

Sally Thompson

Associate Professor, Civil & Environmental Engineering, Berkeley University, USA.



Quintilian Alumni Sally Thompson at a field site in Yosemite National Park.

When did you graduate from Quintilian?

At the end of Year 3 - 1988!

Where do you live now?

Berkeley, California. That's about 10 km away from San Francisco City - when I take the dog walking I stare straight out to the Pacific Ocean through the Golden Gate Bridge. That view still makes me pinch myself!

What do you do in your profession?

There are 2 parts of my profession - on the one hand I'm a "Professor" at a university here in Berkeley. With that hat on, I do research, teaching and work in the administration of my academic department and the university. The other part of my profession is that I'm an "environmental engineer" - specifically a hydrologist. Environmental engineers work to provide people with things like clean water and sanitation, clean air and waste disposal. Hydrologists study the water cycle and try to make predictions about what water will do - are we at risk of floods or droughts? will there be enough water to keep plants and water-living animals alive? is there enough water in a river to use it to e.g. make electricity? is there a risk of chemicals getting into water supplies? These are the kinds of questions that hydrologists try to answer. So most days I'm teaching, chatting to students, marking tests and sitting on committees -- but the stuff I'm thinking about is water in the environment.



Yosemite National Park, USA.

How did you end up becoming an Associate Professor in Civil and Environmental Engineering?

By accident! I was originally an engineer in Perth, and decided to do a PhD to make my company realize that they needed to give me more interesting work! As I was figuring out where to do that PhD, a friend sent me an advertisement for a scholarship called the **General Sir John Monash Award**, which would allow me to study overseas. I applied, got the scholarship, and started research at Duke University in North Carolina. (If you know where New York city is - head south, past Washington DC, and you'll get to the state of North Carolina.

No one in Australia had any idea where I was going when I went there!). In a PhD you mostly do scientific research, and it turns out that I'm pretty good at that and enjoy it a lot, so by the end of my studies I was getting a lot of encouragement to look for a job in a university. I hoped to move back to Australia and actually had taken a job at a university in Sydney when a position opened up at Berkeley - which is the best university in the US to do environmental engineering work. I never expected they'd hire



Looking out across the SF Bay to the Golden Gate Bridge from the Berkeley campus. The pointy building at the front of the image is the Berkeley Campanile (bell tower). I think its the third highest belltower in the world (sorry Richard Court!). The students here make a joke to unsuspecting tourists that in the event of a major earthquake it is designed to fall over and slide down the hill towards the bay, providing a convenient means of escape for anyone who can clamber onto it. I'm yet to see a tourist believe this story, but I always enjoy overhearing it.

me - but they did! - and I've been here for 6 years now. The people I get to work with here at Berkeley are amazing - I still can't believe how fortunate I am to be able to do my work in this community of thinkers and doers.

What makes you excited about going to work each day?

Some days I know we're going to do something really fun and thought provoking in class.

Some days I know I'm going to learn something really new and exciting from our research.

Some days there's cake in the coffee room (I can get pretty excited about cake).

Not every day, but some days, work involves wading through a pristine river, camping in the mountains or spending a day in a vineyard in the Napa Valley as we start to measure what's going on with water in those places. Those days are definitely exciting (especially when there's a bear or mountain lion in the area).

Just about every day I'm excited to spend time with the students who do their research with me. They're positive, diverse, brilliant and genuinely good people. They are the absolute best thing about my job.

What are some of your fondest memories of Quintilian?

When we got the first bus! It was a surprise for all the kids - we drove to Shenton Lake for an outing. The bus had a "new car" smell and the seats were all soft and clean. I'm sure they didn't stay that way for long. Once we had the bus we went out for at least one excursion every week. I've still got a book of photos (somewhere) that we made after a Pre-Primary visit to a farm. The teachers must have been exhausted, but the kids were exhilarated.

When we got to start learning science - we started by learning about electricity. I felt so grown up learning how the electric circuit we had worked to turn a light globe on and off. We were so excited to start learning that stuff.

Bush dances with the Mucky Duck bush band. But I think every kid at school in Perth in the 1980s probably has fond memories of a bush dance with the Mucky Duck bush band, those guys got around!

Not a memory, but one of the best things I have taken with me from

Quintilian is the friendship of my Pre-Primary and Year 1 teacher, Yvonne Moore. I just saw Yvonne at my brother's wedding - she still hangs out with my mum and we catch up when I get back to Perth. She's a beacon of warmth and goodness, and how amazing that she's still in our lives after more than 20 years

What would you say to children learning at Quintilian today?

Quintilian makes learning fun. Hold onto that fun and you'll be enjoying yourself for your whole life.



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