

ACSA Every Student Succeeding Program

Student Story Archives

1996

Region 1

Monica Sanchez

Red Bluff High, Red Bluff Union HSD

Intelligent and sensitive, Monica Sanchez is a natural leader. Two years ago, she used her leadership skills to recruit and mold members of a local female gang.

In the last year as a peer counselor and advisor, she used her influence to positively affect other girls, helping them to stay in school and out of trouble.

Monica, a 1996 graduate of Red Bluff High School, is ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Recognition program winner for Region 1. The program commends students for overcoming extraordinary odds to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who helped them. Monica's support team included Red Bluff High principal Joe Pelanconi, associate principals Rick Prestwood and Bob Bryson, high school counselor Jose "Pep" Roa and Chico State University's talent search counselor Doyle Lowry.

At the beginning of high school, Monica was involved with a local Red Bluff gang whose members were in constant contact and conflict with young women from nearby Corning. Monica had no use for school.

A community effort involving parents, law enforcement officers, probation officials and school staff helped Monica to change. The officials met with parents to help them understand gangs and convince them of the need to work together to help their children. And they met with students involved with gangs or at risk for joining them to show them positive alternatives.

Red Bluff High staff, including Pelanconi, Prestwood, Bryson and Roa, met with Monica to discuss the need for her to make difference choices and to explain the consequences of her behavior. They also told her about the opportunities that awaited her, if she made other choices. Roa, her counselor, met with her individually many times to give her support. She also received help from student support groups and peer counseling. Lowry, the Chico State University talent search counselor, meanwhile, showed her how to further her education after high school.

"Slowly, Monica began to discover who she was," Bryson wrote in an essay nominating Monica for the Every Student Succeeding award.

In her senior year, Monica carried a 3.25 grade-point average in college prep classes and became a peer counselor. She organized numerous support group meetings to help other students, and now she plans to attend college and pursue a career in education or counseling.

"She has been a great asset to her school. She understands what she was, and who she is now," Bryson said. "Certainly, she has had a great deal of help; unlike many others, though, she has taken advantage of this help and support."



Region 2

Sara Davila

Transitional Learning Center, South Tahoe High, Lake Tahoe USD

In her junior year at South Tahoe High School, Sara Davila was heading toward becoming another high school dropout statistic. She paid little attention to her studies, became pregnant and finally stopped attending classes.

Yet after her daughter was born in her senior year, Sara managed to steer herself onto a successful course, despite the challenges of attending school and raising a child.

Sara is Region 2's winner of ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Recognition award, which honors students who conquer extraordinary challenges to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who helped them. Her support team included staff members of Lake Tahoe Unified School District's Transitional Learning Center; Aaron Barnett, counselor; Geniene Newport, program coordinator of the Young Parents Project; Sharon Urban, Independent Studies Center director; Jim Stevens, alternative education principal; and Tara Tibbetto, bilingual teacher.

Sara enrolled at South Tahoe High School as a freshman just after immigrating to the United States from Mexico. She had limited English proficiency, but bilingual teachers learned she was highly motivated to overcome the obstacle.

For more than a year Sara devoted herself to her studies and improved her English language skills. But her efforts were interrupted when her family relocated to Florida. They returned to California the next semester, however, and Sara enrolled again at South Tahoe High School. But her attitude had changed. She was behind in credits, and was less motivated. She began to work part-time and lose interest in her school work.

After she became pregnant, the bilingual faculty, along with counselors, teachers, parents and classmates, urged her to stay in school. Sara stopped attending, though, until what should have been her senior year. The decision to return to school came from Sara's own personal drive. After her daughter was born, she got a glimpse of the reality of trying to support a child and having no high school diploma. Having realized the value of education, Sara enrolled at Lake Tahoe Unified School District's Transitional Learning Center, where she threw herself into her studies with zeal.

"She was very, very determined to finish school," recalled Geniene Newport, program coordinator of the Young Parents Project. "She was determined to provide the best possible future for her child and for herself."

Sara pulled her grades up to mostly A's and B's. While she studied full-time, her daughter attended the South Tahoe High School Nursery. She completed her senior project on infant and prenatal care and presented her findings in English to a panel.

Sara plans to continue her education at a community college. "She'll do very very well," Newport said. "She's just neat kid-and she's an excellent mother."



Region 3

Allegra Pickett

Highlands High, Grant HSD

Categorizing Allegra Pickett according to her accomplishments at Highlands High School would be impossible. The May graduate was both a cheerleader captain and a varsity athlete; a science Olympiad and a class president; a newspaper correspondent and a member of a missionary group. The list goes on and on.

"She is a most well-rounded student," said Constance Farias, former Highlands principal. "She always seems to accomplish what she sets out to do."

Because of her well-rounded involvement and dedication, Allegra was chosen the Region 3 winner of ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Recognition award. The award honors students who beat the odds to succeed and recognizes the educators who supported them. Allegra's support team included Farias and Roberta Mayor, Grant Joint Union High School District's assistant superintendent of instruction.

Farias said Pickett was willing to work the extra hours required to get the most out of her four years in high school, and she served as a role model for other students. "She has shown a willingness to work with others and can be counted on as a team player in addition to maintaining top academic grades in challenging courses," she wrote in a letter nominating Allegra for the honor.

Allegra was a visible student leader. She was president of her freshmen, sophomore and junior classes. In her senior year, she served as president of the entire student body as well as chairing the Grant district's Advisory Council of Students. As council chairperson, she attended the district's Board of Trustee meetings twice monthly and provided trustees with updates of student activities and concerns.

"She was respected by her peers as well as school faculty members and other students throughout the district," Farias said.

Besides serving students as a whole, Allegra helped students one-on-one by providing peer counseling and peer tutoring and participating in the University of California at Davis's Early Outreach. Meanwhile, she was a member of the California Scholarship Federation, Who's Who Among American High School Students, the Law Team, the National Society of Black Engineers and Math Engineering and Science Achievement. She was also a 1995 Alpha Kappa Alpha Debutante and a Sacramento Link's Escort and she participated in the Air Force ROTC Summer Program.

In sports, she was active both on and off the field. She was captain of the freshman and junior varsity cheerleading squads, co-captain of the varsity cheerleading squad and a member of the varsity song squad. Meanwhile, she played freshmen, junior varsity and varsity basketball and junior varsity softball, and she made the varsity track team three years.

Allegra's involvement wasn't limited to school. She was a cheerleading coach three years for California Youth Football. She worked 140 hours as a Traveler's Aid receptionist and was active in Acteens Missionary Group and UNICEF for California Youth Federation.

"Allegra Pickett is an outstanding student, bright, articulate and extremely personable," Mayor wrote in Allegra's nomination for the ACSA award.

Allegra now is a premed student at the University of California at Berkeley.



Region 4

Celina Young

Rancho Cotati High, Cotati-Rohnert Park SD

As a young girl taking dance lessons, Celina Yong was inspired by her dance instructor's constant encouragement, "Never give up on your dreams."

Now as a teen-ager Celina gives the same message to the young dance students she coaches and mentors.

"Everything given to her, she gives back," says Jeannette Anglin, director of secondary education for Santa Rosa City Schools. "She just blooms where she's planted and makes the best of everything."

Celina's remarkable achievements and focus on helping others earned her ACSA 's Every Student Succeeding Recognition award for Region 4. The award honors students who overcame obstacles to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who supported them. Celina's support team included the late Anita Kane, former director of the Anita Kane Ballet Company; Bud Shirley, her history teacher at Mountain Shadows Middle School; her parents, Mr. and Mrs. David Yong; and Anglin.

Celina has been an outstanding, active student since she moved to California from Canada in the second grade. She earned a 4.8 grade point average and ranked No. 1 in her junior class for the 1995- 1996 school year at Rancho Cotati High School in Rohnert Park. But what most impressed Anglin was Celina 's giving spirit. Many students join groups and volunteer so they can get into good colleges, Anglin noted. But Celina, she said, truly strives to help others.

As a volunteer at Kaiser Hospital, she worked in the emergency care center, making follow-up calls on new mothers and shadowing doctors as they made their rounds. Celina hopes to one day be a medical doctor. The Sonoma County Medical Association chose her to be a member of the medical mentorship program, which supports young women wanting a career in the medical field.

Last summer, she was selected from a pool of 60 applicants to be a teen reporter for the Channel 50 news. Each week she profiles a teen who is making a difference in the community. Her goal, Celina told Anglin, is to inspire other young people to volunteer so they can help others.

She also serves as a junior commissioner on the Sonoma County Status of Women Commission, planning activities to help girls achieve their goals, and she was a featured speaker at Sonoma State University's "Expanding Your Horizons" workshop. Celina said she wants to motivate other young women to reach for high goals.

She has taken dance lessons since she was 5 and piano since she was 6. She earned the Certificate of Merit for piano by the county Music Teachers Association and the rank of Distinction for four years by the London Royal Academy of Dancing. Now as captain of the Anita Kane Ballet Company, she helps other young girls choreograph and arrange performances.

As a student leader, Celina has taken an active role in shaping her school. She has served on the student council for seven years and was a member of a committee that studied the pros and cons of block scheduling. She is also a member of the School Site Council and served on a study committee to determine the potential for becoming an International Baccalaureate school. She also planned the "Light Up the Night" program, which acquaints younger students with the high school and its programs.

She is president of the California Scholastic Federation, the biggest club on campus, and has helped raise thousands of dollars for graduating seniors. She also represented her school as ambassador to the Hugh O'Brien Leadership conference.

As one of the school 's conflict managers, meanwhile, she helps students resolve conflicts and trains others to be managers. She also writes for the Sports and Scholars magazine, which is distributed to every student in the county. Celina is nothing if not well-rounded. She is first chair flautist in the school 's symphonic and concert band, serves on the band's executive committee and is captain of the Rancho Cotati Drill Team. And on top of everything else, she won the title of Rohnert Park's Junior Miss and will attend the state



Region 5

Samantha Kelly

San Mateo High, San Mateo Union HSD

Living in a three-bedroom apartment with her mother, grandmother, sister and two brothers, Samantha Kelly didn't get much space or privacy to study. She shared a bedroom with her first-grade sister and helped her grandmother maintain the household while her mother worked.

Yet such responsibilities and challenges didn't keep Samantha from excelling in her classes and activities at San Mateo High School. She graduated fourth in her class this year and is on her way to college.

Samantha is the winner of ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Recognition program for Region 5. The program honors students who have succeeded in school, despite the odds against them, and recognizes the educators who supported them. Samantha's support team included Debbra Lindo, San Mateo High's assistant principal of student services; Patricia Kim, her English teacher; Gloria Chamorro, school counselor; William Bonnell, Latin teacher; and Barbara Snider, scholarship chairman.

For more than half her young life, Samantha knew no stability.

Her mother was the victim of an abusive husband, who moved the family once every year until Samantha was in the fourth grade. They were living in Ohio when the abuse began to spill over to the children and persuaded her mother to finally leave. She and the children fled to California.

Samantha attended San Mateo High almost four years, complement of Honors and Advanced Placement courses. with a 3.98 grade point average.

She maintained her high grade while fulfilling heavy responsibilities at home, where she helped her grandmother prepare meals, clean the apartment and watched the little ones. Her mother said she didn't know how they'd manage once Samantha goes off college.

Samantha gave of herself to the community as well. She tutored two children, 12 and 13, for two years and volunteers more than 200 hours at a local hospital.

At school she participated in a variety of activities, she played on the school's softball team and served as features editor for the school newspaper. She was also an active member of Interast Club, which is affiliated with Rotary International, the school's Ecology Club and the Millard Fillmore Trivia Club, which participates in a yearly countywide competition.

San Mateo High was the only school in its district to compete in the event.

Samantha was accepted to Syracuse University, the University of Indiana and American University in Washington D.C.

"How she has managed to get the grades she has in our most difficult classes and participated to the extent that she has, given the very difficult family situation she had to contend with, causes me to have the highest admiration for her and her efforts," Lindo wrote in the essay nominating Samantha for the ACSA honor. "Samantha is one who has succeeded against all odds and won my heart."

Samantha told Lindo, "I am a product of the things that have happened to me. I am comfortable with who I am."



Region 6

Patrick Male

Pleasanton Middle School, Pleasanton USD

When Patrick Male tried out for baseball, he made his parents promise not to tell the coaches his secret: Because of cancer, he had only one leg and wore a prosthetic device on the other. "If I make the team I want it to be because I'm good enough, not because they pity me," he said.

He made the team.

Patrick, who recently completed seventh grade at Pleasanton Middle School, follows the philosophy, "I'm just normal." But his extraordinary courage earned him the Every Student Succeeding Recognition award for Region 6. The award commends students who conquer challenges to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who help them. His support team included Pleasanton Middle School Principal Dr. Sally Rayhill and teachers Kristina Cramer, Pam Blinn, Chris Bufkin and Mary Johnson.

Until the third grade Patrick was fairly typical. He enjoyed school, was on the Honor Roll, played drums and guitar and was active in sports, particularly baseball. But then he and his family learned Patrick had a rare form of a cancer that would require his right leg to be amputated above the knee. Patrick maintained a remarkably positive attitude through the surgery and chemotherapy and quickly adjusted to a prosthetic device. But two years later in the fifth grade, he was dealt another blow. The cancer had returned. Doctors told Patrick he had a one in 10 chances of surviving.

"But if I'm that one," Patrick reportedly responded, "then my chances are 100 percent." He underwent a second amputation, this time up to the hip.

Most adults can recall the often excruciating self-consciousness of the early teen years when everybody wants to be like everybody else. Yet Patrick couldn't hide the fact he had cancer; besides having only one leg, he had lost his hair from the chemotherapy by the time he started the seventh grade. (The school granted his parents' request for a waiver of the rule banning hats until Patrick's hair grew back.)

Yet Patrick continues not to let his disability or illness stand in the way of success or with making friends. School staff say he is well liked and respected by classmates. He's had a strong support group of peers from the very beginning, mainly because of his positive attitude and support from his parents and school staff. After Patrick was diagnosed with cancer, his mother, Angela, visited Walnut Grove Elementary School to educate the children about the disease. ("No, it's not contagious. Yes, it's possible that he could die from it.")

Patrick doesn't seem to know the meaning of fear. After the second operation, he started a new sport—riding a mountain bike in BMX competitions. Despite his having only one leg, he won some 50 trophies, and his story was featured in two national magazines.

"I try not to worry about the future," he reportedly said. "I just want to enjoy this time."

And enjoy he does. Recently he had to use a wheelchair to get around because he broke his one leg performing daredevil flips on crutches from a ramp. He soon was showing friends how to do "wheelies" with the chair.

School is important to Patrick. When he was in the hospital, he amazed the nurses by keeping up with his homework.

"Even if you don't feel like going to school, do it," he told other patients.

"Throw up if you have to (from the chemotherapy) but get back to class. Try to make your life as normal as possible." He practices what he preaches. When he broke his leg, he missed only one day of classes.

Principal Sally Rayhill calls Patrick a hero. "He's determined not to feel sorry for himself. This is one terrific kid. It's Patrick who's special, not his handicap. He'd stand out anywhere just for the great person he is."

Pleasanton Unified School District's policy of full inclusion of students with disabilities and its emphasis on acceptance of diversity helped pave the way for Patrick's success. And his teachers went out of their way to support him. PE teacher Chris Bufkin helped Patrick develop his physical stature and musculature.



Region 7

Angelica Griego

Thomas Downey High, Modesto City Schools

In her first two years at Thomas Downey High School in Modesto, Angelica Griego earned mostly A's and B's in some of the school's toughest classes.

But pressures at home mounted during her junior year and one Sunday afternoon, she ran away.

Considering the perils that can snare young runaways, Angelica easily could have become lost forever, never to achieve her potential.

Yet through a sheer force of will Angelica instead returned to school and began paving a new path toward success. She is the winner of ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Recognition award for Region 7. The program honors students who have beaten the odds to succeed and recognizes the educators who supported them. Angelica's support team included Richard Shahbazian, Downey High's assistant principal for curriculum and instruction, John Asenjo, assistant principal for pupil personnel services; and Raquel Gutierrez, Angelica's Spanish instructor.

Since middle school, Angelica carried responsibilities beyond her years. As the eldest child in her family, she assumed the role of her late mother, who died when Angelica was in the eighth grade.

"The years of helping to raise her little brothers and sisters, keeping house and going to school took its toll," Gutierrez wrote in a nomination essay. Angelica became a teen-ager living an adult's life.

Problems developed in the relationship with her father, and Angelica decided she had to get away. Gutierrez went looking for the 17-year-old, but only succeeded in scaring Angelica's younger brothers and sisters. "I was deeply saddened she might become another unsolved statistic," she wrote.

As a runaway, Gutierrez said, Angelica didn't consult her family, friends or church for advice. Instead she spent countless idle hours thinking about what she should do. She wondered what her mother would have said and became convinced her running away would have made her mother unhappy. So after three weeks, she returned home and to school.

"The happiest day for me last semester was when Angelica sat in her seat after three long weeks. Her smile lit up the whole classroom," Gutierrez wrote.

On the home front, Angelica moved out of her father's house and in with an aunt. At school, caring teachers and administrators worked with Angelica to help her get back on track academically. Because of her absence and problems at home, Angelica failed two classes the first semester.

"Catching up was very over-whelming," Gutierrez wrote. "She says this won't stop her. She'll go to summer school and continue to work as a part-time waitress to make ends meet."

Her hard work paid off. She was able to take the Spanish Advance Placement test the second semester and bring some of her grades up to A's and B's.



Region 8

Betty Wiegant

Wilson High, Santa Clara USD

A high school diploma is a long-awaited accomplishment for most students-but few can appreciate its value more than Betty Wiegant.

The Santa Clara woman graduated from Wilson High School in June at age 84.

Her dedication showed that it's never too late to learn, and earned her Region 8's Every Student Succeeding Recognition award. The program honors students who conquered extraordinary challenges to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who helped them. Wiegant's support team included instructors Vickie Shelton, Leslye Lawler and Ed Gagliardo.

"For us, Betty is a prime example of a lifelong learner, and that's what our adult program is all about," said Rochelle Kelly, program manager of Santa Clara Unified School District's adult education. "Her perseverance has been an example to students of all ages."

Wiegant enrolled in the school's independent study program at 83 and finished the 80 credits she needed to graduate in about 16 months. She was among some 30 students in the independent study classroom and, according to her instructors, was an inspiration to students and teachers alike. Wiegant made friends with other students, who then supported and encouraged one another throughout the year.

Her family provided support as well. Her daughters brought her to class and helped go over her work. Wiegant enjoyed the American history and government classes and arts and crafts electives. The essays she wrote for her English class, meanwhile, contained so much rich history, her family had them bound in a pictorial album.

"Her work was always completed with extreme effort, and she even learned the math she was so afraid of," Shelton, her teacher, wrote in the nomination. "Her family told me she would wake up at five in the morning and start doing her homework. They had to convince her to stop and relax once in a while."

