

RESEARCH VIEW

Summer
2017

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA Research, Innovation & Imagination

CAST AWAY

Montana Rep Heads to China for 50-Year Anniversary

The first time the Montana Repertory Theatre at the University of Montana performed “To Kill a Mockingbird,” racial tensions ran high as the O.J. Simpson trial wrapped up. More than a decade later, the dress rehearsal for the second UM tour of the signature piece about race and justice took place the same day the United States inaugurated its first black president.

This year, the Montana Rep celebrated its 50th anniversary with another “Mockingbird” milestone – a tour of the play in China.

What originally began in 1967 as a regional touring company comprising UM theater students soon went national, with professionals from across the country joining the troupe in 1975.

And Montana Rep Artistic Director Greg Johnson has been along for that ride for 27 years.

“I never expected to be here so long,” he says.

Johnson’s accent places him from New York. He lived there for the first 20 years of his career, running the full gamut of theater experiences, from Broadway to off-Broadway.

Johnson says that although he had been a child actor, he didn’t think he would eventually do it for a living. He thought about going to law school but instead became a theater major at New York University, building connections within the professional world and falling in love with the stage.

“I got to learn how the big boys do it,” he says.

Johnson carried all

Montana Rep actors Hannah Appell and Jeff Medley perform a scene from “To Kill a Mockingbird.”



Audience members in China prepare to watch a performance of Montana Rep’s “To Kill a Mockingbird.” (Photo by James Drysdale)

that experience with him to Montana. In 1990, he wanted to try something new and responded to the Rep’s call for an artistic director. He thought it would only last a year, but he fell in love with Missoula, the University, Montana and the job.

Johnson knows what to look for in his actors. Since 1994, he has worked on national tours and assembled casts for the Montana Rep with a full range of talents and ages. To find professional actors from the Actors’ Equity Association, he holds auditions in Seattle, Los Angeles and New York. Typically, three actors star in each show. The rest of the cast is mostly UM students.

Johnson says students often play the lead, but the audience does not notice and gives them the same reviews as professionals. “And the professionals really enjoy working with the students, because the professionals are reminded of the fire they had when they were young, so it’s a great back-and-forth,” he says.

Morgan Solonar is one of those students.

A 20-year-old junior majoring in theater, she is the youngest member of Montana Rep and one of two undergraduates.

Solonar’s first acting role, at age 2, was as a sheep in a Nativity play. She interned in UM’s Missoula

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A tropical forest in Costa Rica

Heavy Precipitation Speeds Carbon Exchange in Tropics

New research by UM and its partner institutions gives insight into how forests globally will respond to climate change.

Cory Cleveland, a UM professor of terrestrial ecosystem ecology, says that previous research in the wet tropics – where much of global forest productivity occurs – indicates that the increased rainfall that may occur with climate change would cause declines in plant growth.

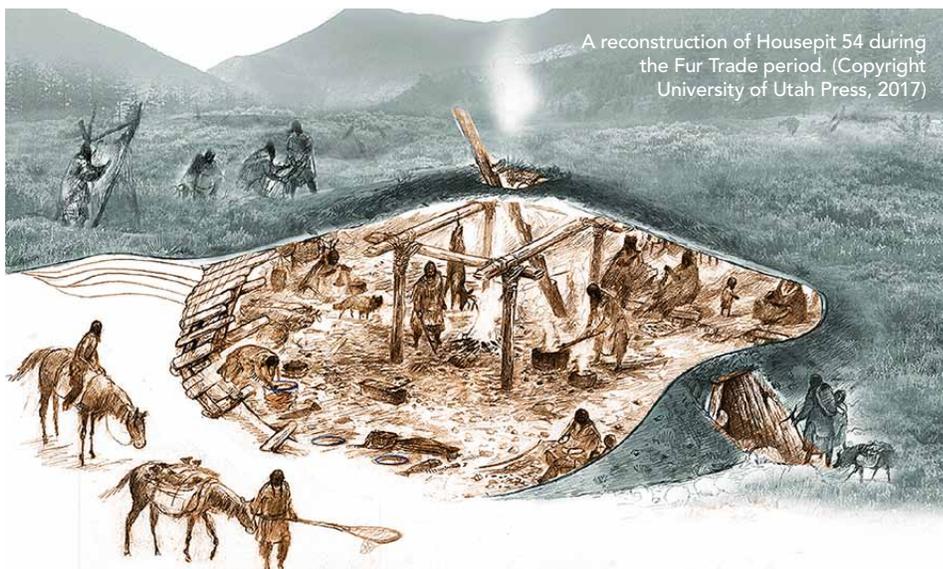
However, their new work suggests climate-change-driven increases in rainfall in warm, wet forests are likely to cause increased plant growth. Plant-growth declines are still expected in cooler forests with increased precipitation.

