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El Camino College | Public Relations & Marketing Department
16007 Crenshaw Blvd., Torrance, CA 90506
Contact: Ann M. Garten, Director, Community Relations
Telephone: (310) 660-3406 | E-Mail: agarten@elcamino.edu

For Immediate Release

October 16, 2012

El Camino College to Celebrate 2012 Distinguished Alumni Awards; Honorees Include NASA Astronaut, Artist, Entrepreneurs, and Singer-Songwriter

Before NASA Astronaut Edward Michael "Mike" Fincke flew on the final spaceflight of Space Shuttle Endeavour, he was a student at El Camino College.

When Astronaut Fincke was stationed at the Los Angeles Air Force Base in the early 1990s, he decided to enroll in geology classes at El Camino College. He found that he could work his studies around his schedule at the base and even found time to take courses in Japanese. He earned an associate degree in earth sciences (geology) in 1993.

An enthusiastic supporter of El Camino College – and education in general – Fincke was impressed with the academic programs and professors ECC had to offer.

“It was extremely convenient to attend El Camino College, the price is reasonable, and I could study many things,” he said. “Sure enough, when it came time for my interview with NASA, they wanted people with a background in geology. Well, I had that background, which gave me a competitive edge in the interview. The more you know, the more opportunities you have. Education enables people to reach for their dreams and do some amazing things. That’s why I am proud to say I am an El Camino College graduate.”

Astronaut Fincke is one of five El Camino College alumni to be honored at the 2012 Distinguished Alumni Awards, scheduled for 6:30 p.m. October 20 in the college’s East Dining Room. In addition to Fincke, recipients also include: Michael Lacey, business owner; Anita McLaughlin, artist/art director; Candace Messer, business owner; and Chris Montez, singer/songwriter.

ECC Distinguished Alumni have shown outstanding achievement in their chosen career, service to the community or area of endeavor, and have gained local, state, or national recognition for their involvement. Honorees were selected by a committee.

Fincke was a mission specialist on Space Shuttle Endeavour’s final spaceflight from May 16 to June 1, 2011. He has a total of 381 days, 15 hours and 11 minutes in orbit and has logged 48 hours and 37 minutes of extra-vehicular activity time on nine spacewalks. Fincke was selected by NASA in April 1996.

Among his career experience, Fincke served as the NASA International Space Station (ISS) science officer and flight engineer for ISS Expedition 9 in 2004, launching from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan. He participated in ISS Expedition 18 that culminated in 2009. For the final mission of Space Shuttle Endeavour, he and his crew delivered the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer, a state-of-the-art cosmic ray particle physics detector, to the International Space Station.

In addition to his degree from El Camino College, Fincke earned two bachelor's degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and master's degrees from Stanford University and the University of Houston, Clear Lake. He was the featured speaker at the 2005 & 2012 El Camino College Space Science Day, an event designed to inspire area youngsters about the science of space.

"It is a big honor for me to be a Distinguished Alumni of El Camino College," he said. "It made a big difference in my life. I think students should take different classes and find out what motivates them – that will take them very far. They will find the place they were supposed to be and that is the beauty of education."

El Camino College 2012 Distinguished Alumni honorees also include:

Michael Lacey opened the famed Comedy & Magic Club 34 years ago in Hermosa Beach. The iconic club is known as a mainstay in the entertainment business, featuring comics such as Jerry Seinfeld, Ray Romano, Robin Williams, and Howie Mandel, who say the club is like a second home. Jay Leno appears at The Comedy & Magic Club every Sunday. Lacey has spent his career not only entertaining countless audiences, but also dedicates much of his time to charity benefits and raising tens of thousands of dollars a year for various causes.

Anita McLaughlin is an artist and owner of Artopolis Design. She designs and directs the art for video games, focusing on the young player and casual gamer. McLaughlin previously worked as the senior artist for Disney Interactive Studios, where she worked on the visuals for games such as "Phineas & Ferb," "Club Penguin," and a variety of Pixar titles, including "Toy Story," "Cars," "The Incredibles," and "Finding Nemo." She earned an associate degree from ECC, as well as bachelor's and master's degrees in fine art from Otis College of Art and Design.

Candace Messer is a successful entrepreneur and active community volunteer. She runs her own business, Affordable Bookkeeping & Payroll, while also contributing to numerous community causes such as Walk with Sally, Networking Matters, and the American Business Women's Association, where she works to raise funds for scholarships. She is also active in the Torrance Chamber of Commerce. Messer earned an associate degree from ECC and a bachelor's degree in business management from California State University, Dominguez Hills.

Chris Montez is a chart-topping singer-songwriter who achieved worldwide recognition in the 1960s and 1970s with hits such as "Call Me," "Let's Dance," and "The More I See You." He graduated from Hawthorne High School, and attended El Camino College. In 1963, Montez co-headlined a European concert tour with fellow American Tommy Roe, featuring an opening act by a new group from England called The Beatles. Montez continues to perform across the U.S. and abroad with legendary acts such as Bobby Vee, The Chiffons, and Johnny Preston.

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