The school's Spectrum Independent Studies High School Diploma Program, in which Wiegant participated, is specially designed to meet individual students' needs. Students meet weekly with their instructors to turn in work and get assignments. They must complete at least 20 hours of work per week, a requirement that Wiegant usually exceeded. Instructors can modify the curriculum to individual students' speed and capability, but students must complete the same courses required at the regular high schools. Each teacher in the program works with about 15 students. Besides monitoring work, the instructors serve as supportive motivators and counselors when necessary.

"With Betty, this was easy for me to do," Shelton wrote. "She was always so excited to do her work, and I just kept praising her on her accomplishments and reminding her that she could do it!... Her attitude and commitment are truly an inspiration to all who know her, and we are all very proud of her accomplishments."



Region 9

Angela Counts

Chowchilla High, Chowchilla Union HSD

Three years ago in her freshman year at Chowchilla High School in Madera County, Angela Counts ditched school, failed her classes and was suspended several times for fighting.

This year in June, she graduated with a 3.9 grade-point average and acceptance to both University of California at Davis and U.C. at San Diego.

What happened in between was an amazing turn-around of a young life, a testament to the fact that no student is hopeless. Angela is Region 9's winner of ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Recognition program, which recognizes students who overcome extraordinary odds to succeed in school and the educators who helped them. Angela's support team included Bob Green, Chowchilla High principal; Harry Maddux, counselor; Linda Veatch, dean of students; Jayne Pressly, director of careers; and Jennifer Blandin, her mother.

"In all the years that I have been in education, Angela Counts is the most courageous and successful student I have had the opportunity to work with," Green wrote in the nomination essay.

Following a disastrous freshman year, the odds didn't favor Angela.

Having grown up in an environment of alcohol, drugs and abuse, her world was full of fear and chaos. Her family lived on welfare, moved frequently and had been homeless more than once. Violence at home culminated when her father shot her mother.

But thanks to support from school staff and a caring parent, Angela didn't become a victim of the hardships. After her father went to prison, her mother got a divorce and focused on giving Angela the support she needed to turn her life around.

"Even while living in a car, her mother taught her that education was the only way out," Green wrote in the nomination essay. "She wanted Angela and her two younger brothers to have the education she did not get."

Test scores showed that Angela was exceptionally bright. At the beginning of her sophomore year, school staff met with her and laid out her options. She could either work hard and go on to college. Or she could continue the course she was taking and end up on the streets. The staff vowed to support her if she chose the first option.

"She was shown she could succeed and had a God-given talent that she could use to be a valuable asset to her school, community and country," Green said.

Angela opted to succeed. For the next three years she concentrated on academics, made new friends and threw herself into school activities. She took three summers of summer school to make up her freshman credits and made the Honor Roll the last five semesters. Meanwhile, she became a devoted member of the Academic Decathlon team, practicing before and after school and on weekends and holidays. With her contribution, the team won second place two years in a row against stiff competition. In addition, she took the Golden State Examine and received recognition in both math and science.

Angela also assumed a strong leadership role. She became a peer counselor, helping other students with their problems, and an Associated Student Body commissioner. She coordinated student rallies and spirit activities throughout the school year and was responsible for the 90-second radio spots on a Fresno radio station highlighting school events.

In addition, Angela represented the high school at service clubs and was co-chairman of homecoming. She was chosen to represent the school at a leadership conference last summer at Stanford and participated in the Rotary and Lions speech contests, where she was runner-up in both.

Outside of school, Angela helped coach a Little League team.

Headed now for college, Angela's odds for success are much different than they were just three years ago. "Angela Counts is ready to meet the world of tomorrow with high self-esteem, dignity, faith and confidence," Green said.



Region 10

Michael Adams

Happy Valley Elementary, Happy Valley Union ESD

Michael Adams seemed like a typical 8-year-old boy when he registered at Happy Valley School in Santa Cruz in May 1995. He liked to ride bikes and play baseball and soccer.

Little did anyone know that in just one month his life would change forever. On June 13, Michael had a stroke, Doctors predicted he would probably never walk or talk again.

Yet within months, Michael began to prove the doctors wrong. His courageous and sometimes painful journey in the last year earned the third grader the Every Student Succeeding Recognition award for Region 10.

The award honors students who have conquered extraordinary challenges to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who supported them. Michael's support team included Cheryl Morris Brothers, Happy Valley School administrator; Dan McGuire, his third-grade teacher; Emily Richey, resource specialist; Brenda Longley, school psychologist; and Bashawn and Steve Adams, his parents.

Michael's progress has been far from easy. The stroke occurred when his left carotid artery, which carried blood to the brain, blocked and caused extensive brain damage that left him partially paralyzed and unable to talk or comprehend the written word. Few children suffer strokes, so Michael's case is quite unusual.

"Michael has a lot of challenges that he works everyday to overcome," McGuire wrote in the award nomination. "With stroke victims, every day is a new day, but not necessarily a bad day. No one really knows what Michael will do next because there's so few stroke victims his age."

Although doctors said Michael probably wouldn't walk again, he enrolled in school as planned in September, using a wheelchair and crutches to get around. He soon began walking, regaining use of his right leg and partial movement of his right arm. And he taught himself how to draw and write again with his left hand.

Now his greatest challenge is learning how to talk again Michael can string a few words together, but he can't read. He can add numbers under 10, but only when using a number line.

"Doctors are saying not to hold out hope that he'll talk again, but that is our whole focus," his mother, Bashawn Adams, reportedly said. "This is going to be a lifelong focus for him."

The third-grader attended half-days of school in McGuire's classroom, then went to therapy or home to rest. In addition to facing the challenges caused by the stroke, Michael also has diabetes, which requires him to take three daily insulin shots. Michael's physical and mental capabilities vary from day to day. The slow and sporadic progress is sometimes frustrating.

"To compound this, Michael is painfully aware that he is not functioning at the same academic level as his peer group," McGuire wrote, "Michael, like any other child, wants to be successful."

Happy Valley's resource specialists led him through difficult exercises to help him. A speech therapist programmed his laptop computer with speech augmentation systems. And the staff reintroduced reading with a system that uses symbols for words, since Michael can't yet decipher the written word.

Despite all these challenges, Michael rarely missed school. "Michael has amazed all of us as he has fought challenge after challenge," administrator Morris Brothers wrote in the nomination. "This amazing young man has brought tears to my eyes as I've observed his progress and daily victories."

Michael's parents, meanwhile, are as persistent as he is. "My goals for my children have always been that they not be a drain on society," his mother reportedly said. "My family is such a joy to me, and I want Michael to have that same chance. I always felt he was going to be a great person, and I still feel that way."

Educators who watched Michael's progress in the last year share in his parents' optimism.

According to McGuire, if tenacity and will were the prerequisites to a full recovery, Michael already would be on equal footing with his peers.

The Happy Valley staff supported Michael with a



Region 11

Donna Harvick

Lemoore High, Lemoore HSD

In the last school year, 17-year-old Donna Harvick helped the Lemoore High School girls volleyball team win the league and valley championships and maintained a B-plus average- admiral accomplishments in and of themselves. But considering the obstacles Harvick had to overcome, they're nothing short of a miracle.

Last summer, Harvick was involved in a serious accident that left her semi-comatose, partially paralyzed and suffering from memory loss. Both of her shoulders were broken and would require surgery.

But Harvick battled her way back. She is Region 11's Every Student Succeeding Recognition award winner. The award honors students who conquered extraordinary challenges and who helped them. Harvick's team included her teachers, Janice Ewing and Sandra Following the accident, Harvick's prognosis was bleak.

Doctors never thought she would able to feed herself, walk without assistance or attend school. Playing volleyball or riding horses again seemed impossible dreams.

Yet Harvick returned to school in the fall. She attended special education classes in the morning and went home at noon because she tired easily. Her resource specialist teachers supported and encouraged Harvick and made sure she was included in core curriculum courses. The school strongly supports the philosophy of inclusion.

Harvick's teachers learned she was able to remember complex algebraic skills, yet could not compute simple equations. But she could use a calculator, so she enrolled in Algebra IA.

Teachers used small group activities and chalkboard exercises to help her advance. Soon she outpaced other students in the class.

She could speak, but she expressed herself most easily in writing. She joined a regular English class working on a story writing project. Early efforts yielded frustration, but Harvick dramatically improved and learned to be more patient with herself.

Meanwhile, Harvick worked to regain her athletic abilities.

Before the accident, she was a starter and a team leader, respected by team members, opponents and coaches. After the accident, though, few thought she'd every play ball again, let alone be able to compete. Harvick had to fight the pain of playing with broken shoulders and relearn how to process information on the court. Playing was no longer instinctive. Yet although her body functioned differently after the accident, her spirit retained the fierce competitive drive it always had.

Slowly Harvick progressed with encouragement from family, friends, teammates and coaches.

"You could see the frustration in her eyes as she failed to make the routine plays she so easily made prior to her injuries," Michael Cawley, her principal, wrote in the award nomination essay. "It would have been easy for a person of lesser character to quit and say, 'Well, I tried.'"

But Harvick didn't quit. By the end of the season she had earned playing time and regained her leadership role on the team. Fed by inspiration, the team went on to become league champions, valley champions and tie for fifth in the state championships.

Meanwhile, of the three academic classes she took in the first semester, Harvick earned a B-plus average. In the second semester, she carried a full academic load with one period of assistance by resource specialists. She continued to maintain a B-plus average and will graduate from high school on time in May. She drives a car and again rides horses.

"Donna is an inspiration to anyone that is faced with what seems like insurmountable obstacles," her principal wrote.

"She is a true testament to 'Nothing is impossible.' She overcame the obstacles."



Region 12

Shazia Siddiqui

Moreno Valley High, Moreno Valley USD

Eleventh grader Shazia Siddiqui has been deaf since she was a tiny child. Yet that hasn't hampered her ability to communicate. Last school year, she was the only student from Moreno Valley High School to win a perfect score in an Academic Decathlon Team competition, an honor earned for a speech she gave.

Shazia is Region 12's winner of the Every Student Succeeding Recognition program, which honors students who conquer extraordinary challenges and recognizes the educators who help them. Her support team included Riverside County Office of Education's deaf and hard-of-hearing teacher Dianne Salyer and sign language interpreters Danny Harth, Sue Killingsworth, Janna Kuziomko and Lorena Ryle.

When Shazia was 3, her parents consulted a doctor because she didn't seem to respond normally to sounds. They learned she was deaf, but they still don't know whether she was born that way or had lost her hearing because of a high fever or illness.

"For most deaf children, the language barrier separates them further and further from the opportunities for success that a hearing person would have," Salyer wrote in the nomination essay. "The innuendoes of voice inflections, the many shades of meanings for a word used in various contexts, jokes, expressions and slang..all have to be taught."

Yet Shazia hasn't let the barriers between her and the hearing world interfere with accomplishing her goals. She was valedictorian of her eighth grade class at Alessandro Middle School and her goal is to be valedictorian of her senior class next year. In her sophomore year, she was chosen by a team of administrators and teachers to represent Moreno Valley High as an ambassador for the Hugh O'Brien Youth Leadership Seminar. She has been involved in the Science Club, the California Scholarship Federation, Interact Club, Math Club and numerous other activities. Next year, she plans to participate in a program to begin earning university credits while still in high school.

"Personally, I have never in my 27 years of teaching the deaf seen such a positive, self-motivated, self-disciplined, determined and accomplished deaf student as Shazia," Salyer wrote. "She pushes herself constantly to do the best she can."

Shazia's determination along with support from her parents and school district have been keys to her success.

Shazia moved to Moreno Valley in 1990 and entered the Riverside County Office of Education's special education program for deaf students at Alessandro Middle School. Program instructors and interpreters helped her with her speech and sign language skills. Shazia was mainstreamed full-time in both middle and high school. Sign language interpreters accompanied her to all her classes and interpreted teachers' lectures, students' comments, conversations and any other pertinent information. The Riverside County Office of Education also provided interpreters for Shazia's educational activities after school and on weekends.

In her classes, Shazia sits in front so she can see both her interpreter and the teacher. During lectures, another student takes notes for her because it's impossible to watch the interpreter and write at the same time. A closed caption machine is used if a movie is shown in class. Moreno Valley High teachers expect the same high standards of Shazia as they do other students.

"She absorbs her classroom information with zeal," Salyer wrote. "Despite the fact that she almost always gets the material a fraction of a second later than her hearing counterparts, she still excels. Her teachers are amazed by her abilities."



Region 13

Daryell Perkins

Pierpont Elementary, Ventura USD

Pierpont School Principal Lee Warner will never forget meeting fifth grader Daryell Perkins. Two boys in Daryell's class had been sent to Warner's office for getting into a heated dispute, and Daryell had come along to mediate. As one boy explained his side of the story, the other boy became increasingly irate. Very calmly, Warner recalled, Daryell turned to the boy and said, "Are you hearing what the other boy is saying? You need to be a listener." The atmosphere calmed as Daryell continued to give guidance, and the pair eventually resolved their problem.

"It just gave me chills," Warner recalled. "He seemed to have an innate instinct for resolving conflict. I went to his teacher and said, 'Who is this young man?'"

Since then Warner learned that Daryell had managed to be a successful student despite hardship. He is the Region 13 winner of ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Recognition program, which honors students who beat the odds to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who helped them. Daryell's support team included Warner and teachers Patti Gudaz and Julie Leary.

Daryell's mother was 16 and his father was 15 when he was born. As a small boy, Daryell lived with his mom in a car and showered at the beach in state park facilities while his father went to school and tried to make as much money as he could.

The family eventually found a home, but tragedy struck in another form. Shortly after Daryell was born, his mom was diagnosed with a deadly disease, in which a mass developed and slowly began to eat away her intestines and organs. Despite 10 surgeries, the mass continued to grow. She told school officials that only two other people had been diagnosed with the condition and both died. She can still walk, but doctors expect her to grow weaker. Daryell knows the seriousness of her condition. He receives comfort from his neighbors and continues to be supportive of his mom.

“This situation must have taken an unseen toll on Daryell Perkins, yet this remarkable individual is conscientious and maintains the Pierpont pride desired in all the students,” Daryell’s support team stated in the essay nominating him from the ACSA honor. “This energetic individual has captured the hearts of his teachers, the administration and support staff at Pierpont.”

Pierpont Elementary is a close-knit ocean-side school of 290 students in Ventura. The staff place high priority on teaching students how to resolve their own conflicts, Warner said, and the school’s small size helps induce a spirit of cooperation.

Daryell has excelled in other areas besides conflict management. He was a straight-A student, and he won awards in science. He was also awarded the “Star of the Week” ribbon for demonstrating good character and was generally well liked by students as well as teachers.

“He’s not Mr. Perfect,” Warner was quick to point out in an interview. “He’s a boy who’s succeeding and who has (to deal with) a few things that would pull back most other students.”



Region 14

Lizette Carva

Hargitt Middle School, Norwalk-La Mirada USD

Students who are academically behind can normally be expected to make up for about six months of academic progress in a year’s time.

That’s what makes the story of Hargitt Middle School eighth grader Lizette Cueva so amazing. In the past year, the eighth grader’s writing ability jumped eight grade levels.

Her remarkable progress and determination earned her ACSA’s Every Student Succeeding Recognition award for Region 14. The award honors students who have overcome odds to succeed and recognizes educators who supported them. Lizette’s support team included Sharon McCrum, Hargitt Middle School’s resource specialist, teachers Lynn Shaullis, Matt Hardy, Lyse Rochon and Judi Marsh; and Elaine Miljous, instructional aide.

“I do not believe I have ever known a student more motivated and eager to learn,” Mccrum wrote in the essay nominating Lizette for the ACSA honor. “She is always considerate of others, supportive, encouraging, friendly and helpful.”

A year ago, Lizette was in the special education day class program at Hargitt Middle School in Norwalk-LaMirada Unified School District, striving to overcome learning disabilities and speech and language difficulties. During the second semester of the 1994-1995 school year, she transferred to the regular education program, with support from resource specialists.

This year, she made dramatic progress, especially in writing, and tested out of the resource specialist program.

“She has a flair for writing and is very creative,” Hardy, her teacher, said. “She always edits her own work. And she doesn’t give up. She keeps coming back to something she may be struggling with until she gets it.”

Hardy found that reading Lizette’s papers to the class helped motivate other students.

support from home and from school staff helped shape Lizette’s success. Hargitt Middle School special education students attend regular education classes. Teachers collaborate with the resource specialists to develop curriculum, set goals and design the student’s individualized educational program. An enrichment program called OPTIONS provides time for students to work on developing skills according to themes of lessons in the regular classrooms. Students can also request tutorial help after school or be sent for specialized instruction during the school day.

Lizette has won admiration from both students and teachers. Her peers elected her to be a natural helper, someone they can trust to help them resolve conflicts and problems. She has been recognized frequently for citizenship, attendance and achievement in almost every academic subject. She made the Honor Roll, received awards for being most improved and was named Husky of the Trimester and given the Principal’s Award for Excellence.

“She is 100 percent committed to excellence and always gives her best,” Schaulis said. “She is polite, caring and looks out for her fellow peers. She is well liked and looked up to.”

Lizette performs well in all areas of her life, McCrum wrote. “Her dedication to excellence guarantees her future success, wherever life may take her.”



Region 15

Carl Cole

Bonita High, Bonita USD

When Carl Cole enrolled as a freshman at Bonita High School in La Verne, Calif., he was withdrawn, angry and scared, his teachers and counselors recalled. He had been taken from his home where he lived with his mother and placed in a boys’ group home. And he started school with a major disadvantage: He didn’t know how to read.

Yet Carl triumphed over his challenges and graduated from Bonita High this year with definite plans on going to college. He is Region 15’s winner of ACSA’s Every Student Succeeding Recognition Program, which honors students who conquer challenges to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who helped them. Carl’s support team included Faye Rone, special day class teacher; Dan Harden, teacher and football coach; Larry Hatley, teacher and football coach; Linda Keel special day class instructional aide; Kay Smith, counselor; and Mary Lou LaForest, director of counseling.

“Carl Cole represents the hope that anyone with a focused sense of direction and purpose in life can succeed,” LaForest stated in the essay nominating Carl for the ACSA award.

Carl had spent his school years avoiding the embarrassing fact that he could not read. But it only increased his anxiety, and when he started high school, his self-worth was about as low as it could be.

He participated in Bonita High’s special day class and began to improve. Reading and learning became important to him, and his confidence grew.

In his sophomore year, Carl joined the football team and became a talented contributor.

“The coaches were always there for him with encouraged teamwork and group effort,” LaForest wrote. “Their support and motivation helped him to feel that for once he truly had something to offer.”

To help Carl succeed, the school’s special education, counseling, athletic and restructuring programs all worked together. In the last two years at Bonita High, Carl’s reading and writing skills continued to improve, and he was recognized as a student of the month. Encouraged and tutored by teachers, supported by coaches, and boosted by the camaraderie on the team, Carl’s self-esteem “soared like an eagle,” La Forest said.

In his senior year, Carl lived with foster parents and made plans to continue his education. He took the SAT for learning disabled students, and as of last spring, two local colleges were interested in Carl playing football for them on athletic scholarships.

“He is a renewed person today because people reached out to him and he responded back in a positive way,” LaForest wrote.