The research was published April 17 in *Ecology Letters* as an article titled “Temperature and rainfall interact to control carbon cycling in tropical forests.”

“Our work is based on real measurements of trees, not from computer models, and therefore may offer the most realistic picture of how much forests grow now, and how they may respond to changing temperature and climate,” Cleveland says. “The biggest takeaway is that understanding variations in both rainfall and temperature is important for predicting how climate, as well as climate change, affect tree growth.”

He says the research has important implications for climate change. It shows changes in rainfall and temperature in the future likely will affect both plant growth, which removes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and organic matter decomposition, which pumps carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

He says the research reinforces the importance of conserving tropical rainforests, where more than one-third of global plant production occurs.



A reconstruction of Housepit 54 during the Fur Trade period. (Copyright University of Utah Press, 2017)

Indigenous Lifestyles Explored in New Book

A UM anthropology professor’s research is helping to fill holes in the history of indigenous peoples living in the Pacific Northwest during the Fur Trade period. Through excavations of a semi-subterranean dwelling in southern interior British Columbia, **Anna Prentiss** reveals ancestors of today’s St’át’imc people actively were engaged in maintaining traditional lifestyles while making the best of new opportunities for trade and intergroup interaction. Her research is outlined in the newly released book “The Last House at Bridge River.”

“This is the first complete excavation and study of an aboriginal household from the early- to mid-19th century in the interior Plateau region,” Prentiss says. “The deeper floors span circa 1,000 to 1,500 years ago and are providing unprecedented insight into the unfolding of household and village history.”

The single home, known as Housepit

54, includes the longest fully documented occupation sequence in the Pacific Northwest region – one of the longest single house sequences found anywhere – 17 superimposed floors. Prentiss’ book details the home’s final occupation during the late Canadian Fur Trade period.

The Bridge River archaeological site is an ancient village containing remains of 80 housepits. By partnering with the Xwisten, the Bridge River Indian Band, and with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Prentiss initiated the Housepit 54 project’s first excavation in 2012, with additional digs in 2013, 2014 and 2016. The work revealed 8,000 animal bones – dominated by salmon and deer remains – and 12,000 stone artifacts from the Fur Trade period deposits alone, including more than 230 hide scrapers and over 130 arrow points.

UM Researcher Earns Prestigious CAREER Grant

UM Assistant Professor **Andrew Whiteley** recently received the National Science Foundation’s most prestigious award for junior faculty.

The Faculty Early Career Development award, also known as a CAREER grant, is awarded annually to faculty who exemplify the role of teacher-scholar through outstanding research, excellent education and the integration of both education and research.

Whiteley, an assistant professor of fisheries and conservation genomics, will



Whiteley

receive more than \$800,000 over five years to work on a project titled “The Influence of Gene Flow on Inbreeding and Local Adaptation: Replicated Experiments in Isolated Wild Populations.” Whiteley and his graduate students will experimentally translocate small numbers of trout among isolated natural populations as a window into understanding the effects of this gene exchange.

Each year, between 350 and 400 assistant professors nationally earn CAREER grants.

