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 46°F
Light Rain

tomorrow
 High **68°F**
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Racecar Driver Looks Beyond Labels

Environmental Advocate With Ironic Day Job Addresses BC Students

Posted: February 2, 2012
By JEREMY HUNT

BRIDGEWATER — When marketing agents told Leilani Munter she couldn't be both an environmental advocate and a racecar driver, her reaction was the same as being told she couldn't be a pro racer because she was a woman.

"I said, 'Screw you. Watch me,'" the 35-year-old Charlotte, N.C., resident told about 100 Bridgewater College students Wednesday night.

Munter, who races in the development leagues of NASCAR and IndyCar, discussed her role as an environmental advocate with an ironic day job.

Sports Illustrated has named her as one of the Top 10 female racecar drivers.

When she decided to speak out on environmental issues in 2007, marketers advised her against doing so, saying she'd sour sponsors against her.

Fans of NASCAR and other high-octane racing circuits aren't exactly the "green" type, Munter acknowledges.

Not to mention the tree-hugging hippies that she identifies herself with aren't usually racing fans, either.

ESPN The Magazine previously described Munter, who adopts an acre of rain forest for every race she participates in, as an oxymoron.

But therein lies the opportunity, she says.

Munter sees herself as a kind of bridge between the two worlds.

Thomas Rawls, vice president of sales and marketing for NativeEnergy, broached this subject after a customer criticized the Vermont-based company for sponsoring Munter.

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“Anyone who is engaged in any broad effort to speak to the public faces this question: Do I talk only to friendly audiences, or do I face the doubters and the hostiles?” Rawls wrote on a blog run by NativeEnergy, which offers products to help companies offset their carbon use.

“If we only address those who already agree with us, nothing changes,” wrote Rawls, who Munter quoted at Wednesday’s lecture at BC.

Munter encourages her fans to make small changes in their lives to reduce their effect on the environment, such as using canvas bags instead of grocery bags and using energy-efficient light bulbs.

She also lobbies members of Congress on environmental issues.

It’s a mistake, she says, to dismiss racing fans as incapable of, or even hostile to, helping solve the ecological problems of the world.

With 75 million NASCAR fans in the U.S., it’s a constituency to be reckoned with.

“Just because these fans love racing doesn’t mean they don’t care about the Earth,” she said.

Munter says she’ll always have critics in both extremes — racing fans who can’t get over her eco-activism and environmentalists who object to her racing — but most people don’t fit into those categories.

“The majority of people fall in the middle,” she said, “and those are the ones I will be able to reach.”

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