Region 16

Cesar Suchite

Birmingham High, Los Angeles USD

Cesar Suchite commuted 80 miles a day to attend Birmingham High School in Van Nuys, Calif., a drive that involved fighting traffic for some three hours daily on Los Angeles freeways.

For Cesar the sacrifice was a small price to pay to sustain his success as a school athlete and prevent himself from backsliding to a formerly troubled life.

The eleventh grader is the Region 16 winner of ACSA’s Every Student Succeeding award, which honors students who beat the odds to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who helped them. Cesar’s support team included Birmingham Principal Gerald Kleinman and teacher Scott King.

Cesar now maintains decent grades, works toward academic and career goals and is a top athlete at Birmingham. But it wasn’t always that way. As a ninth grader, he was troubled and involved with a gang. His parents moved to the valley to get him away from bad influences.

But it was an interest he discovered in a physical education class that inspired him to change. Cesar learned that he loved to run and that he had potential as a distance runner. He began working harder in school and became eligible to run track. He spent countless hours training.

“Despite the aches, pains and minor injuries, he continued to get an even greater degree of enthusiasm, commitment and drive,” Kleinman stated in the essay nominating Cesar for the ACSA honor.

In 10th grade he was the freshman-sophomore conference champion. He was moved to the varsity team and led Birmingham High to fourth place in its section. He has since won numerous awards in track and cross country and this year finished third among runners 18 years and under in the Los Angeles Marathon.

“He has tremendous drive and thrives to be the best,” Kleinman said. “Through running he realizes that success is only achieved by hard work, relentless training and practice.”

Through athletics, Cesar also learned he no longer needed a gang; he now had friends on the team.

In his junior year, Cesar’s father changed jobs, and the family moved 40 miles away from the school. Concerned that he might slip back into his old habits, Cesar convinced his parents to let him continue to attend Birmingham High. His father drove Cesar to and from school each day at first, but then Cesar soon took over driving responsibilities. Despite the lengthy commute, his grades and attendance actually improved.

“He sees what is best for him and makes sacrifices every day to achieve his goals,” Kleinman wrote. “He has learned to pay the price and even when there is a setback he tries again with even more fervor.”



Region 17

Christopher Linden

Estancia High, Newport-Mesa USD

The story of Estancia High School freshman Chris Linden reads like a life-affirming movie script. It’s about how a young man triumphed in school despite homelessness and family tragedy and ended up inspiring an entire community.

Chris is Region 17’s winner of ACSA’s Every Student Succeeding Recognition award. The award honors students who overcame obstacles to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who supported them. Chris’s support team included Marguerite Anatol, principal of Estancia High School in Mesa; Carolyn Crockett, school counselor; Jeff Reynolds, homeless shelter case worker; and Estancia students Chris Johnson, Melissa Inouye and Katie Wehr.

When Chris enrolled at Estancia last year, the ninth grader was living with his mom in a nearby homeless shelter. Two weeks later they were refused shelter because his mother was not complying with the shelter’s job training and no-drug use program. The pair lived in a car for a while, then moved to a motel room.

Despite the hardships, however, Chris thrived at school. Estancia counselors always give extra time and attention to homeless students to offer support and guidance. Crockett, Chris’s counselor, immediately saw that Chris was highly motivated with great academic potential. He dreamed of one day majoring in computer programming at the University of California at Los Angeles. Technically Chris was too young to take Regional Occupational Program computer courses, so Crockett wrote to the program to get special permission for Chris to enroll.

Meanwhile, Chris trained with the track team and maintained A’s and B’s in his classes, including college prep courses, along with a perfect attendance record. While he and his mother were living in a car, he did his homework by the vehicle’s interior dome light.

But at the motel his mother’s situation steadily worsened, and finally she consented to giving temporary custody of Chris to Crockett until a more permanent situation was found. Chris then moved in with Crockett, but, she reported, he never unpacked and always slept in his clothes. He never knew when he might be forced to move again. And his apprehensiveness turned out to be well-grounded—it wasn’t long before he had to leave.

Social Services caught up with his case and placed him in the Orangewood Children’s Home for neglected and abused children. He had to leave Estancia High and attend school in the Orangewood facility until officials could find permanent foster care for him.

Chris was devastated. The Orangewood facility had no algebra class or foreign language classes, and it placed him in a science class instead of the advanced world history class in which he had been enrolled. He knew his time at Orangewood would put him behind in his studies at Estancia, and he missed his friends.

But Chris was far from forgotten at Estancia High. A handful of friends learned of his plight and decided to help. They hung signs at school urging for Chris's release from Orangewood and gathered signatures on petitions. Letters poured in, and the effort attracted television and newspaper coverage. The Orange County Board of Supervisors even joined the campaign, and community members donated money. In an amazingly speedy two weeks, social Services responded and placed Chris in a temporary foster home so he could return to Estancia.

Chris had expected to see a few friends waiting to welcome him back when he returned, but instead more than 100 students, cheerleaders, the marching band and television news crews lined the sidewalks to greet him.

Chris continued excelling in his schoolwork after he returned. He made straight A 's and maintained a rigorous schedule, rollerblading to school for his 7 a.m. computer aided drafting class (he was never tardy) and working out until 5 p.m. each evening with the track team.

On the weekend, meanwhile, Chris volunteered at the homeless shelter where he and his mother once stayed.

"In our opinion, Chris is a survivor and winner i



Region 18

Eddie Contreras

Desert Oasis High, Central Union HSD

Eddie Contreras reached a crossroads a year and a half ago when he was referred to the School Attendance Review Board for truancy. He was smart and had academic potential, but he came from a family heavily exposed to drugs and gang activity. The Desert Oasis High School student faced a clear choice.

Fortunately, he made a good one. Today the El Centro teenager is a dedicated student and leader with a promising future. Eddie is the Region 18 winner of ACSA' s Every Student Succeeding Recognition award, which honors students who beat the odds to succeed in school and recognizes the educators who supported them. Eddie's support team included Betty Romero, teacher; Robin Staton, school counselor; Ernest Gomez, principal; Arturo Santoyo, dean of students; and John Anderson, superintendent of the Central Union High School District.

"Eddie is a hard-working, intelligent and determined young man," his support team wrote in a letter nominating him for the ACSA honor. He "has progressed at Desert Oasis High School as a positive campus leader who is well respected by our entire student body. "

Eddie had demonstrated in elementary school that he was bright and capable of excelling academically. But his grades faded and school attendance slipped after he became a teenager. Members of his district's School Attendance Review Board recognized Eddie's potential, Gomez said, and prescribed a restructured education plan, which called for frequent contacts by Staton, the school counselor. He was also admitted into the Advancement Via Individual Determination, a new program funded through Migrant Education, that teaches students how to study, take notes and develop leadership skills and exposes them to college education opportunities. Students visit university campuses and learn what higher education has to offer.

"From that point on, he has proven himself to be a leader," Gomez said. "His attendance shot up and his grades went up."

Romero, Eddie's AVID teacher, said he devoted himself to his studies. "He always turned in his homework," she said. The AVID program also exposed Eddie to the Mexican American National Association, which provided another positive influence, Gomez said.

Last school year, Eddie was elected president of AVID and was among four students selected by the school to visit Washington, D.C. at the personal invitation of Isabel Tapia, former director of President Clinton's advance party operations. Tapia had visited the school to observe its unique alternative education program and had invited the school to send representatives to visit the nation's capital.

Eddie, now a senior at Desert Oasis High, is living with his grandmother and continuing to thrive in school and develop as a leader.

1997

Region 1

Sebastian O'Tero

Sunset School, Arcata SD

For some students, just making it to school can be a challenge. But if you're homeless, have emotional problems and spent your first year of school in Puerto Rico, the challenge is even greater. Sebastian O'Tero, a second-grader at the Sunset School of the Arts, a K-5 magnet school in the Arcata School District, worked hard to overcome all of those obstacles.

When he first started at the school, he would not even speak with anybody. He's now participated in a class play, and he's due to be mainstreamed into a regular third grade class.

When Sebastian enrolled at Sunset School last September, his family was homeless and he was severely withdrawn - classified as an SED (severely emotionally disturbed) student. Because of his problems he was put in special day classes. He also had occasional violent outbursts. One incident was so bad he had to be restrained and hospitalized. He was placed on home study and slowly phased back into the classroom.

Since then he's come a long way. He's now back full time and also participates in an after-school program.

His family has moved into an apartment and his mother has become active in helping him in school.

One thing that's really brought Sebastian out of his shell is helping a physically handicapped student use words so that the student can ask for what he wants.

Sebastian has also started interacting with the other kids in his class, playing with them and talking through problems rather than getting into altercations. He is also participating in dance, art and drama classes.

Diane Kettle, principal of Sunset School, considers Sebastian kind, considerate and a very bright boy.



Region 2

Esther Cruz

Hamilton UHS, Hamilton UHSD

Esther Cruz overcame the odds of being an emigrant from Mexico with no English vocabulary to become a top student and a leader at school.

Esther, who graduated sixth in her class from Hamilton Union High School this year, was also named the best writer in her class the week of graduation.

Not only does she perform well in school, but she also is friendly, respectful and goal-oriented.

She's done all of this without the full-time presence of her parents, who are away frequently on family trips to Mexico.

Esther was born in Colima, Mexico, the youngest daughter in a family of seven children. Six years ago she left with her parents and youngest brother and moved to Hamilton City, where she was enrolled in Hamilton Elementary School.

At the time she spoke no English, but with the help of bilingual educators, she started down the path of learning.

Esther started high school in the English as a Second Language program and by taking bilingual science and history. By her junior year she was mainstreamed out of bilingual classes.

Despite her linguistic challenges, she graduated with a 3.65 grade point average.

While putting in extra hours for studying, Esther was also active in school organizations. She was the treasurer of the school's Mathematics, Engineering and Science Achievement (MESA) chapter and vice president of a Hispanic club.

She also participated in a speech contest where she delivered a 10-minute speech on the American legal system.

Esther credits Joanne Harvey, a migrant education instructional aide; Rae Turnbull, her speech and art teacher; and Betty Mercado, her Spanish teacher with helping her succeed.

Esther now attends California State University, Chico where she studies engineering.



Region 3

Nai F. Saephanh

Hiram Johnson HS, Sacramento City SD

Nai Saephanh has prevailed academically and socially at Hiram W. Johnson High School in the Sacramento City Unified School District while overcoming family hardships and a serious medical condition.

Nai immigrated with her family to the United States from Laos in the 1980s. She was an ESL student in grammar school, but by high school she was sailing through advanced placement and honors courses. She graduated with a 4.13 grade point average. All of her hard work could have been derailed in the summer of 1995, when doctors discovered she had a brain tumor. Even though her cultural beliefs oppose surgery, Nai had the surgery so she could continue her education. Nai's nominator, Hiram Johnson Counselor Candice Lee Koropp, credits not only Nai's drive but also the instructors who have made a difference in her life.

Nai said she received support from Mike Hotell, her sophomore science teacher; Toni Crandall, her honors English teacher; and Mike Rademan, the school newspaper advisor.

Nai said the hard times her family has endured have also given her the will to succeed.

Nai's academic success is even more startling in light of her extracurricular activities, including working 20 hours per week, membership in various school clubs, writing for the school newspaper and serving as a peer tutor at her school. She's also involved in an ROP program in computer graphics, in which she has excelled greatly. She has helped create web pages for two elementary schools.

Nai is now pursuing her education at California State University, Chico. She realizes that the best way to get ahead in this world is education, something of which her parents never had the opportunity to take advantage.



Region 4

Kevin Francis Daly

Shearer Elementary, Napa Valley USD

The story of sixth-grader Kevin Daly is a hero's tale.

When he was in fourth grade he sustained severe second- and third-degree, burns to his face, hands and chest while trying to rescue a baby in a fire.

Unfortunately, the baby died, and Kevin needed medical care and rehabilitation, which continues to today.

Yet, his courage to bounce back has touched the staff at Shearer Elementary School in Napa.

After Kevin was burned he stayed in the hospital for months. Despite his painful recovery, he stayed in touch with his fourth-grade teacher Anne Percelay. She brought him books, and his classmates sent him cards.

Percelay also spearheaded a community fund-raiser to help pay for Kevin's rehabilitation. The fund-raiser, held during Fire Prevention week, raised

\$6,400 towards a new computer for Kevin and martial arts lessons recommended by his physical therapist.

When he first returned to school Kevin was on a modified schedule so that he could regain his strength. He had to wear a mask to protect his face and rubber suit to stretch his skin.

But he'd changed more than physically. Before his accident he'd been an outgoing kid. Now he was introverted and avoided the playground during recess.

As fifth grade progressed, Kevin became more outgoing. By sixth grade he wanted to join the school's safety patrol.

Because of hand problems, he was unable to grip the stop sign for crosswalk duty. Instead he volunteered to supervise the school's kindergarten play area.

Shearer principal Debora Ferrero-White said the Every Student Succeed recognition, coupled with a "Personal Best" award the school gave him earlier this year, has lifted his self-confidence.



Region 5

Maria Ochoa

Aragon HS, San Mateo UHSD

As a freshman Maria Ochoa was enrolled in Aragon High School but she rarely showed up for class. Her gang life mattered more to her.

Then one day while out on the streets, Maria saw a fellow gang member shot dead before her eyes. Witnessing the shooting changed her life.

With the help of Aragon's staff, she boosted her grade point average tremendously and became active in school. When Maria was a habitually truant freshman, the only adult she confided in was English as a Second Language student services aide Bedilia Trujillo. When she ran away from home she would check in with Trujillo. Her life changed after her friend was shot. She saw the grief her friend's mother went through and realized she would never want her mother to go through the same. Trujillo helped Maria to return home. She went back to school, but her attendance was still sporadic. During her freshman year she completed only 15 credits., but went to summer school and earned an A in English. At the start of her sophomore year, Maria's attendance faltered again. That's when James Maxwell, assistant principal, stepped in. He coaxed her to join Latino Unidos Club which Trujillo oversaw. He also said that if she put her mind to it she could go to college. Maria was able to salvage her sophomore year, lifting her GPA. to 1.67 from .6 the prior year. She completed all of her classes in her junior year, and during the last 18 months she's also worked at Round Table Pizza part time. When Maria graduates she now wants to go to college and perhaps someday work for the U.S. Department of Justice.



Region 6

Matthew Balek

Village Continuation HS, Pleasanton USD

Matthew Balek graduated from high school this past summer after turning his life around from truancy, failing classes and family problems.

Matt almost went astray early in his high school career, and was sent to continuation school after skipping school and languishing with a 1.08 grade point average.

After transferring to Village Continuation High School, however, he pulled his GPA up to a 3.5 and he was named "student of the month" every month during his senior year.

Matt's father died when Matt was 5 and he's been living with his mother ever since. Money's been tight for them, and he wasn't privileged enough to have the resources kids from higher-income families do.

Matt came to Village as a sophomore and during his first year there, he goofed around a lot. But a change came over him in his junior year when he started getting into more serious classes.

He heard principal Richard Puppione tell seniors, "Start panicking if you're not panicking already."

Matt started taking extra classes and did extra credit work at home to pull his grades up to better than a B average.

In addition to excelling scholastically he also wrote for the school newspaper and worked on the yearbook. He was instrumental in launching a prom committee during his senior year.

He also volunteers his time for philanthropic events such as Thanksgiving feasts for poor families, blood drives and more. On top of it all, he worked part-time.

He was unanimously picked by teachers to receive Village High School's appreciation award, the highest award that can be given at graduation ceremonies.

Matt now attends community college in Livermore and plans to transfer to a four-year university.



Region 7

Ilonka Inerbichler

Teel MS, Empire UHSD

Not many students in eighth grade had to manage their lives as an adult would, but Ilonka Inerbichler must and does. Hailing from a home life that's tumultuous and financially strapped, Ilonka managed to maintain As in all of her classes at Teel Middle School in the Empire Union School District.

Ilonka lives in a broken home with her single mother who struggles to support Ilonka and her older brother and sister, both of whom are parents themselves at young ages.

Despite circumstances at home, Ilonka has managed to thrive at school with a perfect GPA. Not only that, but she helps other students with their work.

One way Ilonka received support is through Teel Middle School's "Bees" team. The team consists of five instructors who cooperate to integrate reading, language arts, math, science and social studies so students understand how everything in learning is interconnected.

These teachers try to give extra support to students who need it. They get to know the students personally and they check on them frequently at home.

David Loucks, Ilonka's reading teacher, convinced her to participate in a Reading Buddies program. Through the program Ilonka has been paired up with first-graders at a neighboring school.

Two other teachers in the team, Melinda Heim and Alycia Sato, were there emotionally for Ilonka, talking with her about her problems, said Ilonka's principal Melva Rush.

Other teachers in her support team included Jeanne Sturtevant and Oma Muirhead.

Ilonka belongs to 4-H, and on weekends she and her Big Sister take their dogs to convalescent homes. Ilonka wants to attend the University of California at Davis, where she'd like to study to be a veterinarian.



Region 8

Brenda Saucedo

Burnett Elementary, Milpitas USD

When Brenda Saucedo came to Burnett Elementary School as a kindergartner she spoke only Spanish.

During the next seven years at the school, Brenda quickly became fluent in both Spanish and English. In the process, she's also become one of the school's premier student leaders, giving her time to important programs that help other students. She's done all of this while earning straight A's the last four years.

After entering Burnett with no English, by third grade she was reading in both Spanish and English and by fourth grade she could speak, read and write in both languages.

In fourth grade Brenda was chosen for the school's "Gifted and Talented" program. She's used her smarts to help other students at her school and help the school as well.

She has served as her class representative and bilingual officer to the student council. and has explained GATE in English and Spanish to other classrooms.

Her volunteerism didn't stop there. She was also a member of the school's Conflict Management Team, which helps students talk through their problems rather than fighting.

During Brenda's fifth-grade spring vacation, her teacher drove to her house to see if Brenda could help in the classroom. When the teacher arrived she saw a homemade chalkboard attached to a fence and a row of chairs in front of it. On the chalkboard was the same lesson the teacher had taught a few days earlier in her own class. Brenda was teaching her siblings and neighbors what she herself had learned.

Burnett's thorough bilingual program helped Brenda succeed. When Brenda first started school, Burnett's bilingual program consisted of a K-2 program. It has since been expanded to include all grades.



Region 9

Chad Patlan

Mendota HS, Mendota USD

While being raised by a caring grandmother after his mother died when he was only a year old, Chad Patlan has striven for greatness in all facets of his life.

Chad was raised in Mendota, a rural community where it's the norm for people to toil on farms just like their parents did, and oftentimes their grandparents. Few residents have aspirations to go to college, but Chad has always been different.

At Mendota High School he played baseball, football and basketball, while maintaining a 3.88 grade point average. Chad also was active in school organizations such as the academic decathlon.

He was on the superintendent's honor roll seven consecutive semesters, and during his four years of sports at school, he received the "Coach's Award" in football and "Most Improved" and "All League Player" awards in baseball.

He accomplished this while helping care for his young son, who was 1 year old during Chad's senior year.

While in school, Chad would go to his girlfriend's house every evening and take care of their son, Chad, who was born shortly after Chad's sophomore year. He also takes care of his son on the weekends.

