invention and business plan is different. This process can take several months, or several years, or in many cases never. These days it is harder than ever, with money being tight, to bring product to market.

*Moebius: Does the university hinder progression in any way because it is an academic environment?*

RM: In regards to the school hindering inventions, there was a problem that I stumbled onto several years ago. After I started giving lectures, several students and staff came to me for help with patents. I discovered that the school (at the time) claimed 100 percent ownership to intellectual property (IP) developed by students and staff. Obviously this was not an incentive for inventors to work with the school, which is why many showed up on my doorstep. Luckily, Dean Susan Opava challenged this rule and was successful in changing this long-standing policy. Now IP is shared with the school and the inventor.

*Moebius: From my past experience working with your devices in the Technical Writing for Engineers course I teach, students gain valuable lessons regarding writing and testing technical devices. What do you gain from the student involvements in your inventions?*

RM: First and foremost, the opportunity to work with students is really fun and enjoyable. It is also rewarding knowing that working together gives them an opportunity to work on a project that emulates the demands of a real job. For my company, we gain a finished product that in several cases was shipped with actual products that we introduced to the market. However, more than this we gain insight from a very young market segment. The world is changing at lightening speed, and even people in their 30s may not be up on the hottest widget, blog, or web site that every student on the planet knows about. This, more than anything, is the greatest value of working with students.

*Moebius: I want to reiterate that the students who have worked with you in my English 149 classes leave the class with working product knowledge, a manual of sorts to show potential employers, and a letter of recommendation you provide. What would you add to this list?*

RM: Many students over the years have kept in contact with me, and I have always made time to assist them and give them advice long after they graduate. Some have asked for input when trying to start a business, others have inventions, and others have asked about partnerships and questions about global marketing. Some past students have also helped me with student projects after they graduated, mostly with projects related to SIFE.

*Moebius: Do you think Cal Poly has room for more undergraduate classes in the curriculum where mentors in business, the community, and technology interface with the students?*

*RM:* Yes, for sure, this is something I would like to see expanded. There are several outstanding Cal Poly staff members that I have worked with over the years, and individually they have been great. Having said that, I personally do not know the details of classes specifically dedicated to interfacing with mentors in business, but if these classes do not exist, I would love to see them integrated into the class curriculum. ☺

*Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Anne Regan, Winter 2010.*