UM Creates New Humanities Institute

With Montana Board of Regents approval, UM has launched a Humanities Institute to generate greater opportunities for humanities study. The new institute is led by faculty members and structured to benefit student and faculty research.

“The creation of the Humanities Institute signals (UM’s) historic commitment to scholarship in the humanities,” says Nathaniel Levtow, who serves as the institute’s first director. “The Humanities Institute will be an important site and source of support for individual and collaborative research projects in the humanities at the University.”

Drawing on UM’s rich tradition of teaching and scholarship in the humanities, and funded primarily by grants, private donations and the Office of Research and Creative Scholarship, the institute aims to foster provocative thinking, innovative research and sustained public discussion of the human experience in all its complexity.

This mission encompasses traditional liberal arts disciplines including history, languages, literature, philosophy and religious studies, as well as humanistic work that crosses disciplinary boundaries or develops new approaches to related fields.

“Until now, UM has lacked a common space and visible forum for

History and political science Assistant Professor Eric Schluessel delivers the first installment of the institute’s New Faculty Lecture Series in February.



the development and presentation of cross-disciplinary humanities research on campus,” Levtow says. “The Humanities Institute will promote faculty scholarship and offer the entire University community and the greater public a way to connect with ideas and initiatives generated every day in UM’s many humanities departments and related programs in the arts and sciences.”

Scientists Earn Grant to Investigate Heat Trapped in Greenland’s Snow Cover

A new \$1.54 million grant from the National Science Foundation will fund UM geoscientists as they study the deep layer of compacted snow covering most of Greenland’s ice sheet.

Lead investigator **Joel Harper** and co-investigator **Toby Meierbachtol**, both from UM’s Department of Geosciences, received \$760,000 for the research at UM and \$400,000 for chartering aircraft. A collaborator at the University of Wyoming also received \$380,000 for the project.

The research will investigate the development of the snow layer covering Greenland as it melts during the summer months. Meltwater percolates into the



underlying snow and refreezes to form deep layers of ice. The melting absorbs heat from the atmosphere, and the refreezing releases the heat into the ice sheet.

The icy snow builds up over years to form

a layer of compacted dense snow called firn, which can reach up to 90 meters thick. The firn is a key component of the ice sheet; as its porous structure absorbs meltwater, it changes ice sheet elevation through compaction and influences heat exchanges between the ice sheet and the climate system.

Little is known about the firn layer’s structure, temperature or thickness. The project will quantify the structural and thermal frameworks of Greenland’s firn layer by drilling boreholes through it to conduct measurements and experiments deep within the layer. The researchers also have designed a new type of drill for the project.



Christina Yoshimura

New Work Helps Counsel Sexual Assault Survivors

A UM communication studies faculty member is drawing national attention for her approach to incorporating research in interpersonal communication with the delivery of mental health services to sexual assault survivors.

The research of communication studies Associate Professor **Christina Yoshimura** focuses on how personal relationships intersect with larger systems, such as health care or the workplace. Yoshimura also volunteers as a clinical mental health counselor at UM’s Curry Health Center Counseling Services in order to bring research out of academia and into the daily lives of students at UM.

In 2013, UM received a federal grant to better address sexual assault on campus. Yoshimura joined a team at Counseling Services tasked with ensuring that sufficient services were available and appropriate for survivors of sexual assault. Yoshimura specifically worked to incorporate communication studies principles and theories into her therapeutic work with survivors of sexual assault and other forms of interpersonal violence.

“We found that engaging verbal and nonverbal practices of strategic accommodation and divergence from clients were useful elements in building a trauma-informed approach to client care,” she says. •



Novelist and UM
Professor Kevin
Canty at his home
writing station

ARISE, WRITERS!

For this English professor, teaching and writing novels feed each other

The way Kevin Canty sees it, if you don't really want to write – that is, if you won't sit down and commit to it – there's nothing he can do to make you better. And if you don't read other people's writing, your own writing will fall flat.

"That's the ironclad law of the universe," says the University of Montana fiction professor. "If you don't read, you don't know where the target is."