Chad's grandmother has been one of his biggest supporters. She came to watch every one of his school games and was a tremendous booster during his academic trials as well.

Chad also credits Mendota High's principal, Alfred Sanchez, with helping him when Chad needed a father figure and guidance, especially when he became a parent himself.

Chad worked during the summer after graduation to save money for college. He enrolled at the University of California at Davis this fall to study engineering.



Region 10

Juanita Jaramillo

Lorna Prieta Continuation HS, Santa Cruz City HSD

She was in a gang, was arrested on numerous occasions and spent time in juvenile hall and group homes. She gave birth to a son at 16 with no family support.

But by her 17th birthday, she'd turned her life around and become active in school. This is the life of Juanita Jaramillo, who recently graduated from Loma Prieta Continuation High School.

School administrators don't take credit for Juanita's changes. She's done it all herself, said principal Richard Dye.

Juanita had her first run-in with the law when she was 12. Shortly thereafter, her grandmother died, leaving Juanita without a strong role model. Juanita starting running with a gang.

Her life changed dramatically when she gave birth to her son, Anthony, who was born with numerous food allergies . After Anthony was born, Juanita decided to make a change for the better and return to school. She did so as a junior, with only

.5 credits on her transcript.

She relied on public transportation to attend school and welfare checks which barely fed her. During that first year in school,

Juanita and Anthony never stayed at one residence for more than three months at a time. For about three months Dye also took her in.

Despite the hardships, Juanita completed all of her graduation requirements in her junior and senior years. She did this while becoming involved in school activities, including work on student government and organizing field trips, She recently spoke at an anti-gang conference in the Midwest .

During her senior year Juanita moved in with her boyfriend and his grandmother, who help her care for Anthony.

Juanita attends Cabrillo Community College. She now wants to help others in a profession like social work, medicine or law..



Region 11

Kham Phai Xaysaleumsack

North Edwards HS, Muroc Joint USD

In a period of four years, Kham Phai Xaysaleumsack managed to drop out of school, join a gang, get tossed in jail 13 times and somehow come back to become one of the most active members of his high school class.

After falling into trouble his first year of high school, Kham Phai has straightened up completely. He's been rewarded with top school honors at North Edwards High School, a continuation school at Edwards Air Force Base.

Kham Phai is a Laotian immigrant. He attended public schools from kindergarten to ninth grade in New Mexico. But during his freshman year he started running with a gang, and at the end of ninth grade, he dropped out.

Over the next few months he was arrested time and again for robbing a jewelry store, using illegal drugs, shootings and gang fighting.

Eventually the juvenile court wanted to fully incarcerate Kham Phai, but he plea bargained by agreeing to leave the state. He moved in with his sister and brother-in-law at Edwards AFB. Since then he's hit numerous milestones at North Edwards, including becoming associated student body president, honor roll member and student of the month. He also helped write the school song and choose the school mascot. His zeal for the school and the leadership roles he's taken persuaded the student body to choose Kham Phai to represent the school at Muroc Joint Unified School District's board meetings. According to principal Mollie Graham, other district schools and communities have praised Kham Phai for his school pride and speaking abilities. Other educators who contributed to Kham Phai's success include North Edwards High teachers Frances Johnson and Jay Blank, teacher/advisor Robert McGowan and district psychologist John Lanser.



Region 12

Lorne Skipper

Riverside Poly, Riverside UHSD

Despite being abandoned by his parents at different times in his life and being shuttled from home to home, Lorne Skipper graduated from Riverside Poly High School this summer. Lorne has been uprooted time and again and has never had a place to call home. Still, he's managed to keep his aspirations high, according to Lori Barnum, the counselor who nominated him. When Lorne was 2, his parents divorced. Then his mother picked up and moved with Lorne and his brother, and during the next seven years they had no contact with Lorne's father. Nevertheless, Lorne managed to pull straight A's through the eighth grade. Before his freshman year in high school, Lorne and his brother were dropped off at his grandparents' home in Riverside for the summer, but their mother never came back. Even though Lorne felt abandoned, he managed a 3.0 grade point average while playing football at Riverside Poly. Then his grandfather died and his grandmother told Lorne and his brother they had to live with their uncle. With little financial support he was forced to buy his own food and clothes, which he did by working through the Job Training Partnership Act. Lorne's father found him and moved him into a house owned by his grandmother. But it wasn't long before Lorne was kicked out of that house. Fortunately, a friend's family took him in. Through it all, Lorne has continued to play football and work on campus and at restaurants through the JTPA. Lorne has been accepted into the Navy and wants to work for the FBI in the future. He also wants to have his own family some day, but not until he'd be able to provide stability for one.



Region 13

Manuel Nunez

Santa Paula HS, Santa Paula UHSD

Manuel Nunez has a world class story of courage. Manuel doesn't speak much English and he comes from a family with a limited income. When he was in the eighth grade, he was diagnosed with brain cancer and had to battle through a long series of surgeries and chemotherapy that kept him out of school for a year. Rehabilitation left Manuel wheelchair-bound and with limited memory. But with help from his loving family, staff at Santa Paula High School and his home teacher, Edward Arguelles, Manuel has managed to bounce back into school, eager to learn. When Arguelles first came to see Manuel in November 1995, he was sure the boy was near death. He thought every visit would be his last. During his ailing times, Manuel received a computer from the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Not knowing where to start with Manuel's education, Arguelles helped his student use the computer to write about his life -a record in the event of hi death. After a few months he was ready for summer school. Still in a wheelchair, he went back to school in September 1996. He started in special education classes because of his still-limited English skills and his memory problems.

But he had worked his way out of his wheelchair to a walker and then a cane. Now he can often walk without the cane, Arguelles said.

Manuel's support team also include special programs director Sergio Robles, special education counselor Deanna Collins, school psychologist Kathryn Vanderluit and special education clerk Isabel Hannah.

Manuel's back in the special education program this year but is expected to join his peers in general education if he continues to progress.



Region 14

Samuel Ogami

North HS, Torrance USD

Sam Ogami works double-time to succeed in school. He has to—he's dyslexic.

Sam has managed to surprise everyone with his dedication to academics. As a student, he shined ranking first in his class at North High School in Torrance. His grades were so outstanding that he was accepted to Stanford under its Early Action Program for learning-challenged students who have proven they can excel.

Sam was eligible for special education classes, but he chose to work through school in regular, honors and advanced placement classes. The only requests he's made in these classes are for textbooks on tape and sometimes "extended time tests."

To be successful in school, Sam put in extra hours for homework. He pre-read, read and re-read his texts and edited and critiqued all of his work. He also used tutors and study groups.

Despite his processing problems, Sam enrolled in advanced placement classes in calculus, physics, English and economics.

Still, he occasionally stumbled. But he's undeterred by temporary defeats and his tenacious attitude drove him to always try harder.

The team of educators who most enabled Sam to succeed includes Rolling Hills Preparatory School education therapist Sheila Aft and, from North High, guidance counselor Susan Schneiders, Special Education Department Chairman Judy Hying, music teacher David Beery, and GATE coordinator and math teacher Ruthann Rugiero.

Besides his scholastic achievements, Sam also tutored other students, and he played in the school's steel drum band and marching band. He's also great with computers, taking time during the summer to install hardware and software at North High, Rolling Hills Prep and Hamilton Adult School.



Region 15

Jo-An Shea

Monterey HS, Burbank USD

From life on the streets to graduation, Jo-An Shea transformed her life from one with little future to one with boundless opportunities.

Since she's been at Monterey High School, a continuation school, she's gotten top grades and perfect attendance.

Jo-An lived with her mother until she was 16. Her mother would move around from friend to friend with Jo-An in tote. Then at the end of her junior year, Jo-An dropped out of school. She abused drugs and bounced around from one friend's house to the other's.

After she met her boyfriend, the two decided to give up drugs. Because of the changes they saw in the couple, the boy's grandparents invited them to live with them.

The grandparents enrolled Jo-An in Monterey High as a junior. Before her school-year ended, Jo-An's mother died, but her boyfriend rallied around her.

During her senior year Jo-An came into her own. Through a partnership Monterey High developed with Walt Disney Co., she volunteered to distribute Christmas gifts to the needy. The company's community relations manager was so impressed with Jo-An that she offered her an internship in the Disney studio.

Pamela Feix, Monterey High's principal, said that concerned staff at the school pitched in to help Jo-An. Art teacher Peggy Zirves coaxed her to help paint a mural at a shopping mall.

Office manager Tami Sagona helped her develop office skills. And Phyllis Ainsworth, children's center aide, took time to drive Jo-An to school.

Jo-An has entered Pasadena Community College. She said there is so much she wants to do, that she hasn't decided what career path to pursue.



Region 16

Luisa Margarita Gavino

San Fernando HS, Los Angeles USD

Considering everything Luisa Margarita Gavino has accomplished at San Fernando High School you'd never know her personal life is a struggle.

Not only does she have to work long hours to help make ends meet for her family, she has to help her mother care for her little sister who has cancer.

And, though she often comes to school after getting very little sleep and not much food, Luisa graduated first in her class in June with a 4.0-plus grade point average.

Luisa has been a good student all through high school, but she was put to the test two years ago when her younger sister, Viviana, was diagnosed with leukemia. Luisa's mother had to quit her job in order to care for Viviana.

To help make ends meet, Luisa took on a part-time job soliciting newspaper subscriptions door-to-door.

The job has been challenging, though, since it's in a gang-infested area.

Still, during her senior year she was enrolled in four advanced placement courses. She was also the "heart and spirit" of the school's academic decathlon during the last two years, said Region 16 President Jose Rodriguez.

In her junior year, she was named "outstanding 11th grade student" as well as chairwoman for San Fernando High's Future Business Leaders of America.

With the Spanish Club she helped write and organize a one-hour play, all in Spanish, which she performed as well.

Educators in San Fernando High's Math Science Technology Magnet who participated in Luisa's success include principal Philip Saldivar, magnet coordinator Ann Anderson, math teacher George Fhys, college advisor Hareld SooHoo and office assistant Sylvia Suarez.

Luisa has been accepted to Stanford, where she will study business administration.



Region 17

Tonna Elms

Los Alamitos HS, Los Alamitos USD

Tonna Elms, a graduate of Los Alamitos High School, has taken the pain of growing up with a drug-using parent and spun it into a positive by enlightening others about the dangers of drug abuse.

During the last few years she has focused her energy on anti-drug projects. Her mission to steer students away from drugs is not surprising considering the environment she grew up in.

According to Los Alamitos High Assistant Principal Jerry Halpin, Tonna's parents divorced when she was just a year old. When her mother remarried and drugs were introduced into the household, Tonna ran away from home and lived with her grandmother.

When Tonna was 9, her mother divorced again and moved the family to Fresno. Tonna cooked, cleaned and cared for her two younger half-siblings.

Her grandmother, Tonna's best friend, died when she was 12. And by the time Tonna was 13, the situation at home had deteriorated to the point where she was ordered by the court to live with her father and stepmother in Southern California. Since then, Tonna has taken the experience of growing up around drugs to enlighten her peers about the destruction drug abuse can cause. She serves as president of Drug Alternative Nights and Counseling Events, a program that provides alternatives to drinking and using drugs.

Because of her outreach work Tonna was recently selected to participate in the Seal Beach Host Lions Club's cultural exchange with Japan.

After graduation Tonna was planning to move to Fresno for a semester to live with her mother, now drug-free.

When she returns she plans to continue working with DANCE while she starts her first semester at Cypress Community College.



Region 18

Christopher Jacoby

Mountain Empire HS, Mountain Empire USD

Christopher Jacoby has taken the pressures of being epileptic and turned them into a personal challenge to overcome not only the disease but all of life's hardships.

In so doing he's become an active participant in Mountain Empire High School's clubs and sports, while achieving academic success -enough to be accepted into the University of California, Santa Cruz. In the process he's overcome plenty of adversity including being a child from a low-income family, dealing with his father's suicide and his own fears of failure because of his disease.

Christopher was 5 when he had his first seizure and his family discovered his epilepsy. While his mother accepted his disease and gave him support, his father ignored it, Christopher said. After not having a seizure for some time, he was taken off epilepsy medication at the start of junior high.

But that same year his father committed suicide. Christopher suffered his first seizure in years. His doctor ordered him back on medication.

Christopher stopped doing his homework and dwelled on his father's death.

While still in junior high, he started hanging around with kids who coaxed him into lying and stealing. When his freshman year arrived, Christopher's mother persuaded him to get involved in school activities such as honor society, Friday Night Live and the baseball and football teams. Educators who enabled Christopher to succeed include his fifth and sixth-grade teacher Susan Barry, second and third-grade teacher Drew Hudson, math teacher Liz Ann Parker, history teacher Tim McCreary and counselor Jane Firth.

Christopher says epilepsy has been the force in his drive for success. He realizes he can conquer any obstacles set before him.

1998

Region 1

Cesar Villa

Eureka High School, Eureka City Schools

The Villa family moved to the California coastal town of Eureka five years ago hoping to provide their son Cesar with an escape from the gang culture in Southern California. They found they could not escape for long.

Once settled in the small town, Cesar, at that time a middle school student, found himself with few friends and little of the urban excitement he was used to in Santa Barbara.

"I began studying I was so bored," Cesar said. "I found out I liked math. I got good grades."

But, by the time he entered high school, Cesar, who once merely imitated gang-identified clothing styles and language favored by older relatives, was fully initiated into Eureka's emerging gang scene.

Soon "Schoolboy," as he was known to his friends, found himself expelled from school. Cesar's swift turn-around from this low point, less than two years ago, to become a valuable member of his community has earned him the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 1.

In his including early teens, Cesar Mexican-Americans befriended other youngsters who, like other himself, hailed from Southern California and Spanish-speaking backgrounds. Eureka had become an emerging center for new Mexican-American and Asian-American immigrants as they looked to escape the distractions Southern California cities often presented their children. In gang activity the two groups often pitted themselves against each other.

Cesar found that he had cured him-self or boredom, but he had also fallen in with a rough crowd involved with gangs. Soon it became rare for Cesar to come home from the mall without getting in a fight. His father encouraged him to be macho and stand up for himself against rival groups of teenagers.

Cesar delivered what could have been a crushing blow to his future when he assaulted a schoolmate with a crow bar in a personal dispute at the beginning of his junior year. Not only was he expelled from Eureka High School, he was also barred from attending any other local schools. Cesar, a college-bound student, was devastated, but the intervention of caring Humboldt County educators helped him stick to his plan.

Through his home school teacher, McKaye Lent, Cesar enrolled in class-es at the College or the Redwoods and in a work experience program through Eureka High. He also soon became involved in the Humboldt County Office of Education's Gang Risk Intervention Program. Its lead-ers, through one-to-one counseling and mentoring, helped Cesar direct his energy and emotions in positive ways.

"The whole time I spent out of school was a good experience for me," he said. "It helped me think about what I was doing with my life."

In the fall of 1997, Cesar returned to Eureka High with a remarkable change of attitude. He dropped his gang affiliation, kept up his good grades, and opened himself up to making a diverse group of friends. In fact, he became a leader in the school's Culture Club and organized camping trips and other activities.

"A lot of violence comes from not knowing each other's cultures," Cesar said. "Everyone gets along well (in the club). It's really peaceful."

Humboldt County Office of Education director Denise Keppel-Jones, who supervises GRIP activities, says Cesar's presence is a valuable asset in her program.

"He looks at the unity or all now. At the high school, he enrolls those who are suspicious and distrusting (to become members of the Culture Club)," she said. "He can sell himself and the positive things that can be accomplished."

One of Cesar's most remarkable achievements upon returning to school was working with Eureka High School Resource Officer John Turner, once Cesar's arresting officer, to work with gang members on developing conflict resolution skills.

"Mainly I try to set an example, especially in the Mexican community, by being a pro-non-violence person," Cesar said. He has been able to set that exam-ple through his work on the California Attorney General's Youth Council on Violence Prevention. Last f



Region 2

Beth Peterson

Magnolia Intermediate School, Pleasant Ridge Union School District

Eighth-grade honor roll student Beth Peterson takes her star qualities beyond the classroom at Magnolia Intermediate School in Grass Valley.

At school she participates in Magnolia's Accelerated Academic Program and the school's concert choir. But her love of science has taken her farther afield.

During her seventh-grade year, Beth and several classmates participated in the statewide Odyssey of the Mind competition in Davis. And she's traveled even further—to Cape Canaveral in Florida—to attend a NASA space camp the past two summers.

Beth accepts her far-flung academic commitments with ease. "I just like learning, and it gives me the chance to meet my friends," she said.

For her extensive academic involvement and her willing attitude, Beth has been named the recipient of the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 2.

It was an easy choice to nominate Beth for the award, said her principal, David Rosenquist.

"Beth is very happy, upbeat, friendly and enthusiastic in every task she undertakes," he said.

Her special love is science. This past summer, Beth was also an alternate selection by the Nevada County chapter of the American Association of University Women to attend a math, science and computer camp at Stanford University.

"There's a whole wide world out there, and I just want to know all about it," Beth explained. Even the smallest creatures, like dust mites, don't escape her fascination.

Beth helped convince her teammates on the Odyssey of Mine project, a competitive group problem-solving activity, to explore the anatomy of the mites. The project asks its participants to develop an original dramatization that demonstrates their academic knowledge and problem-solving capabilities.

In an odd theatrical turn, Beth and her teammates demonstrated how famous disappearing historical figures such as Jimmy Hoffa and Amelia Earhart had "morphed" into dust mites.

"We thought (the story) was very bizarre and the judges might like it," Beth said.

Beth's curious nature is also nurtured at the NASA Camp each year. There, she has experienced night simulations and the workings of an ant-gravity machine.

Her creativity is also supported at school. Beth is one of a number of honors students in the Pleasant Ridge Union School District and the Nevada Joint Union High School District enrolled in the rigorous Accelerated Academic Program, which seeks to prepare students in grades 7-12 for entrance into highly competitive colleges and universities.

Even with the extra academic challenge posed by the "X" classes, Beth achieved a grade point average of 3.86 through seventh grade.

Naturally, given her extracurricular activities, "her teachers describe her as having a talent for following up on concepts presented in close with real-life experiences and ... making meaningful connections." Rosenquist said.

Beth rounds out her experiences through music and theatre. Along with performing with Magnolia's choir, Beth has performed in theater productions at Lake Tahoe with her family for years. As a participant in Tahoe Mountain Music and Music and More she has played in "The Sound of Music," "Alice in Wonderland," "The Wizard of Oz" and the movie "Bushwacked."



Region 3

Khalil Abdullah

Grant Union High School, Grant Unified School District

Khalil Abdullah doesn't settle for second-best for anyone: his friends, his family or himself.

The recent Grant High School graduate put hundreds of volunteer labor hours into ensuring his family could move from a cramped apartment to their first home.

Throughout his school career he also encouraged his classmates, many from underprivileged backgrounds, to set high goals for themselves.

For himself, he put aside fears about leaving his West Coast home and family for the opportunity to receive an Ivy League education at the University of Pennsylvania.

For his achievements Khalil has been named the recipient of Region 3's Every Student Succeeding Award.

