

Student profile for *Metro Magazine*, alumni magazine for Metropolitan State College of Denver. Spring 2007 issue. Copyright 2007 Metropolitan State College of Denver.

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Growing a Life

By Julie Lancaster

Over the past two years, biology major Mitch Hall has wrought a quiet transformation in a little-known part of the Auraria Campus.

Most people don't even know there is a greenhouse on the third floor of the Science Building, although it's clearly visible from street level. Shared by Metro's and UCD's Biology Departments, the greenhouse wasn't much to brag about until recently. It had fallen into neglect after years of sometimes-haphazard student care.

Working 12 hours per week as a student hourly, Hall took on the challenge and set about cleaning out dead plants, transferring live ones from plastic pots to terra cotta, expanding the collection and coaxing near-dead specimens back to life. On more than one occasion he's fished apparently dead office greenery out of campus dumpsters, brought the plants into the greenhouse and revived them.

"I can't help it," he says, as he ushers a visitor into the greenhouse. "I can't stand to see plants die."

One testimony to his efforts is a 20-ft. Norfolk Island pine in the corner—an "old man of the greenhouse" that has been there, as far as Hall knows, since the early days of the campus. When Hall started, he says, the tree was almost completely bare of foliage. Now lush and healthy, it towers over plants ranging from cacti to rare cycads, from orchids to hibiscus, and from student experiments (think corn and beans) to faculty research in plant genetics.

He has created a database of the 260-plus species in Metro's official collection. Neatly laminated tags identify each plant by family, genus, species and common name. Extra plants go to the Biology Club to sell.

Gifted as he is with plants, Hall has other irons in the fire. For starters, he's married, with five children, ranging from a 27-year-old to 11-year-old twins. Besides his biology course load (botany emphasis), his minor is secondary education. This semester's projects include an 80-hour internship at Skinner Middle School and student teaching elsewhere.

"I want to be a junior high school teacher," he says. "There's something about kids of that age—they're a challenge. Not brats, but spirited. They're still moldable."

Teaching won't be Hall's first career. He grew up in Ohio, earned a degree in electronics engineering from REST Technical Center there and came to Denver in 1980. He ran his own business for many years designing and creating communications systems for hospitals.

In 1994 he was diagnosed with Von Hippel-Lindau (VHL) disease, a genetic condition involving abnormal growth of blood vessels in certain parts of the body. Symptoms differ widely, but for Hall the disease is marked by tumors in the central nervous system and he has had many surgeries, which pose a real challenge with his school and other commitments. He

admits he pushes himself very hard. Although he walks short distances, he uses a wheelchair to get around campus.

Hall's enthusiastic guide dog, Whiplash, accompanies him everywhere. She is part golden retriever, part something unknown—maybe bulldog—and quite protective.

"I've been training Whiplash for six months," he says. "Now she's about 2½ years old. She has her moments. I recently flew back to Ohio for a funeral and she flew with me. You should have seen her with the airport security people."

Hall glances up at the greenhouse window, where a passer-by in the classroom hallway has stopped and is peering in.

"I've noticed a big change in the people in this building," he says. "There's a lot more to see in here now. Working in the greenhouse is definitely a labor of love."