Beyond those basic tenets, Canty says, teaching students in a writing program is a strange endeavor that requires creative and varied approaches.

"Bill Kittredge said in an interview once that teaching creative writing was the only profession made up entirely of tips," Canty says. "It's kind of true. When someone comes to me, my advice is always super specific to

whatever is going on in their story."

Canty is a renowned author with four novels and three short-story collections under his belt, plus pieces in high-profile publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *GQ* and *The New York Times Magazine*. He started teaching at UM in 1995 and currently facilitates writing workshops in both undergraduate and graduate programs.

His latest novel, "The Underworld," is based loosely on a real event: a disastrous fire that erupted in an Idaho silver mine in the 1970s. It's the first novel Canty ever has done research on, though some of the details are plucked from his own experience working near the mining town in his younger years.

Canty sees his role in writing workshops as a coach rather than teacher. What he's

mastered over the years is how to ask the right questions of his students – the kind of questions that unlock key aspects of a story, jar them loose and help them come into focus.

Ben Fowlkes, who now writes for *USA Today*, was included along with Canty in the 2015 *Best American Short Stories* anthology. But back in 2006, when he was a student in Canty's class, he navigated his short stories through those questions Canty liked to ask.

"I remember him saying, 'Is this a story or is this a situation?'" Fowlkes says. "Or he'd look at the action your main character was taking and say, 'What kind of person does this?' Then you'd realize you didn't know because you hadn't thought to ask, and that's why the character didn't feel fully developed yet."

The connection between what happens in a writing workshop and how it plays out in Canty's own writing provides a way for students to understand the craft.

"It really helped that you could see him applying that in his own work," Fowlkes says. "He'd sometimes hold up a story and ask, 'Does this world feel as big as the one we know?' That's a high bar to clear in fiction, but he consistently does it. The worlds of his novels feel rich and complex and fully fleshed out."

Canty's path to becoming a writer involved back roads and side treks. He initially came to Missoula in 1972 from Washington, D.C., to go to college. He took poetry classes at the time, studying under esteemed professors Madeline DeFrees and Richard Hugo.

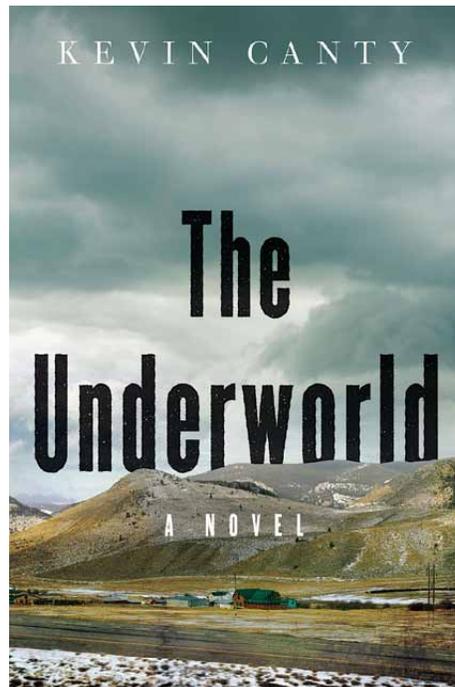
"I was no poet. I managed to prove that," he says. "I sort of slipped sideways into the fiction classes."

Acclaimed author William Kittredge often allowed undergrads to sit in on his graduate workshops, and Canty took advantage of the opportunity. Still, he didn't have much focus for school, so in the summer of 1973 he traded in the classroom for some real-world experience, working for the Milwaukee Railroad in Avery, Idaho. During his time there, he met people with friends and family who had perished in the mine fire. Writing "The Underworld" was an exercise in remembering this time: the songs on the radio station, the old highway through Wallace and the warehouses still in operation even up through the 1980s.

For a long time he didn't go back to school. He played music and worked for the U.S. Forest Service, but after he turned 30 he had a moment of reckoning. "I realized I wasn't going to be in my 20s again, and if I wanted to be a writer I needed to do it now," he says.