Khalil has always set high standards for himself and others. Growing up in the economically depressed Sacramento area of Del Paso Heights, the youngster was acquainted with many teenagers and adults whose goals in life would take them no further than neighborhood bounds.

“I was stubborn. People around me weren’t doing anything, but I wanted to be different,” Khalil said.

From an early age, he enrolled in GATE classes even though his placement meant traveling beyond his neighborhood school. He also talked to his classmates about setting goals and “controlling your own outcomes.” Few of his friends understood his desire to succeed, however.

“I got on to a few people, but some would just laugh,” he said.

At Grant High, Khalil gained the utmost respect of his peers—especially as graduation grew closer.

“People began to understand about the next level and that I was going there,” he said. “They saw how different I was and what their outcome would be compared to mine.”

Not only was Khalil enrolled in a full slate of honors and Advanced Placement classes, he also served as president of the African-American Club and was active in the Students Reaching Out anti-drug-abuse program and the Math, Engineering and Science Achievement program. He was even crowned king of the junior prom.

An avid basketball player, Khalil began his senior season as a captain and starter on the Grant team. Mid-way through the season, however, Khalil made the agonizing decision to quit the team. They had stopped playing together as a team because of several rifts among players, he said.

“I was thinking about how long it would take to solve these problems and how my grades would drop,” said Khalil, who had maintained a 3.7 grade point average throughout his high school career.

His family was also on the verge of realizing a longtime dream. Khalil’s mother, Anne James, had done her best to support Khalil and his older sister Sheenah as a single mother. But her salary as a data entry operator was never enough to provide the family with a home of their own.

For years the family lived with relatives or in small, cramped apartments.

Finally, through the aid of the non-profit organization Habitat for Humanity, the family was able to purchase a new, low-cost home. They moved into their home earlier this year.

But first the family was required to contribute 500 hours of “sweat equity,” volunteering for Habitat and helping to construct their home and others for the program. Khalil knew he would have to play his part.

In his free time, he hung doors, installed insulation, put up drywall and did other carpentry chores “I knew my week wasn’t going to end until Saturday afternoon,” Khalil said.

The maturity of his decision to quit basketball in order to plan for a better life for himself and his family was not lost on the Grant High School staff. Coach Tony Lowden respected Khalil’s decision to drop basketball, though he originally thought it would hurt his chances of gaining acceptance to some universities.

“We were trying to get him into (college) through basketball, but then he got in through academics. He made the right decision,” Lowden said.

Khalil’s hard work paid off last spring when he was accepted to the University of Pennsylvania and several other prestigious East Coast coll



Region 4

Marijoyce Naguit

Springstowne Jr. High, Vallejo City Unified School District

When Marijoyce Naguit, this year’s recipient of the ACSA Region 4 Every Student Succeeding Award, was just a kindergartner, her teacher called her mother in for a conference. Marijoyce wasn’t following her teacher’s directions.

“She was just ignoring her. She got scolded,” recalled Marijoyce’s mother, Prescila Naguit.

The Naguit family, then living on a U.S. military base in Japan, was surprised initially by the accusations. But then Prescila realized that at home, as well, her young daughter had difficulty understanding directions.

The teacher and Prescila concluded that Marijoyce might be hearing impaired. Tests proved their assumption correct: 5-year-old Marijoyce suffered from profound hearing loss.

Marijoyce, now a sophomore at Hogan High School in Vallejo, had been fooling her teachers and parents.

She spoke English and some Tagalog, the Filipino-American family’s native language. And through lip-reading she was able to understand most oral language—provided people spoke face-to-face with her.

“Imagine that, in pre-school and CCD (Catholic school) she had been lip-reading!” Prescila said, still surprised with her daughter’s ingenuity,

Even after Marijoyce had been diagnosed, she still faced an uphill battle in her quest to enjoy the educational advantages that hearing youngster’s possess.

The challenges she has overcome in the past 10 years to thrive as an honor student and active school and community volunteer earned her the ACSA award.

Marijoyce received two hearing aids at the age of 5, but she was already past the critical age for acquiring language.

According to Lois Vieira, Marijoyce’s source teacher in the Vallejo Unified School District’s Deaf/Hard of Hearing Program, this period spans from birth to 3 years.

“Marijoyce’s hearing loss is very significant and usually poses a tremendous challenge for children who are attempting to learn a language they have never heard clearly,” Vieira said-

Nevertheless, when the Naguit family moved from Japan to Vallejo in 1990, Marijoyce began to prosper. She easily learned sign language.

“I got used to it,” she said. “I was a quick learner, and it was fun.”

Marijoyce’s mother and father, Danitoe, also enrolled in the Vallejo Unified sign language programs to be able to better communicate with their daughter.

As her elementary year progressed Marijoyce quickly “closed the gaps” in her education and received less and less support from special education teachers.

She graduated from Springstowne Junior High in June with a straight “A” average. During ninth grade she only used a sign language interpreter in science class. Marijoyce remains a proficient lip reader.

“The teachers know they have to turn around and speak directly to me,” she said.

Vieira is particularly impressed with the “A” Marijoyce received in Spanish.

“Once again she is conquering a language she is unable to fully hear,” she said.

Marijoyce has never let her hearing impairment prevent her from being active at school and in the community. In junior high she was a member of student council and tutored other deaf and hard of hearing students during her free periods.

She volunteers in her aunt’s second-grade classroom and at a nearby Air Force base hospital. And she enjoys dancing and hanging out with her friends.

The Naguits are proud of Marijoyce’s accomplishments, but sometimes they worry that her constant activities could put further stress on her hearing.

“I stop her to rest, but she just wants to finish the job,” Prescila said.

The Naguits are unsure whether Marijoyce’s hearing loss will become more severe. The origin of her impairment has never quite been determined. That doesn’t seem to bother Marijoyce. However, who said she believes working hard at school will bring her success no matter what the odds,

“I don’t know about my hearing, but in the future I hope to keep up my good grades,” she said.



Region 5

Veronica Perla Loa

Mark Twain High School, San Francisco Unified School District

Recent high school graduate Veronica Perla Loa has blossomed during her two years at Mark Twain High School, a continuation school in San Francisco’s Sunset district.

She’s been active in class activities, helpful to her teachers and is set to attend San Francisco City College in the fall. Few people, including herself, thought she’d make it this far.

When Perla arrived at Mark Twain at the urging of her one-time boyfriend, Eric, she had not been attending school regularly for nearly two years. She started out in a mainstream high school, only to drop out two months into her freshman year. Perla briefly attended another continuation high school, but soon quit again. Her friends didn’t take school seriously either, and she followed them into gang activities.

“I was just trying to do what everyone else was doing,” Perla said.

She was also struggling with the loss of the friendship of her brother, Luis, who had recently been sent to jail. When Eric brought her to Mark Twain she initially resisted her teachers’ desire to involve her in school activities. But soon she began to enjoy the nurturing environment at the school.

“Last year she started to unfold,” agreed Mark Twain Principal Erma Cobb. “It was like a rose opening.”

Mark Twain, a school that operates on an afternoon and evening schedule because of a San Francisco Unified facilities crunch, attracts many students looking for a last-ditch opportunity to complete their K-12 education requirements. "It's a very supportive environment. Regardless of who they are or where they have come from, they haven't had a lot of success in school." Cobb said.

Perla's problems began early on in her school career. The Mexico native moved to Texas when she was a young child only to return to Mexico when she was 9 years old. Her family moved to San Francisco when she was 12.

Making transitions between life in the two countries was difficult, Perla said

"It was stressful. I didn't even know how to speak Spanish anymore (when she returned to Mexico)," she said.

Returning to the United States, Perla found the shift back to American life equally as challenging. She responded by cutting classes and getting in trouble at home. Her mother, distressed over Luis' problems, couldn't keep her in school by ninth grade.

"I just wasn't interested," Perla said. "And I was in that stage—whenever my mom would tell me what to do it was like, 'whatever'"

She eventually left home to stay with an ever-changing group of friends. But Perla's lifestyle began to worry her. It took her boyfriend's desire to spend more time with her to bring her back to school. and this time she stayed.

"I got a lot of help from teachers. They didn't have as many students to teach. I began to learn things I didn't understand before." Perla said. In her two years at Mark Twain, she made up all of her required credits for graduation through intense concentration on her classwork and credit received through employment as a receptionist and at a T-shirt shop.

During her senior year, Perla translated for Spanish-speaking students in her classes and participated on Mark Twain's student council. She also found a new interest in mathematics.

"I started liking it because I understood it better," Perla said.

Perla is a very quiet young woman, Cobb said. She and Perla's teachers still don't know too much about Perla's background, but they've tried to give her all the help they can.

In particular she received the support of her homeroom and Spanish teacher David Lipman, who persuaded Perla that her bilingualism was an asset

"She was the person with the knowledge. Everyone (in Spanish class) wanted to talk to her," Lipman said

He attributes Perla's change in attitude to an improvement in her home environment. Though still without a permanent home, she moved in with a group of adults who provide a stable home environment and support her goals.

At San Francisco City College, Perla plans to study sign



Region 6

Francisco Guerra

Buena Vista Elementary, Walnut Creek School District

An extra year spent in fifth grade and the support of a caring school staff have allowed Francisco Guerra to gain academic confidence—and the ACSA Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 6.

Francisco, a Mexico native, enrolled in Buena Vista Elementary School in Walnut Creek during his fourth-grade year. Because of a hearing impairment, poor eye-sight and short-term memory problems, he had been placed in special day classes at his previous school.

At Buena Vista he was mainstreamed into regular classes, while receiving continuing resource and English as a Second Language support. His academic progress was steady but slow.

A year ago, Francisco's teachers requested that he spend another year in fifth grade to solidify his skills before moving to middle school.

Francisco agreed, provided he could have the same classroom teacher, Linda Judd.

A second fifth-grade year boosted his English and reading skills and his self-esteem. This fall he enrolled as a sixth-grader with confidence at Walnut Creek Intermediate School.

Helping Francisco succeed has been a pleasure for the Buena Vista staff.

"When you get a kid who works as hard as he does," said Nancy Singer, a Buena Vista resource specialist who has worked closely with Francisco, "everyone wants to help him."

Singer first met Francisco as a fourth-grader.

"I saw this very polite, sweet boy, but one who obviously was having difficulties with academics and negotiating around the school because of low vision." New glasses alleviated Francisco's vision problem. A special reading program, the Herman Method for Recovering Reading Failure, bolstered his academics.

The program, known as Herman, uses visual, tactile and audio techniques to help children grasp the phonemes that make words. Hermon students hold a mirror close to their mouth, grasp their throat and repeat a list of words followed by the sound or each word's first letter.

"It's very, very structured," Singer said. "Students can grab a hold of it."

With Herman, Francisco has improved his reading skills from a pre-primer to second-grade level.

In his first fifth-grade year Francisco struggled to do his state report, a requirement for all Buena Vista fifth-graders. This past spring, he completed a study of New Mexico with a special emphasis on its Indian ruins, Judd said.

"It's all coming together," she said. "Before, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get it."

A real turning point for Francisco, Singer says, came when he shared his enthusiasm for learning with a first-grader at the school, Alex. Alex had been brought to the school's resource center because he wouldn't complete his classwork.

Francisco explained to the boy the importance of doing his assignments. "I told him, 'If you don't do your work, you get bored in class.'" he said. "If you work more, you can learn more."

Francisco even listened to the boy read aloud when Alex complained that no one ever listened to him read. Helping Alex, who was reading at a third-grade level, provided another boost to Francisco's confidence.

"With Francisco, it was just finding that 'something' to ignite a child to learn," Singer said.

Buena Vista Principal Kim Williams is proud of the support members of the school staff have given Francisco. "He's just done wonderfully in responding to the services the team has offered," she said.

Williams also informed Walnut Creek mayor Gene Wolf of Francisco's accomplishments. In May, Francisco received the Champion Citizenships Award from Wolf.

The Buena Vista staff is sure Francisco is now ready for sixth grade.

Late last spring Francisco was admittedly nervous about moving to middle school but said that he was readier than ever for the experience.

"I didn't know what sixth grade was going to be like before," he said. "This year I'm going to find out."



Region 7

Maria Reynoso

Grace M. Davis High School, Modesto City School District

When Maria "Gabby" Reynoso traveled to UC Berkeley this fall to begin her freshman year at the prestigious university, she knew she'd have to tackle some big academic and personal responsibilities.

But in many ways, Gabby's handled even more daunting challenges throughout her 18 years. Frequently she's acted as head of household for her mother, whose English is limited, and her three younger siblings.

The challenging family circumstances Gabby has overcome to achieve academic and personal success have earned her the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 7.

"She has proven to herself that she can be successful even without many of the opportunities that other kids have," said Perkins Elementary School Principal Teresa Roberson, who has known Gabby since she was a third-grader at another Modesto elementary school.

The Reynosos live in a government-subsidized housing complex where gangs are common, Roberson said. Gabby could have easily been distracted by the itinerant lifestyles that surrounded her. Instead, she seized every opportunity to improve her family's situation and her own possibilities in life, Roberson said.

Gabby grew up in Spanish-speaking home. She quickly learned English at the age of 3 through a Head Start program. At an early age she translated for her parents.

Gabby's responsibilities grew at the age of 12 when her mother made Gabby's father move out of their home.

"He was abusive and would drink a lot," Gabby recalled in a conversation just prior to her high school graduation. "It got to a point where he was a threat to the family."

Soon Gabby, as the family's oldest child, fell into a routine. She would come home from school each day, do her homework, then help her mother with chores and interpreting duties.

"I got used to filling out school forms and paying bills. It became normal," said Gabby, a shy, quiet young woman. "I couldn't turn to my mother because obviously she didn't understand."

In the summer, while her mother worked in a cannery, Gabby assumed the total responsibility of caring for her two young brothers and baby sister.

Her obligations intensified during her junior year when Gabby's mother developed Bell's Palsy, a condition which temporarily robbed her of her sight in one eye.

Despite her many domestic duties, Gabby also made sure she concentrated on her school work. Roberson remembers her as a highly capable and conscientious student in elementary school.

At Davis High School in Modesto, Gabby also found academic success. During her senior year she served as vice president of the high school's California Scholarship Federation chapter and as secretary of the College Club. Gabby also maintained a rigorous class schedule of Advanced Placement English, biology and government, as well as advanced physics and pre-calculus. She scored 1250 on her Scholastic Aptitude Test and held a 3.7 grade point average.

Gabby's academic achievements weren't limited to her high school campus, either. From her freshman year on, Gabby participated in Modesto Junior College's Upward Bound program. The program, geared to first-generation college-bound students, provides participants with extra tutoring and SAT preparation classes along with field trips to college campuses and other attractions.

"I got to visit a whole bunch of new places I never would have otherwise," Gabby said.

During her high school years, she went tide pooling in Half Moon Bay and visited Arizona's Grand Canyon with other members of the group. She and her classmates in Upward Bound also visited the University of California campuses of Berkeley and Davis.

The trip to UC Berkeley sealed her interest in the school. She made a return trip to stay overnight in the school dorms during spring break her senior year.

After finishing her basic requirements at the university, she plans to enroll in its College of Natural Resources to study environmental science.

Roberson helped Gabby's family move her into the



Region 8

Patty Hewitt

Fremont High School, Fremont Union High School District

Patty Hewitt encountered more than a change in scenery when she moved from Oklahoma to the Silicon Valley prior to her freshman year of high school. The challenges she overcame—and success she found—in adjusting to her new environment have earned Patty, a recent graduate of Fremont Union High School, the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 8.

In Oklahoma, where Patty lived "in the middle of nowhere," she wasn't concerned about ethnic differences getting in the way of making friends. The child of an Irish labor activist and a Mexican American former migrant worker knew few others with a background like hers and little bigotry. Patty, a bright, shy girl, made friends with everyone.

But moving to San Jose meant big changes in Patty's life. She was leaving behind her brother, Juan, who was incarcerated in Oklahoma. Her parents took new jobs and worked long hours. In her loneliness she would retreat to a spot behind Lynbrook High School during "brunch" and lunch time and ponder her situation. Finding a diverse group of friends would be best, Patty decided. But instead of being embraced for her openness she was derided. The Latinos she opened up to teased her for her preppy appearance, calling her "white girl," and pressured her to join gangs.

"She faced, for the first time, culture shock. She felt segregation," said Peggy Raun-Linde, a Fremont High School assistant principal who has worked with Patty since she transferred from Lynbrook as a sophomore. "To avoid it, she joined in."

She desperately wanted friends to escape her loneliness, Patty recalled.

"The people who approached me had an edge to them," she said. "I took anyone who was there. I didn't want to shoo anyone away."

Her "friends" cut classes, drank, smoked pot and had little desire to achieve in school. They also fought amongst themselves and with other groups of youngsters. Patty, too, joined in the scuffles. After a particularly bad episode, she was cited for assault and spent a night in juvenile hall.

"You get a reputation from walking away," Patty said, explaining her actions. "I didn't have a reputation coming in. (Her friends) didn't know what I was like before."

She bowed to peer pressure in order to try to prove herself to her friends, Patty said. Her parents, too, struggled to control their daughter, Patty said. After a strict upbringing, Juan rebelled through criminal activity. Patty worried that she was on the same path.

But through her rebelliousness, then-Lynbrook High School Principal Mike Hawkes saw Patty's potential. He and Fremont High principal Pete Tuana worked to transfer Patty to Fremont in order to give her a fresh start.

"She had unbelievable leadership skills and was terrific with her peers," said Hawkes, now an associate superintendent of Fremont Union High School District.

At Fremont, Patty was determined to choose her friends more carefully. She would also establish her independence, she said, no matter how hard that became. "I stuck to myself. I wanted to find out what I did and didn't like," Patty said. She soon found that the students at Fremont were different than those whom she had encountered as a new student at other schools. At Fremont her classmates smiled, said hello and invited her to join their school clubs.

Patty smiled back.

She joined the Student Organization of Latinos, this time embracing her culture and participated in school activities, such as the Link Crew orientation team and volunteer programs. She compiled honor roll-worthy grade point averages while taking honors and AP courses.

Patty channeled her energy into learning in and out of school. She found she enjoyed reading and even frequented the same San Jose book stores as her principal, Tuana.

"I learned that you didn't get anything out of being rebellious," she said.

As a junior at Fremont, Patty had also noticed that the school's class presidents didn't always make an effort to reach out to everyone in the class. As senior class pr



Region 9

Tony "T.J." De La Garza

Buchanan High School, Clovis Unified School District

Eighteen-year-old Tony "TJ" De La Garza's been through enough heartbreak to last a lifetime. Before he was 2, his father left home, his mother slipped into a coma while giving birth, and his newborn brother died.

For the next several years, TJ, a recent graduate of Buchanan High School in Clovis, was bounced from home to home as he was cared for by relatives. Two of his special guardians, his Aunt Velma, whom TJ regarded as his mom, and his grandfather, died while he was under their care.

The pain continued, as his mother remained—as she does today—in a coma.

By the time he was a young teenager, TJ had become fully entangled in Fresno's gang scene. He soon lost several of his friends to gang violence.

Yet, TJ says his life was not much worse than many others growing up in the poorer neighborhoods of Fresno.

