Like many returning-adult students, Bridget Byrne is determined to get the most out of her Middlesex experience. The 40-year-old Littleton resident is excelling in her STEM (science, technology, engineering & math) coursework, is a Supplemental Instruction Leader helping other students in Engineering courses, is active in the STEM Club, and has been named 2018-19 Student Trustee by the MCC Board of Trustees.

“This is my time and I’m going to make the most of it,” said Byrne. “Older students are driven, we speak up in class and we do our homework. Plus, we learned long ago it’s not the end of the world if you don’t get every answer right.”

Single mother with a 13-year-old daughter, Byrne earned a bachelor’s degree in anthropology from Smith College. “I studied anthropology and archaeology – especially material culture of the Eastern seaboard. I always wanted to work with objects and study how people interact with their stuff.”

Before graduating in 1999 – and after taking a “Chemistry of Art Materials” course – she began working part time for a conservator and fell in love with the field. “I learned everything on the job, it was 100 percent hands-on training. In the conservation/restoration world, we share everything. The ultimate goal is to best preserve the item.”

After graduation, Byrne continued working with her mentor, then went out on her own. She has run Byrne Restoration for almost 20 years. “I restore furniture, and also work on historic homes and church organs. My specialty is finishes and painted surfaces.”

Over the years, in addition to restoring countless objects for private clients, Byrne has worked for Historic New England, on Concord’s Col. James Barrett House, and served as curator of a small museum on New Hampshire’s Star Island. But once her daughter was born, traveling for work became a challenge.

Ready for a change – and a more predictable income – Byrne enrolled at MCC in 2017. Always drawn to math and science, she decided to pursue a degree in Chemical Engineering, to help with her goal of developing her own, less-toxic conservation compounds.

“In restoration, we do lots of testing and sampling, which involves mixing together different – often toxic – products to come up with the best solutions for a particular job. You’re basically doing chemistry lab work. I wanted to go back to school to learn how to do that lab work the right way.”

However, after exploring other STEM fields, Byrne realized she prefers the hands-on, problem-solving aspects of biotechnology. She is now pursuing a Biotechnology Technician Certificate and expects to graduate in May 2019.

Returning to college after a 20-year lapse has been challenging at times, but Byrne has persevered. “School has changed so much! I took drafting in high school and it was all done by
Always drawn to STEM fields of study, returning-adult student Bridget Byrne discovered she likes the hands-on, problem-solving aspects of biotechnology.

“That’s one of the things I really like about MCC – nobody is caught up in age. You can learn a lot from different people, no matter how old they are.”

– Bridget Byrne
Biotechnology Technician Certificate
Student Trustee

hand. Now it’s all done with computers and AutoCAD.

“My restoration workshop is set up like it’s from the 1700s. It’s so old school – I do everything by hand. Going from that world to taking an online course was pretty scary at first. But I went from being horrified to really loving it.”

And she continues to catch up quickly. “In class I’ve learned to sit between younger students who already know a lot about the latest technology so I can ask them questions. And they ask me for ‘Mom’ advice,” she said, laughing.

Another thing Byrne discovered is how much she enjoys MCC’s many extracurricular activities. “I never imagined I’d get so involved on campus,” she said. “As an adult student, I thought I’d just go to class, then go home and do my homework.”

It all started when she joined STEM Club. “One of my friends asked if I’d join because she was the only female.” Byrne is now vice president and there are three women in the club. During spring semester, the club designed and built a prototype of a wind turbine using 3-D printers. They hope to ultimately have it installed on campus.

She also took part in last spring’s Diversity Summit – a weekend retreat organized by the International & Multicultural Office – which she found exceptionally rewarding. And she accepted the nomination to become new Student Trustee.

Byrne’s goals as a trustee include improving communication between the board and students, and hopes to make studying at Middlesex even more conducive for students of all ages.

“That’s one of the things I really like about MCC – nobody is caught up in age,” said Byrne. “You can learn a lot from different people, no matter how old they are.”

– Kathy Register