After finishing his UM undergrad degree, he went on to get two graduate degrees, an M.A. in English at the University of Florida and an MFA in fiction at the University of Arizona. He taught two years in Wilmington, North Carolina, before a job opened up at UM and he returned to Missoula.

Canty got his first real break during his



The cover of Canty's latest novel

second year of grad school at the University of Arizona. One of his workshop professors, well-known author Joy Williams, had taken an assignment in Africa with *Outside* magazine. She asked her husband, L. Rust Hills, the fiction editor for *Esquire*, to fill in during her absence.

"He saw one of my stories in a workshop and basically ran it in the summer fiction issue of *Esquire*," Canty says. "My first published story, in *Esquire*. So when my students ask me, 'How does this work?' I just tell them to get as lucky as possible as often as possible."

Luck is just the ticket through the door, though. Habit is what has kept Canty going. Every morning he wakes up, reads *The New York Times* and gets a bite to eat. But he's at his desk writing within 45 minutes or an hour. He ignores the outside world – emails, bills – until he's done. This is the kind of wisdom he passes onto his students.

"The good news and the bad news about writing is the same news, which is that everything is soluble in work," he says.

In his undergraduate classes, Canty

sometimes gets the chance to watch a writer blossom from raw talent.

"You can sometimes be the first to put the sword on that person's shoulder and say, 'Arise! You are now a writer,'" he says.

In graduate classes, students are more polished and focused – and even then it's still about jumping into the deep end. Canty teaches a class in which students work toward writing an entire novel in one semester. It's a lofty goal, but the real value is the marathon-like exercise and the conversation that develops.

"The workshop itself is smarter than anyone in the workshop," he says. "The ideas are kicking around, and everyone's feeding off each other, and we're all leaving the workshop with ideas we didn't have when we started."

Even then, Canty says, graduate classes end up being launchpads for the real work that happens later when writers go out into the world.

"Like all really great writing teachers, Kevin taught us about life and humanity as much as about plot and character," says former student Sarah Aswell, who now writes comedy pieces and has appeared in *McSweeney's* and *The New Yorker*. "Years later, I apply a lot of his lessons to my life as well as my writing. For example, when creating characters, 'find the virtue of their faults' – in other words, remember that the things that make us special are often born from our imperfections."

There's sometimes a sense in the writing world that academia takes away from a writer's time to create, but Canty doesn't see it that way. The conversations his students start in a classroom often reveal a solution to a problem he's dealing with in his own writing. It keeps him challenged and it gives him hope.

"To watch people go out into the world and succeed and have fulfilling lives and do fulfilling work," he says, "that is a pleasure of working with people who are at a really pivotal point in their lives." •

BY ERIKA FREDRICKSON



Montana Rep cast members hike part of the Great Wall. (Photo by James Drysdale)

MONTANA REP — continued from front

Colony summer playwriting festival as a high schooler and later became a part of the Montana Rep. When asked by Johnson to tour with “To Kill a Mockingbird,” Solonar says she was ecstatic, flattered and grateful.

“Are you kidding me?” Solonar says. “Who would ever say no to this? It’s a Montana Rep tour, it’s international, and I get to play a sort of lead character? Why would I say no to that?”

Solonar says the rehearsals are fun and quite the experience when all kinds of people come together to create art. Working with the professional actors especially has been humbling but invaluable to her, she says.

Students learn a lot on the road, Johnson says. As a faculty member in UM’s College of Visual and Performing Arts, he sees firsthand the professional growth in his students.

“All the students who go out on the Rep, they come back, and they’re very different,” Johnson says.

In choosing actors to tour, Johnson also considers who will be good on the road. He says he looks for people who can help create a positive environment, because touring is hard work.

National tours usually run from the end of January to the middle of April, and everyone works as both crew members and actors every day. They spend all day setting up, usually until 5 p.m., and then have about an hour and a half to get ready for the show. They must load the truck after each performance. Working well together is essential.