"To be real," said TJ, using one of his favorite expressions, "(the tragedies) didn't affect me. I see the same things with my friends.

"Growing up in bad neighborhoods and around dope, it's normal. Society will tell you that I came a long way, but it's normal."

The difference is that TJ, with the help of a rival gang member, turned his life around. He made a commitment to school. He became active in church, stopped his fighting and now devotes his time to helping children avoid being caught in a gang. For life. His achievements, TJ has earned the Every Student Succeeding Award for Student Region 9.

It's an honor TJ certainly deserves, says John Pendley, who represents the region on the ACSA Board of Directors.

"He overcame a number of problems in his life," Pendley said. "What we thought was interesting was that he mentioned on his support team the officer who had arrested him the most. They now have a strong mutual respect for one another."

The relationship between TJ and Officer Chuck Giovanni flowed out of another unlikely friendship. On March 11, 1997—TJ still clearly remembers the date—an ex-rival gang member invited him to church.

TJ wasn't sure what to expect from the experience, but he was beginning to think he wanted to leave his gang affiliation and violent life behind.

"I was at a point where I had lost one of my best friends. One of my 14-year-old homies was caught in a cross-fire. It got tiring," TJ said. "I knew there was something better for me."

TJ. can't remember the specific message he heard at church that day, but he believes he was moved by God to change his life.

"My lifestyle has been a total turn-around since then," he said. "I not only have dreams, but I have plans to accomplish them."

He and his Aunt Mary, who is his current guardian, repaired their relationship. TJ enrolled in Buchanan for his senior year, his first try in years at a comprehensive high school. And he worked with Giovanni to counsel gang members. TJ is particularly proud of his decision to go to Buchanan. "I'm barely passing, but I am passing. I'm doing my best," he said earlier this year. "I knew (enrolling at Buchanan) would look better in job interviews. I wanted to challenge myself." TJ now plans to study the ministry. He also hopes to land a job at Fresno Boys & Girls Club, capitalizing on his new interest in counseling children.

He combines his two career interests at the Children's Church and Youth Ministry, two projects of the Cornerstone Church in Fresno.

At Children's Church, TJ and other young adult church members meet with children in the poor neighborhoods of Fresno, playing games with them and singing songs.

"We let the kids be kids. In the inner city you don't have a childhood," he said.

In the Youth Ministry, TJ works with young teenagers at a crucial age for facing peer pressure.

He offers his younger peers a message TJ wishes he had realized earlier in his life: "Just because everyone around you isn't succeeding doesn't mean you can't succeed," he said.



Region 10

Katie Vanoli

University Park Elementary, Salinas City School District

Katie Vanoli took two big steps toward building a better quality of life for herself during her fifth-grade year.

First, the University Park Elementary School student entered a mainstream classroom after spending the balance of her educational career in special day classes. The epileptic seizures she frequently endured had impacted her ability to learn. Secondly, Katie traveled cross-country in the midst of her watershed year to undergo brain surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The operation has helped to end her seizures.

The fact that she was able to combine the two endeavors speaks highly of the strength of her support team at her Salinas school, Katie's family says. In recognition of Katie's achievements, the support team and other ACSA members have named her the recipient of Region 10's Every Student Succeeding Award.

Katie had always been an eager student, but attending school regularly was a struggle for her until she reached fifth grade.

"The (seizure) medicine slowed her brain down. Physically it did a lot of the same things. She was very lethargic," explained Katie's mother, Cathy Vanoli.

The seizures frightened Katie, a quiet, friendly girl.

"My legs and arms would move, and my head would, too," she said.

Several years ago, after Katie's medicine had become increasingly ineffective, the Vanoli family decided to place Katie on an experimental high-fat, liquid-restricted Ketogenic diet. The diet, made famous by the movie "Lorenzo's Oil," is believed to have halted seizures in some epileptics. Suddenly there was hope for Katie's misery.

"She was seizure and medication free for 10 months. She was like a different kid," Cathy Vanoli said.

But as Katie's seizures gradually began to return, the Vanoli family was forced to consider other options. The family traveled to Baltimore in January 1997 to discuss the possibility of having Katie undergo surgery. Meanwhile, Katie's health worsened, and she was placed in a drug-induced coma for six weeks in the summer of 1997 to stabilize her condition.

Despite the obstacles facing Katie, her educational future was still foremost in the minds of the Vanolis. They worried about the fact that she traveled across town to attend her special day classes. As she headed toward adolescence, they thought a move to her neighborhood school might offer a more complete educational experience.

"We wanted Katie to be around kids she would see in the neighborhood," Cathy said. "(If she stayed in her cross-town school) she might not know anyone when she went to high school."

The family discussed their plan with University Park, whose administration placed Katie in a special combined fifth-grade class, team-taught by two teachers. It turned out to be the perfect choice.

From her first day in the class, Katie made friends and found success.

With the help of an aide, Katie was able to keep up with the class academically. She joined her classmates in group activities and showed improvement in her reading skills. Her confidence soared as she tackled a series of firsts: traveling across campus by herself, answering the "Daily Bite" academic warm-up exercise in front of the class, and serving on student council.

Katie was also embraced by her classmates.

"She's getting invited to birthday parties. It's everything we didn't have for 10 years," said Cathy.

Early in the school year, Katie returned to Baltimore to have her "seizures taken out and put in the trash can," as she explained. The surgery, which removed part of her left frontal lobe, has thus far ended her seizures.

When Katie returned to class two weeks after the surgery, her classmates rallied around her, staying in with her at recess until her stitches healed and supporting her as she grew stronger.

Co-teacher Amy Ish observed Katie's improvement throughout the year.

"Being in a class with lots of positive role models has been wonderful for her," Ish said. "At the beginning of the year she acted



Region 11

Francesca Cosentino

Lemoore High School, Lemoore Union High School District

Francesca Cosentino was just 11 when her mother left her for crack cocaine. Abandoned, and on a quest to find her mother, she took to the streets of Las Vegas.

During her early teenage years, Francesca spent most of her days drunk or high on speed or pot. She also frequently ditched school. Her self-esteem was so low that she contemplated suicide.

But with her foster mother's love and the support of an esteem-building substance abuse program, Francesca is on the rebound. She's gotten honor roll grades at Lemoore High School, is active in school clubs and serves as a community volunteer.

Her achievements have earned her the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 11.

"Francesca has demonstrated a great deal of inner strength and determination in order to change her life from dependence on drugs to a life where family, friends and God are her focus," said her vice principal/learning director Sandi Lowe in a nomination letter for the award.

Shortly after Francesca's mother abandoned her young daughter and husband, she landed in jail. She told Francesca she would return to her family after her release, but instead she deserted the family again.

Francesca was entrusted to the care of her stepfather. He provided a supportive environment for her, but she was determined to find her mother and ran away. After three weeks on the streets of Las Vegas, she turned herself in to Child Protective Services.

Francesca landed in the foster care system, but still continued her drinking and drug abuse. Finally, she found an advocate in foster mom Teresa Becker.

Becker enrolled Francesca in an after-school substance abuse recovery program where she was finally able to deal with her feelings of abandonment and low self-worth. Francesca also became a Christian during this time.

"She finally learned how to be a survivor and not a victim," Lowe said.

At the beginning of her sophomore year in high school Francesca moved to Lemoore to live with her aunt and uncle, Andrea and John Brinson. Given the support of a stable home life at last, Francesca has flourished academically and personally.

Her grade point average at Lemoore High School has soared to a 3.8. Francesca is also active in the LEAF environmental club, Rally Club, Peer Helpers and the California Scholarship Foundation. A special interest in the visual arts has provided her with a particular outlet for her emotions.

She also serves as a mentor and active volunteer for Central California CARES (Child Abuse and Abduction Response and Resistance Education Services).

Francesca's accomplishment recently earned her a spot at the National Young Leaders Conference in Washington, D.C. as a National Scholar.

Now a senior at Lemoore, Francesca relies on the continued support of assistant principal Jim Bennett and art instructor Clay Wagley, as well as Lowe, the Brinsons and members of her local Nazarene Church.



Region 12

Araceli Frazier

Eisenhower High School, Rialto Unified School District

When her foster family did not support her educational goals, Araceli Frazier used her own tools of self-reliance to accomplish them.

After arriving at Eisenhower High School 60 credits behind in her studies just three years ago, Araceli is now a first-year student at California State University, San Bernardino. Her remarkable academic comeback has earned her the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 12.

Araceli is a deserving recipient of the honor, said her school counselor at Eisenhower High in Rialto, Wendy Bettar. "Araceli has gone through a lot of tragedies in her life," Bettar said. "Even though she went off the right path at times, she knew what she had to do."

Araceli first experienced heartbreak when she was just 5. Her mother died and Araceli and her younger brother, Adrian, were placed in the foster care system in Southern California.

Luckily, Araceli was matched with a caring foster family in Claremont.

There she met first father figure in her life. But he, too, died when Araceli was 13.

In her anger and frustration, she lashed out at her family and others around her.

"I was very sad. I started to draw away from things," recalled Araceli, shortly before her high school graduation. "I used to be in Girl Scouts. I used to read. I quit all that."

She was placed in another series of foster homes. After several unsuccessful matches, Araceli found another caring mother, but she soon died of lung cancer. The woman's daughter took Araceli in, but kept the teenager out of school for long periods at a time. She finished her sophomore year at Eisenhower with only 6 credits when she should have had 120.

But Araceli made her own commitment to stay in school beginning in early 1996. Her battle back toward academic success had begun. She was determined to graduate with her class.

She was supported by the school's Advancement Via Individual Determination program and its coordinator Lynne Williams

Upon her return to school, Araceli immediately enrolled in the program, which gives an extra boost to at-risk students with strong academic potential.

"I heard other students talking about (AVID), and it sounded interesting," Araceli said.

She stuck with the rigorous program, although she faced many additional responsibilities during her junior and senior years. Because of her credit deficit, she was enrolled in numerous independent study program as well as her college prep classes.

"I had to take 10 classes (a semester)," Araceli said. "Surprisingly, I did very good."

Her secret?

"I look advantage of class time, really," Araceli said. "When everyone else was talking, I got my work done." She had to take advantage of any free time she had. Araceli also worked two part time jobs during high school to support herself in another foster home and later with the family of her boyfriend. And during the spring of her senior year, Araceli's daughter, Amber, was born.

Araceli is glad she persevered. AVID also includes tutoring and financial aid counseling for its students.

"A lot of other seniors are not aware of what is open to us," she said. "(Lynne Williams) helped us keep on top of things."

As she prepared to graduate, Araceli was looking toward a future that includes a college education. She and Amber planned to continue living with the baby's father's family while Araceli began her studies at CSUSB. Araceli is thinking about a career as an architect.

One last obstacle will be securing more financial aid to complete the scholarship package she has already received.

Araceli plans to work her hardest to find more funding.

"I'm going to keep my hopes high," she said.



Region 13

Toi Dennis

Santa Barbara High School, Santa Barbara High School District

Toi Dennis faced a double burden when she entered Santa Barbara High School in early 1995.

First, she was expecting a baby, due in the summer of that year. Secondly, she was just an eighth grader. The Santa Barbara Unified School District placed her in the high school because there was no other facility for educating a pregnant teenager. Toi worked on an independent study program with the teachers at the school.

Despite the extra support given to her by the Parent and Child Education program at the school, Toi was a trouble-maker. She fought with her fellow students and her teachers. She cut school and failed classes all through her eighth and ninth grade years, But during her sophomore year, Toi finally began to accept the support that had been given to her. After realizing she needed to change her attitude for the sake of her young daughter, Shai, Toi began to take a leadership role at the PAE center. She soon extended that role into other campus activities.

Most importantly Toi learned to express her emotions in positive ways. Her turnaround has earned her the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 13.

Looking back on her life, Toi, now a senior, sees the root of her earlier deficiencies: she was just trying to get someone's attention.

Her mother died when Toi was 3. Toi and her younger sister, Niki, were shuttled between relatives who provided short-term care. Later, the pair stayed with an older sister.

"I didn't have anyone to really raise me," Toi said. "My sister didn't really know what to do,."

As early as third grade, Toi remembers stabbing a classmate with a pencil when she didn't get her way. In junior high she began smoking cigarettes and skipping classes.

At Santa Barbara High, Toi initially lashed out at anyone in authority when she felt she was being challenged.

But gradually Toi began to open up to counselors trained to work with at-risk students. They helped Toi to resolve her conflict peacefully.

As Toi increasingly became willing to seek out her counselors' advice, they encouraged her to join the school's peer mediation program.

"It was a difficult transition," Toi said. "I was used to being a leader, but not in a good way."

But she decided to become involved for Shai's sake.

"I thought, 'I can't put my daughter through these (violent) situations,'" Toi said. "It was still ditching, but I stopped fighting."

An opportunity to join the school's step dance team, Dons with Flava, convinced Toi to improve her grades. Toi failed her first try-out for the team, which promotes an anti-drug message, because of her academic deficiencies. Through resource help, Toi had pulled her grade point average up from 1.8 in her sophomore year to a 3.6 by the end of her junior year.

"It was really hard. First I had to find my study hours," she said "I can't do my work when my daughter is awake."

Toi also has become more active with the PACE center, where Shai, now 3, attends pre-school. Toi was named the co-president of the center's Parent Club her junior year. She and other members of the club frequently visit local junior high schools to tell students about their experiences as teen parents.

"It affects them," Toi said. "If a girl had come to my class when I was 13 and talked to me about being pregnant I probably would have wailed (to have sex)."

But Toi also tries to present herself as an example to the young teenagers. Challenges and obstacles can be overcome through hard work, she said.

Toi now hopes to graduate from high school with honors and attend Santa Barbara City College's culinary program. Santa Barbara Assistant Principal Kathy Abney first met Toi as a freshman when she was sent to Abney's office for disciplinary problems. Now the two meet to discuss DWF, the PACE center and Toi's other campus activities.

"She's a role model for students and her sister," Abney said. "And she's a great mom."



Region 14

Sheryl Cooper

Compton Adult School, Compton Unified School District

Sheryl Cooper has never let adversity get her down. Using grit and determination, she managed to stay employed while battling a severe drug addiction. After 12 years as a cocaine addict, she finally completed a rehabilitation program, resolving to be a better mother to her young son.

The one circumstance she seemingly could not overcome was her lack of a high school diploma. But, after being turned down from a security job because she did not meet the position's education criteria, she conquered this challenge, too. Sheryl entered Compton Adult School more than 20 years after she had last attended school. She distinguished herself both in and out of the classroom at Compton. Sheryl assisted counselors in the school's guidance office, initiated a support group for other students battling addictions and was named her class valedictorian. For her academic and personal achievements Sheryl has received the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 14.

Sheryl figures her problems began back when she was about 12 years old, and her parents separated.

"My parents began to change. I thought my mom was too strict with me," Sheryl said.

By 16, she had left her family home in the Los Angeles area, but remained enrolled in school. When school authorities called Sheryl's mother in one day, she promptly dropped out rather than face her family.

She soon married her boyfriend, but after four years and the birth of two children, the couple separated amicably.

From that point on, Sheryl's "up and down roller coaster ride" began. Smoking marijuana became a release from her pain initially, but by 1984 she craved harder drugs, such as cocaine. The addictive qualities of that drug gripped Sheryl until 1996. She tried quitting several times, but her addiction was too strong.

Somehow she managed to hide her substance abuse from her employers, working those years as a certified nurse's aide, bus driver and administrative assistant. Sheryl was able to control her addiction on the job, but at home she fell apart, she explained.

She is proud to say that her four children (two from other relationships) were never taken away from her, but admits that her three older children, now 24, 23 and 21, missed out on a lot of love and attention.

"It was rough on my kids, but somehow they managed to turn out to be beautiful children," Sheryl said.

She began her turnaround with the birth of her son, Marquis, now 3. Wanting to be a better parent to him than she had been to her older children, she enrolled in an intensive out-patient drug treatment program. This time she stuck with it.

"I started connecting with people in the program. They would give these testimonies about how they rose up from the bottom," Sheryl said. "I said, 'this is for me.'"

Even with her victory over addiction, she still felt "incomplete" without a high school diploma. Failing to get the security job was the last straw for Sheryl.

"This was a \$5 an hour job, and I couldn't even get that," she said with exasperation.

Naturally, Sheryl said, after more than 20 years out of school, she was hesitant to return. As soon as she arrived at Compton Adult, her fears dissipated however.

"Once I got here and met (head counselor I Delores Adams and the staff, they were so supportive, there was no reason to be scared," Sheryl said. "I had found the right place."

At Compton, Sheryl excelled at subjects ranging from English to computer technology. She was known by all at the school for her excellent work ethic,

Adams recalls being impressed with Sheryl's desire to succeed in all areas of her schooling. Soon after she came to Compton Adult School, she asked Adams for permission to serve on the school's student council. Sheryl also developed the Life Management Skills group for students like herself who were coming to terms with life after drug and chemical dependency.

She's a highly motivated person, and she has a lot of aspirations for herself and Marquis." Adams said.

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Region 15

Guy "Joey" Stone

Pasadena High School, Pasadena Unified School District

As a sixth-grader Joey Stone made a decision many adults never have the courage to make. The youngster looked at the unstable family circumstances surrounding him—divorced parents, a custodial father with a drug problem and a mother with whom he did not have frequent contact—and decided to make a change for the better.

The perseverance and independence he has shown to take charge of his life earned him the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 15.

“I was on my own (in the family). You can get into a lot of trouble if you are left alone,” said Joey, a recent graduate of Pasadena High School.

He had always enjoyed his outings with his cousin, Jimmy Stone and Jimmy’s wife, Mary, and decided to ask the couple to let him move in with them. Eventually the Stones, who have three children of their own, gained custody of Joey.

“It was my own decision. I was aware of what was going on,” he said. “I took it upon myself.”

Now, six years later, Joey is able to explain his reasoning matter-of-factly. Cutting off ties with his parents wasn’t easy, he admits, but in time the hurt has abated. The self-reliance the experience taught him allowed him to pursue his own goals. Joey graduated from high school this year after completing a stellar high school athletic career and could soon embark on a career in the Navy.

“For him to realize at such a young age that he needed a more wholesome environment is a pretty strong statement,” said Pasadena High Principal Ben Ramirez, who nominated Joey for the ACSA award.

Ramirez met Joey for the first time two years ago when he enrolled at Pasadena High after moving from another district. Ramirez remembers being impressed by Joey’s good manners and uncommon strength of purpose—to live independently following high school graduation.

But Ramirez was also intrigued by Joey’s unusual living situation. Upon Ramirez’ asking, Joey did not hesitate to tell him how he came to live with the Stones.

As a star pitcher, Joey fit right into the baseball-loving family, he recalled. Jimmy and Joey constructed a batting cage in their backyard. Jimmy’s son played alongside Joey on the Pasadena High School baseball team. And it was his adopted family who cheered Joey on when Pasadena High made it to the league play-offs and he received most valuable player and all-league honors.

More importantly, the family made him feel welcome.

“They didn’t treat me any better or any worse than any of their kids,” Joey said.

As his senior year wore down, Joey’s pitching earned him the attention of local college coaches, who spoke to him about scholarship possibilities. Still, he leaned toward enlisting in the Navy.