During tours, the Rep has performed

everywhere from an old 1,000-seat opera house in Galveston, Texas, to a gymnasium floor in small-town Plains, Montana.

“That’s a real amazing spectrum,” Johnson says.

While on the two-week tour in Beijing, the group performed five times: twice at a high school, once at a university and two more times in the smaller inland town of Chongqing.

Although most of the audience understood English, display panels on the side of the stage explained the basics for each scene in Chinese. The play is featured in some curriculums, but Johnson says it had never been performed in China before.

Johnson says the audiences received the shows well, especially with the addition of Chinese students into the play in Beijing. Students at the Southwest University of Political Science and Law in Chongqing particularly enjoyed one of the play’s keynote scenes.

“Atticus Finch’s address to the jury outlining the importance of the justice system was met with massive applause at every performance,” Johnson says.

Starring in the role of Atticus Finch is Jeff Medley, a Missoula actor recruited by Johnson for the tour of “To Kill a Mockingbird.” Although Medley always had the desire to act, severe stage fright and a Shakespeare phobia prevented him from performing until 2008, when he landed a role in Missoula Community Theatre’s “Jesus Christ Superstar.”

“I’m 43. And I’m a late comer ... a late bloomer,” he says.

He met Johnson a year later, and when Johnson asked him to play in “To Kill a Mockingbird,” Medley says he was honored. He says playing the briefcase-carrying attorney Finch is challenging because most of the acting is word-based, rather than full of gestures.

Although he never went to school for theater, Medley says he has learned constantly while working with the students and recent theater grads in Montana Rep. And he was eager to bring a play about a small town in Alabama to the Chinese people.

“What a crazy thing to be a part of,” Medley says.

During the first stumble-through, the crew finally put together all the scenes from “To Kill a Mockingbird” in the Schreiber Gymnasium at UM.

Instead of stage lights, fluorescent bulbs beamed down from the gray, high-ceilinged room. Simple wood chairs, stools and a ladder in the center served as the only props.

Johnson cued the humming, and the strains of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” echoed throughout the space. Everyone scrambled through their scenes, with Medley’s occasional, “I’m sorry, line?”

Two weeks later, and after about a month total of practice, everyone departed for Beijing, piling into rental SUVs at 3 a.m. and driving from UM to Seattle.

The Rep was on the road again, this time to China. •

BY COURTNEY BROCKMAN

TICKET TO THE TECH SECTOR

UM-affiliated Montana Code School offers another path for students

Even the best, most accomplished, longest-tenured web developer doesn't know all there is to know about coding. The sheer volume of the internet is too great and the number of obscure issues too many for any one person to have all the answers. But great developers know how to think like coders – always learning, always seeking new solutions, and always ready to fail in their experimentation and then rebound to outflank a problem from another angle.

The Montana Code School at UM plunges would-be developers into a three-month course that demands not only 9-to-5 commitment in the classroom but another 20-plus hours of coding a week in students' "off" hours. The intensity is by design: Students not only are attempting to master a new language – they're wrestling with a new way to approach the world.

"We're really rewiring the brain," says Montana Code School Executive Director Amita Patel Greer, who is also a graduate of the school. "It's not just coding, it's learning how to fail. In general, we're not encouraged to fail, but coding is about failing, and it takes some getting used to."

Since its founding in 2015, the code school has graduated 75 students and sent 95 percent of them into the workforce – a placement rate that resonates with potential students and has an impact across the state. Employers ranging from tech companies like Bozeman's Wisetail and Missoula's Submittable to more "traditional" companies such as Partners Creative advertising agency and Livingston's Printing for Less have hired students from the school, keeping homegrown talent in Montana.

Making the choice to leave a career or put one on hold to go back to school full time is tough. But unlike hopping into a more traditional postsecondary environment, Montana Code School offers a unique path toward a different future. Still, total commitment is required.