Even with a scholarship to pay for school, Joey worried about living expenses. The Navy would give him a job, medical benefits and provide him with money to go to school later and possibly pursue a career in law enforcement, he thought.

“The Navy pays you to learn,” Joey said. “I have a goal of being a Navy SEAL and being one of the best in the world in special forces.”

He credits his cousin Jimmy with helping him stake this goal.

“Jimmy kept me out of the gang life. I don’t have a police record or anything else wrong with me,” Joey said. “The Navy SEALs only take those with the highest moral character; the cream of the crop. I’m glad I’m still eligible.”

Though he does not know the Stone family personally, Ramirez, too, singles them out for praise.

“It’s really something that needs to be recognized. They have children of their own. You never know if there is going to be instability (when another child comes into the household),” he said.

Joey recognizes this fact as well. He’s also drawn to enlist in the Navy because of the new home it will offer him. He’s determined to allow the Stones some time to be “a normal family.”

Once he leaves the Stones, Joey won’t be calling on his parents, however. That part of his life he has chosen to put in the past.

“They chose their life, and I’ll c



Region 16

Lenin “Leo” Morales

Cleveland High School, Los Angeles Unified School District

For many high school students, senior year represents a last hurrah for youth—one final time to spend with friends before heading out to the work world, college and adult responsibilities.

But Leo Morales, a student at Cleveland High School in Reseda, decided to take a different course during his senior year. He spent much of his free time last year with his family, particularly his 9-year-old sister, Karen.

“I get on her case. I try to do as much as I can so she doesn’t make the same decisions I did.” Leo said in a conversation shortly before his June graduation from Cleveland.

When Leo was his sister’s age, he was fast becoming taken in by neighborhood gangs. His parents had recently separated, and his mother was working long hours. In his loneliness and rage, he embraced the violent gang life.

It took both the tragic death of a close friend and the unceasing support of junior high and high school teachers to finally turn Leo's life around. Now that he has graduated, he plans to attend Santa Monica College. For his achievements, Leo earned the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 16.

A Guatemalan native, Leo spent his early years in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Chatsworth. From the time he was in elementary school, the gangs of the area proved an enticement to the youngster.

"I was bored. I was alone a lot," Leo said. "(The gangs) were just there. I dropped right in."

By sixth grade, Leo was attending school only sporadically. When he did attend, he frequently found himself in the midst of school-yard fights. A move out of the neighborhood for junior high did little to help his attitude. His grades suffered, and were it not for the intervention of his first educational ally, counselor Ed Jackson of Mt. Vernon Junior High, Leo is sure he would have been expelled.

It took the shooting of his best friends, Hector, in a drive-by gang-related incident to turn the center of Leo's life back to his family and education.

Hector was paralyzed in the shooting. Shortly after encouraging Leo to leave their gang and change his violent ways, Hector took his own life.

Leo was determined to change, but leaving the gang life was not easy, he soon found.

"You always had those people trying to keep you down," he said. "I had to change my dress. I had to change my speech. Leo likened the struggles he encountered during those years to a sad clown who has a smile painted on his face.

"He has a mask on. No one really knows what is going on inside," he said.

Several times he faltered in his mission. After first enrolling at one Los Angeles high school, Leo was soon transferred to another to protect him from gang members threatening him.

Leo's real turn-about came in the 11th grade when his family moved to the San Fernando Valley and he enrolled at Cleveland.

Always known as intelligent, for the first time Leo began to take his classes seriously. His teachers responded with support. Leo describes his relationship with computer teacher Rita Anderson as "a fabulous step on my way up the mountain."

During his senior year he worked as a computer network manager for Anderson and enrolled in AP English, Honors Math Analysis, economics and physics. "Now that I got my shot I'm taking advantage of it," Leo said.

He's also taking advantage of the time he has now to spend with his family.

After years away from Leo's mother and siblings, Leo's father returned to the family recently.

"That helped me a lot," Leo said.

He now, too, appreciates the time his mother put into providing for the family as a single mother for so many years. Leo intends to show his thanks to his family and teachers for their support by studying to be an engineer. He hopes to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology one day.



Region 17

Jolezlie Sanchez

La Sierra High School - Teenage Pregnancy & Parenting Program, Fullerton Joint Union High School District

Jolezlie Sanchez was born into a life primed for chaos. Over the years she has endured a disruptive home environment sexual abuse, life in foster homes and drug abuse.

Now at 18 and a high school senior, she has persevered to become a loving mother and wife, and a top student in Fullerton's La Sierra High School Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting program. For her efforts she has been named the recipient of ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 17.

Jolezlie's parents never graduated from high school, and they didn't expect her to either. From the beginning she didn't have too many role models.

Jolezlie's mother, then living in Blythe, went into labor with her daughter while pushing her broken-down truck after a night of partying.

As a young child, Jolezlie lived with her grandparents briefly, until their alcoholism, too, provided an unstable environment. She moved back in with her mother, only now to face her mother's drug abuse and her stepfather's sexual abuse. Jolezlie was then placed in a foster home.

After two years, Jolezlie returned to her mother, now living in Brea, married to another man and raising five children from two marriages.

During those disruptive early years, Jolezlie was, however, able to find one source of solace and constancy in her life—school.

“That was how I got away from every-thing. I would bury my head in a book,” she said. “That was my security.”

Despite frequent absences from school to care for her younger brothers and sisters, Jolezlie maintained good grades into her junior high years.

But as a young teenager, the pressures of her home environment finally overcame her. Jolezlie began using drugs and fell deeply into the Orange County gang scene. Her mother called her incorrigible and “a loser.” She left home at 13 to live alternately with friends, on the street and even in the back of a pickup.

“I was in a rebellious stage. I think everyone does that, but I did it to an extreme,” Jolezlie said.

She also dropped out of school, her former comfort.

“I thought, ‘My parents didn’t graduate, so why should I,’” she recalled.

Luckily by the time she was 15, Jolezlie found a friend who cared about her future. The help came from the most unlikely source, a man 12 years her senior who was her drug supplier.

Luis Sanchez convinced Jolezlie to stop using drugs, and together they began to clean up their lives. Jolezlie moved in with Luis and soon found herself pregnant with the couple’s first child, Justin, now 3.

Luis was the one who encouraged her to return to school and enroll in La Sierra’s TAPP Program. She entered the school with only 15 previous academic credits, but with an opportunity to complete her education while receiving on-site child care.

“I didn’t want to go. He forced me,” Jolezlie recalled. “He was telling me that education was the best thing I could do for myself.”

Her unwilling attitude toward school showed in her first year at La Sierra. Jolezlie missed school regularly, was unco-operative with staff and did not socialize with other students in the program, said La Sierra Assistant Principal Linda Miller, who nominated Jolezlie for the Every Student Succeeding Award.

But after Jolezlie gave birth to her second child, Emily, and married Luis, a transformation came over her.

“All of a sudden I opened my eyes and said, ‘I have to do this,’” she said.

She began attending school regularly. She volunteered to help tutor other La Sierra students who were struggling with basic skills and received every award that is given at TAPP. She is a model for the other TAPP students, Miller said.

“Jolezlie even picks up other girls in her car and takes them to school,” she said. “If one of them says she’s not going that day, Jolezlie will say, ‘Go get dressed. I’m waiting for you.’”

Jolezlie’s husband has played a large role in her success, said Miller. Luis and Jolezlie have not missed a Family Night at the school, despite the fact that Luis works nights as



Region 18

Rommel Nanasca

Twin Peaks Middle School, Poway Unified School District

Since infancy, a degenerative muscle condition known as spinal muscular atrophy has deprived 14- year-old Rommel Nanasca of much of his physical strength, but never his strong spirit.

Despite his frequent school absences due to illness and his susceptibility to fatigue during the school day, Rommel is an honor student. His perseverance has earned him the Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 18.

Rommel, a freshman at Poway High School, must adhere to a strict medical routine each school day.

After an early-morning wake-up call, Rommel undergoes a breathing treatment to shake the build-up of secretions in his lungs. His father, Romie, helps him into a plastic vest that supports his upper body and hooks up a feeding tube into his intestines.

At school, Rommel gets around in a specially fitted wheelchair that allows him to sit upright. A modified school schedule allows him to rest several times a day. Rommel’s student health care specialist, Becky Draper, accompanies him from class to class and to the restroom.

Rommel’s special schedule and accommodations require dedicated teamwork from Poway Unified School District’s transportation, health services, special education, administrative and support staff.

Yet, Rommel seems to take these extra challenges all in stride. He explains the details of his medical condition in a matter-of-fact way to others.

“I like to find out a lot of the medical information myself,” Rommel said.

Rommel's 10-year-old brother, Ariel, suffers from a milder form of muscular atrophy. The two share a bond because of their similar conditions, but Rommel emphasizes that the two bicker and grouse like any two brothers. Rommel also seemingly takes an aw-shucks attitude to Draper's constant presence—accompanying him to the restroom, the cafeteria with his friends and every class.

"Becky is pretty good," Rommel admitted. "She stays behind me and doesn't get in the way. She doesn't act like a mom."

Rommel's former assistant principal at Twin Peaks Middle School in Poway, Jennie Smith, is also impressed by his altitude.

"The adversity he encounters every day - he's very blasé about it," she said. "It's just the way things are."

In class, Draper helps Rommel take notes and often writes his classwork for him. Rommel dictates his thoughts to her. Some students might see this arrangement as easier than doing your work alone. But Rommel explains that it takes extra time to communicate his thought processes and exact wording to another person.

"I try to explain my thoughts as clearly as possible," he said.

In school Rommel excels at mathematics and computer classes. During his free time at school he enjoys reading, particularly mystery, science fiction and horror novels.

At home, Rommel tries to do most of his homework alone. His older sister, Melanie, and his mother, Melorna, assist him when he gets tired.

During his years at Twin Peaks, Rommel was held in the highest regard by his classmate and teachers, Smith said.

"When he read a book report in class you could hear a pin drop," she said. "He commanded the utmost respect of the kids. They saw how hard he had to work."

The respect that is afforded Rommel was on full display the day he graduated from Twin Peaks, Smith said.

"When his name was announced the entire eighth grade class erupted into applause," she said.

Region 1

Kristin Zablocki

Jefferson High School, Siskiyou UHSD

Kristin Zablocki has overcome some large hurdles to get to where she stands today: a successful graduate of Jefferson High School in Mt. Shasta and the Region 1 representative for the Every Student Succeeding program.

After a troubled ninth grade year, Kristin reached a point where she felt the best thing she could do was to move out of her mother's home. For the next three years she moved from friend's house to friend's house, even on one occasion moving in with a school staff member for a few months,

"It was pretty bad being homeless," Kristin said, "I was doing drugs and stuff like that."

Because of the erratic living situation, her 10th grade attendance fluctuated. But when she did attend school, her teachers noticed that she seemed interested and took an active part.

"Kristin has been on her own since she was 14 or 15," said Merlina Phillips, one of Kristin's teachers "She's had little support from home and has had to take care of herself- do it all on her own. When she came in here, school was not a priority for her."

In her junior year, two things set her life on firmer footing. First, she made graduating high school a goal. Second, a friend took her to church, where she met other kids her age who had turned their lives around. This inspired her to quit doing drugs and to attend school regularly. She also received support at school.

"I just decided it was time to turn myself around," Kristin said.

"I kind of took her under my wing." Phillips said. "I got a little more involved with Kristin than I would with other kids who had more parental support. I pushed her to do the things she was capable of doing. I also helped her find scholarships and helped her fill out financial aid forms."

"Ms. Phillips helped me by telling me I could do it and being there for me," Kristin said.

Kristin faced one of her biggest hurdles as her senior year began. She needed 124 credits to graduate on time.

Facing the odds, many kids would have thrown in the towel. But Kristin made a commitment to attend school every day from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. With almost perfect attendance, she was able to complete all her schoolwork as well as the extra work required to make up the credits she needed.

She was even able to find time to write a student-generated leadership grant to provide healthy alternatives to teen smoking at lunchtime. In her senior year she was named Student of the Grading Period and received several awards in various classes.

Principal Jim Burger understands the significance of helping students like Kristin.

"I think it's phenomenally important," he said. "I'm new to the school this year, and I've found Kristin to be a lovely, highly motivated person. Just a pleasure to be around. I understand it wasn't like that last year. She had terrible attendance and a bad attitude.

"What I really did was be supportive," Burger said. "Encouraging her when I could. I'd do that by talking with her, checking in and seeing how she was doing."

Phillips agreed that Burger's support made a difference.

"It was his first year, but he came in and showed he really understood the needs of the students," she said.

Phillips also credited Jefferson High's previous principal, Dick Holmes, currently superintendent of the Siskiyou High School District, for his help.

"He alerted me about the Every Student Succeeding program and thought it would be a good thing for Kristin. He helped me fill out the paperwork for her to apply." Phillips said.

Kristin has now made the decision to enter the profession of nursing. She's enrolled in a local community college for the 1999-00 school year.

For her high school senior project, she worked as a nurse's aide for the Mercy Medical Center in Mt. Shasta. She was awarded a \$500 Catholic Healthcare West scholarship for students entering the healthcare field.



Region 2

Josephine Selvester

Del Oro High School, Placer UHSD

Josie Selvester, ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Award recipient from Region 2, has had to grow up much faster than her fellow schoolmates.

"The hardest thing was just making it through every day," Josie said. "I was on my own at 15 and I had to provide for myself. So it was hard just surviving day to day."

When she entered ninth grade, Josie's mom was temporarily incarcerated. This left Josie living in a house with another adult, but she was responsible for herself. She did her own shopping, fixed her own meals, and managed to eke out a living on sparse Social Security money from her father, who died when Josie was 12.

The lack of adult supervision led Josie to make some unhealthy decisions and in turn gave her a bad attitude at school. She drew the attention of her school counselor, who noted that Josie seemed negative and aggressive, and looked hard and angry. Her school problems also stemmed from a spotty attendance record from elementary school on.

"Josie reacted with anger to the adults around her, She wasn't in a gang, but she was heading in that direction," said Sheryl Wilson, Josie's counselor at Del Oro High in the Placer Union High School District.

Josie credits Wilson for helping her turn her life around.

"She helped me out with a lot of different things," Josie said. "She helped me with the group I was in, ALLY. When my mom and I had a lot of problems with her in jail and everything, (Wilson) gave me the tools to get by."

Josie found what she was looking for in the school support group program called ALLY. The program introduced her to healthy, productive activities. She discovered an affinity for athletics, and even competed in a mini-triathlon, "ALLY is basically a support group for at-risk kids," Wilson said "We counsel them a lot, We read them the riot act when they need it. We just love them a lot."

Instrumental in the support group was ACSA's Monte White, Del Oro High assistant principal.

"He's a really caring man," Wilson said. "He started a garden which became significant for a lot of the kids, including Josie. She brought her mom over and they watered the vegetables together."

"I like the ALLY group because it lets me take off my administrative hat and allows me to be just another person and be accepted by these kids," White said. "I give all the credit to Josie for her success. We just provide the support mechanism for these kids.

"We started the garden about three years ago and it's been a real success. Every year we donate about 100 to 150 pounds of vegetables to St. Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen up here. Josie was kind of a ringleader with the garden. She had a real green thumb."

"Mr. White helped me a lot," Josie said. "The first day I came in to high school, I came with a bad attitude. He singled me out and talked to me.

"There were a lot of times when he could have just thrown up his hands and kicked me out, but he didn't. He got me into running and gardening.

"The gardening was a good thing for me to do with my time. We took food down to the soup kitchen. When I was homeless I got food from them, so it was good to give something back."

Josie is now enrolled at American River College. The discovery of her affinity for growing things has led to an interest in pursuing study in forestry, agriculture or conservation science.

White said he feels good when a student like Josie succeeds.

"It's so gratifying to see it happen," he said. "You may only get the chance to see something like that once every two or three years. To see a student like Josie succeed is so great. She's had to overcome a lot in her life. It's been a real mark of perseverance."

Josie's support team also includes teacher Terry Barker and ALLY advisors Larry Jenks and Lorrie Lewis, both of the Placer County Sheriff's Department.



Region 3

Javier Garcia

C. K. McClatchy High School, Sacramento City USD

Lots of students have jobs while they're in high school. But not too many know the challenges Javier Garcia has faced. In the 10th grade, Javier found himself the principal provider for his family.

Region 3's Every Student Succeeding Award recipient recently graduated from C.K. McClatchy High School in Sacramento. With both his parents disabled and chronically ill, Javier was forced to become the chief breadwinner in the family early in his high school career.

Javier got a job with an auto body and paint shop in the summer of his junior year. Slowly but surely, his hard work helped him become a valuable and trusted employee. But when the summer was over, he worried about his ability to schedule both work and school.

"I had to bring in money to help pay the bills," Javier said simply. "Since both my parents are disabled and can't work, it's up to me and my brothers to take care of things. My brothers were going to school, so I had to bring in some money." It would have been very easy for Javier to drop out at this point and concentrate on earning the money his family needed to survive.

Instead, he chose to buckle down and work out a way to attend school and keep working at the same time. Javier began asking questions around school, inquiring about how he could keep his job and still keep up in his classes. He landed in the Career Center, where he enrolled in an auto body class in the Regional Occupation Program. Inside of a week, he was back at work, earning school credits while getting paid.

That was in large part thanks to the work of Career Information Technician Pat Rademacher.

"Javier started out in his job as just a part-time person who would come in and clean up and do odd jobs," Rademacher said. "But Javier is so good and so conscientious a worker that they began to teach him the trade."

So Rademacher, with Principal Kathleen Whelan's blessing, arranged for Javier to enroll in an ROP class and get school credit for the work he was doing.

His ROP class required him to spend much time and expense traveling: from home to his ROP class many miles away, then to work and back home again, a time-consuming effort. Despite this grueling schedule, he managed to keep up in his school- work, and still somehow find time to care for his parents.

But suddenly this delicate balance was upset when Javier's employer was forced to cut and change his hours. Javier might have lost his job or dropped out of school at that point were it not for the intervention of Rademacher. Working along with Javier's employer, she saw to it that Javier's class hours were adjusted and his employer decided to make Javier a permanent employee with an increase in salary and benefits. Javier praised Rademacher for being such a big help to him. He's also grateful for the help he has received from Whelan.

"She got me into the ROP class by adding an extra desk in there so I'd have a place to sit," Javier said.

"We were running out of room so we just kind of tucked him in there," Whelan said.

"A lot of kids want everything done for them," Rademacher said. "Javier's not like that. He comes from a very hardworking family. Both his parents are disabled, and his mother is in a wheelchair. Although everybody helps out, Javier has taken on the brunt of the responsibility for the care of his mother. So we did everything we could to help him. We just adore him here."

"I know his family and all the kids have a fantastic sense of duty as far as taking care of the parents," Whelan said.

"Javier has overcome so much that it makes it all worthwhile when you see a student like him succeed."

Javier has now graduated. He managed to persevere through a tough senior year that found him handling long hours with both school and work. Despite his demanding schedule, Javier had an excellent attendance record at school. He has managed to keep an upbeat outlook on life despite everything thrown his way. And he has big plans for his life.