"Students really self-select," Greer says. "They have a lot on the line financially



Amita Patel Greer leads the Montana Code School, which has produced 75 graduates for the state's tech sector since 2015.

and career-wise, and they're extremely motivated. It's great as a student, though, because the people around you are as motivated and committed as you are."

Committed, yes, but students don't normally enter with much experience. In fact, backgrounds run the gamut into some decidedly non-techy skill sets.

"Lots of people might not think they have an aptitude for coding," she says. "But we get students from all kinds of backgrounds like musicians, artists and graphic designers, which is good because coding is creative."

Jesse Sindler, 28, who graduated from Montana Code School in 2016, first heard about the program from a seatmate on a flight, and it struck a chord as a possible path forward from his job as a bike mechanic.

"I met someone involved with the school and after chatting with him realized it might be a good fit for me," he says. "The immersive learning environment seemed like it would fit my personal learning style

– like going to a foreign country to learn the language – and as an adult the three-month intensive program seemed convenient and efficient."

Motivated and creative classmates are important, as the school's approach to teaching is less of a traditional syllabus and more of a "move fast and break things"-style ethos, adhering to "agile" learning that allows tweaking as they go. Not only are students working in small groups on specific projects day in and day out, they're working with their instructors to guide content and teaching style as the three-month course progresses. At the end of each week, the class analyzes what worked well and what didn't and makes decisions as a group on how to adjust the content and delivery.

"They have a lot of say in how they want to learn," Greer says. "It makes it a wonderful experience, but it also makes it hard because they're being pushed. It's great training to work in a tech space."

CODE SCHOOL — continued next page

Research View

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CODE SCHOOL — continued from page 7

Sindler, who landed a job in Missoula with Partners Creative as a web developer, says what he learned, how he learned it and his pre-code school background mixed to build a well-rounded potential employee.

“There’s a big misconception that coding is something that only ‘smart’ people are capable of, but that’s not the case,” he says. “Coding has become a basic skill like reading or mathematics. And it becomes more useful when paired with other knowledge, experience and skill sets.”

Housed in the MonTEC business incubator building across the Clark Fork River from the main UM campus, Montana Code School enjoys a unique relationship compared to many similar programs around the country. The code school is a nonprofit organization – technically housed under MonTEC’s 501c3 status – and also enjoys UM affiliation via MonTEC’s connection to the University. It might not seem that unusual, but code schools are still such a new concept – the first one in the U.S. was founded just a few years ago – that they remain unregulated and without a means for any type of accreditation.

Lacking more formal quality control, programs like Montana Code School promote their job placement rates, community of coders and curriculum to attract students. But in a crowded marketplace, an affiliation with a respected public university lends credibility.

Coding has become a basic skill like reading or mathematics. And it becomes more useful when paired with other knowledge, experience and skill sets.

Most Montana Code School students are in their late 20s and early 30s, Greer says, and looking for a career change and a chance to break into the tech sector. They also, nearly without exception, want to stay in Montana – a boon for employers in the state who might not have the resources to woo Silicon Valley stars to Big Sky Country. And as Montana’s tech sector grows, there are more opportunities than ever for students to

launch new careers while enjoying the state’s lifestyle.

However, no coder is ever a finished product, and no matter how intense, three months at the code school isn’t enough to make someone into a full-fledged developer.

“We’re not hiding it,” Greer says. “They need more training. We tell students that they need to work for a senior developer for at least a year or so to continue honing their skills and learning. But a great thing in the tech sector is that advancement is on a fast track, so they can move up quickly.”

And as subsequent cohorts of Montana Code School graduates hit the job market and find their place in the Big Sky tech world, alumni and supporting companies expand into more than simply a pipeline of coders, but a vibrant tech community across the state. That community, in turn, will help ensure that the Montana Code School continues offering opportunities to students looking for a big change.

“Are students getting hired? Are they performing?” Greer asked. “I think we are demonstrating that, and I know our students appreciate this new path into Montana’s growing tech sector.” •

By ALEX STRICKLAND