"I'm going to college," he said



Region 4

Stephanie Williams

Clover Valley High School, Upper Lake UHSD

Stephanie Williams, ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Award recipient from Region 4, is a student who has turned herself all the way around.

When she entered Upper Lake Union High School District's Clover Valley High School, the people who knew her used phrases such as "gigantic chip on her shoulder," "negative attitude," "profound disrespect" and "overly stubborn and opinionated" to describe her.

But Stephanie's attitude was more a shell in which to hide. rather than the exemplification of a truly bad kid. Living on her own, without any help from her mother who lives elsewhere, the teenager had developed a defensive posture.

“Stephanie’s home situation was not the best,” said Joann Murphy, a registrar/aide at Clover Valley High. “Her mother led what you might call an alternative type lifestyle. She pretty much left Stephanie on her own to provide for herself.” Stephanie’s bad attitude at school got her suspended numerous times from Clover Valley High. She walked around with a perennial frown, and people couldn’t even look at her without setting off her defensive mechanisms “She was very stubborn and opinionated at that time, and had a very bad temper,” Murphy recalled. “Stephanie is a young lady who overcame a rough start,” said ACSA’s Ed Zimmerman, former superintendent/principal of Upper Lake UHSD. “When Stephanie came in here as a freshman, she was coming from a broken home. She had been the victim of an abusive stepparent. She didn’t like herself and she would react in anger to the people around her.” That behavior led to a transfer from the district’s comprehensive high school to Clover Valley, a continuation high school. “After she transferred we saw an improvement in her attendance and her grades,” Zimmerman said. “She was behind in units, so we convinced her to attend double sessions and summer school.” “I counseled Stephanie and in turn she trusted me.” Murphy said. “I helped her with her explosive anger. When she’d flare up I’d take her outside and show her how she had to learn to control her anger She’d think about it and come back to me later and say, ‘You were absolutely right about that.’” This year she found the focus she needed at school when she began to study culinary arts. The change in her was noticeable to all. She began to wear a smile instead of a frown, She lost the chip on her shoulder and now listens respectfully to adults and comports herself in a much more level-headed way. “Stephanie has turned out to be a very lovely, lovely young lady,” Murphy said. “As she matured she learned how to listen and how to express her opinion in an acceptable manner. She learned more self-control and became more goal-oriented.” “Stephanie got caught up on her credits in her senior year and became the star of the culinary class,” Zimmerman said, “We have a school board meeting where the students from the cooking unit provide food, and Stephanie got to plan all the refreshments for the meeting.” Now the words those around her choose to describe her are “blossomed,” “picked herself up by the boot straps” and “matured.” By her senior year, Stephanie was maintaining a 3.5 grade point average and had excellent attendance. She has now entered the Job Corps and is earning to be a chef. She owes much to the staff at Clover Valley High, who could see beneath her hard outer shell to tell that she needed a lot of TLC to become the mature young lady she is today. Stephanie’s ESS support team also included former Clover Valley High Principal William Christian.



Region 5

Yaminah White

Mark Twain High School, San Francisco USD

Yaminah White battled illness throughout high school. Until then, everything was fine. But shortly after she entered her final years of K-12 education, she became ill.

Overcoming the difficulties she faced has earned her recognition as ACSA’s Every Student Succeeding Award recipient from Region 5.

Yaminah was diagnosed with abdominal migraines. The pain from the disease and treatment was so debilitating she could not attend school

“When Yaminah first entered high school she had her intestinal problem.” said Erma Cobb, immediate past president of ACSA Region 5 and principal of Mark Twain High School in the San Francisco Unified School District. “The problem forced her to do home study for over two years. Because she got so far behind in her studies. she couldn’t go back to the school she had originally attended. and that’s when she came to Mark Twain.”

When Yaminah finally felt well enough to go back to school, she was far behind in her education. A friend, Natasha Pulliam, suggested Yaminah attend Mark Twain High with her. Going to school with a good friend seemed to really help Yaminah. She made steady progress academically and socially. She was an honors student and her mother was active in the school and with the district parents association.

“That’s where I really got to know Yaminah,” Cobb said. “Her mother was the connection. She was very active in the parent groups we have at school. Also her (other) daughters had been former students of mine.”

However, the specter of illness fell over Yaminah's life once again. This time it hit her mother.

Yaminah dropped out of summer school to help take care of her mother, but came back with a renewed sense of purpose in the fall. Her attendance was excellent, and she was doing better than ever academically. Her mother, though still ill, frequently supported her at school.

Although everything seemed to be going well, the specter of illness had not really gone away. Yaminah's mother had developed ovarian cancer. In order to spare her children the grief she knew it would cause them, Yaminah's mother kept the information from them until she was so sick she had to be hospitalized. Three weeks after entering the hospital, Yaminah's mother died.

"That set Yaminah back physically because of the stress," Cobb said. "She also started to go over the edge behaviorally. She would do things she never would have done if her mother were around. Things like using profanity and being difficult."

Yaminah and her siblings went to live with their aunt, who already had two daughters and a son of her own.

Yaminah returned to school, a changed person. She was hostile, resentful, irresponsible and defiant. But these were just symptoms of the devastating grief that Yaminah felt at the loss of her mother.

Although understandable in hindsight, Yaminah's acting out caused great stress to her family. But with a lot of support from them, her friends and the Mark Twain staff, Yaminah pulled herself out of her rut and once again became the positive, smiling, sweetly soft-spoken person she had been before.

"It was extremely important to me to see that change," Cobb said. "Because Yaminah could have continued that downward spiral. We've had young female students here like that, and we've lost them completely."

Yaminah's renewed spirit led to renewed efforts on behalf of her education. She was able to graduate early. She now plans to attend San Francisco State University, with hopes of entering the health care field.

Yaminah has demonstrated a strong desire to be successful in her schooling and her career, said Twain's head counselor Helen Hill.

"I have watched Yaminah mature emotionally and grow academically," Hill said. "She has navigated some of the unexpected stresses of life and has reached some of her goals. She is a deserving young woman who is ready to take her place in the adult world."



Region 6

Vanessa Graciano

Island High School, Alameda City USD

Vanessa Graciano is a student whose struggle for personal success and academic achievement is a benchmark for others, earning her the Region 6 ACSA Every Student Succeeding Award.

Vanessa transferred to Alameda Unified's Island High School, which provides alternative education, after falling off her graduation path due to insufficient credits and irregular school attendance.

"I had dropped out because I got pregnant," she said "When my son was about three months old I decided I wanted to go back to school."

But the demands of motherhood interfered with her schoolwork.

"Vanessa missed about two or three years of school," said Michael Easterday, one of Vanessa's teachers at Island High, "When she finally got back in, she was way behind in credits."

Before she returned to school, the father of her child was both physically and mentally abusive to Vanessa, she said. A number of times he threatened to kill her and her baby.

"The father of my son wouldn't let me go to school, he wouldn't let me do anything," she said. "Finally I got tired of it and decided to go back and live with my mom and go back to school."

Finding the courage to leave the abusive relationship gave Vanessa confidence in other areas of her life. She went from being a student who teachers felt always needed assistance, to being a highly productive learner. Her efforts have earned her eligibility for various student awards and academic recognition.

Some of the credit for being able to graduate goes to Easterday, who was also Vanessa's school advisor.

"I made sure she was taking the courses she needed," he said. "Also, I was making sure she was taking care of all her outside work for which she was getting extra credit.

"I made sure she was completing her senior portfolio. In a lot of ways. I acted as her coach, especially during her senior year."

“Mr. Easterday was very nice to me,” Vanessa said. “It encouraged me to do are projects, which I really love doing. He helped me work lo gel my credits. He was a real mentor to me.”

Easterday said considerable credit also goes lo the principal of Island High School, ACSA’s Joseph Angeles.

“He started an outreach into the community,” Easterday said, “So Vanessa got the chance to meet with a lot of outside groups. He also chose her to be the student representative on the school board.”

‘Mr. Angeles was a great principal. He encouraged me to do lots of things in school. All of my teachers were great too,” Vanessa said, listing in particular Kevin Hennessee, Mimi Fruehan, Dan Salsbury and Tina Kreitz, who all acted as advisors to SAPID, a teen parenting panel with which Vanessa was very active. They were all part of Vanessa’s ESS sup- port team. Angeles said his role included en-couraging Vanessa to look toward the future.

“I was mainly very involved with helping Vanessa plot a path for after high school,” he said. “When I first met her she was pretty much thinking of stopping her education after she graduated from high school. I urged her to look at attending community college or a four-year college.

“I also got her involved with some scholarships that were offered in the community. That was something Vanessa had never really considered doing. So I encouraged her to apply and go out and meet some of these people and groups who were outside the realm of her experience.”

Vanessa has been active in various community and school activities. She served as the school-site student representative to the Alameda Board of Education. She also took an active part in the SAPID teen parenting panel, speaking out to her peers on the subject of teen pregnancy. Angeles said Vanessa exemplifies the Every Student Succeeding philosophy.

“I think that sometimes alternative education is the forgotten path,” he said. “It’s very important to see that a student like Vanessa, who has gone from being a teen mother to being the valedictorian of her class, can succeed, It sets the tone for the Every Student Succeeding program



Region 7

Tom Griffiths

Sonora High School, Sonora UHSD

Tom Griffiths has traveled a long road back. When he was in the eighth grade, in May 1993, he fell off the back of a pickup truck and suffered a serious head injury. But this brave young man has battled back to become ACSA’s Every Student Succeeding Award recipient in Region 7.

The accident injured Tom’s skull and brain. He was unconscious for 23 days. Surgery was required in which portion of his skull bone and a section of damaged brain were removed.

“Tom had to have a metal piece inserted into his skull,” said Ellen Beck, Tom’s counselor at Sonora High School. “There were times during parts or the process where they didn’t know if he’d live or not.”

When he finally regained consciousness, Tom had to relearn many of the day-to-day activities he once took for granted—things like swallowing, walking and talking. He began a lengthy process of rehabilitation, which continued when he was released from the hospital after a stay of 66 days. Owing to the seriousness of his injury, Tom had to wear a specially designed helmet.

He entered high school in fall of 1993 as an independent study student. His teachers had to work dili-gently with him because he was at an elementary level.

After two years of independent study, Tom had surgery to place the protective plate in his skull.

He had trouble keeping up in school, though, and had to leave for a year while he relearned necessary living skills. He did receive tutoring help in this time. His mother also worked extensively with him. Finally, he was able to return to school.

“It was very difficult for me when I went back,” Tom said.

Tom returned to school with the initial goal of earning a graduate equivalency diploma. But his determi-nation won out, and in 1998 he decided to return to Sonora High and complete his high school diploma. He worked his way up to carrying a full six-class load, along with a number of adult school classes.

“I had talked to some older people who were business leaders,” he said. “They told me that getting a high school diploma was better than getting a GED. It gave me a lot more work, though.”

Tom received plenty of assistance from the people at Sonora High. ACSA Principal Roger Francis provided much-needed encouragement.

"I've known Tom's family for a long time," Francis said "In fact, I went to school with Tom's mother. I just provided encouragement to Tom that it was possible for him to go for his high school diploma and not just a GED I was just there to provide an opportunity for Tom, all the credit goes to him."

"Mr. Francis has been a friend of our family's for a long time," Tom said. "He was very concerned about me and how I was doing."

Tom also received encouragement from agriculture science teacher Ron Arington.

"I've known Tom's family since he was very young," Arington said. "I taught Tom's sister before him. so I was aware of his situation."

Arington helped Tom nurture his longtime interest in agriculture, providing supervision on a lamb project that Tom recently showed at the county fair.

"He did pretty good." Arington said. "It humbles me to think that I may have had a small part in helping Tom. As a teacher, I believe my job is to build students up, to open doors for them and give them a chance to suc-ceed.

"I like Tom because I admire students who have active, witty minds. It's great to see him succeed."

"Mr. Arington ... knows me and knows what I went through," Tom said. "He's been a good friend."

In addition to Beck, Francis and Arington, Tom also received academic support from teachers Ed Charlton and Max Lemon

Tom graduated from Sonora High this year, and has distinguished himself as a person who can overcome the hurdles life throws his way.

"It was extremely exciting for me to get to give him his diploma," Francis said. "It's great to see a student like Tom succeed. That's why we're in this business."

Tom now has big plans for his future.

"I'm going to community college to get some of my general education



Region 8

Angel Ibarra

Caroline Davis Intermediate School, Oak Grove ESD

Angel Ibarra is lucky to be here today. About five years ago, he was in on automobile accident that killed his father, mother. sister and paternal uncle.

Angel was the sole survivor, having been pulled from the burning car. He spent eight long months in the hospital, recovering from traumatic head injury and the burns he received in the accident.

Angel's triumphant recovery from such a heart-breaking interruption to his life has earned him recognition as ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Award recipient from Region 8.

By the time Angel re-entered school in the Oak Grove ESD, his academic ability had regressed. He was still in a state of grief. To complicate matters; he was now living with his aunt and grandmother, and had to establish a relationship with his new extended family.

"That was a big thing for Angel because he was going to live with a family he didn't know," said ACSA's Yvette Irving, Angel's Resource Specialist Program teacher.

And Angel had never before been n candidate for special education. But because of his brain injury, he was enrolled in a bilingual/special day class program. After three years, he was assigned to the Resource Specialist Program as a student at Caroline Davis Intermediate School.

Angel was fortunate in having Irving there to help him at both the elementary and middle school levels.

"Angel was in the hospital for eight months after the accident, and I got him right after that," Irving said. "I checked his school records and he'd been a normal student all the way up to the accident. By sixth grade we got him ready to make the transition to middle school, and he made the transition to Davis Intermediate at the same time I started working there."

Angel participates fully in the program at Davis, Irving said. "He's still RS status because of his injuries, but he's made tremendous strides academically and socially."

Also playing roles in Angel's success were Principal Gary Francis and Vice-Principal Art Peters, both of whom are ACSA members.

"Art facilitated Angel coming to Davis," Irving said. "He helped Angel get involved in student activities and looked after him."

“My role with Angel was mainly to talk with him on a regular basis,” Peters said. “I tried to make it a point to talk with him at least once a week. I’d find out how things were going with him, how things were going with his classmates. We’d talk about conflict resolution sometimes. “As far as school activities, I did take him down and introduce him to our shop teacher when he expressed interest in working with plastics and metals. I also introduced him to the teacher of our arts club where the students throw their own pottery.”

Francis played a similar role in helping Angel, Irving said.

“He looked after him. He also helped facilitate Angel’s aunt and uncle getting involved in our parenting classes,” she said. “That was instrumental in helping them with Angel as he went through adolescence.”

Angel has come a long way. Although he still becomes saddened when classroom activities remind him of his immediate family loss, he is steadfast in moving forward toward his goal of rediscovering the skills he lost in the accident.

The success of students such as Angel is extremely important in Oak Grove ESD, Peters said,

“That is the focus of our entire district,” he said. “In the case of Angel, the issue was to help him feel connected so he could learn in the classroom. We want him to feel and be successful.”



Region 9

Juan Santos

Fresno High School, Fresno USD

Juan Santos is a young man who has turned himself around, earning the ACSA Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 9.

Juan has gone from a troubled youngster involved in a neighborhood gang to an upstanding citizen who has risen through the Junior Reserve Officer Training Program to attain the rank of captain.

When Juan entered Fresno High School in 1994, he was headed for trouble. He had succumbed to peer pressure and was hanging out with a local gang.

“I was in trouble a lot. I didn’t care,” Juan said. “I thought nobody would help me out - help me to get an education or get a job.”

“Initially, Juan was into the gang lifestyle,” said Robert Reyes, principal of Fresno High. “He wasn’t a hardcore gang member, more of a wannabe. But because of that he was not interested in school or Academics.”

The turning point came when he joined the Junior ROTC. The discipline required of him there enabled him to quit his gang affiliation all over his junior year.

When Juan came in here, he was your typical 14- year old gang member,” said Dennis Kirstein, teacher at Fresno High and Juan’s commanding officer in the Junior ROTC. “I think joining the ROTC program here at Fresno High helped him turn himself around.”

“Before joining ROTC I didn’t know what to do in life,” Juan said, “but when I joined, (Col. Kirstein) helped me decide what to do with my life. He helped me learn leadership and responsibility. He showed me how to motivate myself and how to work as part of a team.”

Kirstein said joining ROTC helped Juan find his leadership potential.

“He became a member of our color guard,” he said. “It gave him a feeling of responsibility and helped him recognize that he could graduate.”

“The Junior ROTC program gave him a discipline and a family-type support,” Reyes said. “That hooked him. He started doing better in his classes. Because of the support Juan received he was able to leave the gang lifestyle.”

However, he had already fallen off graduation track, due to poor attendance and grades. Being limited English proficient and a Title I student only made the obstacles to graduation higher.

As his senior year ended, Juan realized he would not graduate on time. He requested permission to return to Fresno High as a fifth-year senior. With the backing of teachers and other administrators. Principal Reyes allowed Juan to return.

Juan has lived up to the confidence placed in him by maintaining a 3.75 GPA or better in his extra year. He graduated this month.

“In a large high school that’s impacted by enrollment like ours, we have to look at each student request to come back for an extra year, and make a decision based on the interest of the kid,” Reyes said. “Initially with Juan, the answer was leaning to ‘no.’ But his commanding officer came in and personally appealed to let Juan come back.

“He said Juan had made significant changes in his life, and he was sure he’d graduate if given the chance. Based on that, I said ‘yes’ to getting him back in here.”

“Mr. Reyes has helped me with my education,” Juan said. “He knew I could do it if he gave me a chance. I also knew if I had any kind of a problem I could come to him.”

Juan also demonstrated adult responsibility as he rose through the ranks of the Junior ROTC. As captain, he was responsible for the supplies and uniforms of his battalion. His

commander says he has repeatedly shown strong leadership skills. As part of ROTC, he planned and coordinated his participation in monthly community service projects. He also found time to participate on the school football team, as well as the ROTC Honor Guard and drill teams.

Juan is now enrolled in college, with thoughts of becoming a teacher. He has succeeded in not only becoming a successful student, but a promising young adult.

“I want to be somebody in life now,” he said.



Region 11

Obdulio Contreras

Exeter Union High School, Exeter UHSD

Obdulio Contreras is one of those students who make you marvel at the amount of perseverance they show. Excelling in school, despite the odds stacked against him, Obdulio has earned ACSA’s Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 11. Born in Mexico, Obdulio was stricken with polio at a very young age. He was left without the use of his legs but nothing can slow

down this determined young man.

The road to school success hasn’t been easy, though.

“I had to wake up at 5 a.m. so I could have time to get ready and put my braces on,” Obdulio said. “They were a little hard for me because I had to tie 10 belts across my legs and back. I depended a lot on others, like my brothers, for help.

“I also needed help getting on the bus. The steps were a little high. It was hard in school because I had to walk a lot, since my classes were in different rooms.”

Language could have been another barrier to Obdulio, but it was simply another challenge to conquer. Moving to America in his ninth-grade year, he was able to learn English at a rapid rate. He skipped the lower levels of his English as a second language program, and tackled the more challenging courses taken by the regular English students.

Obdulio hasn’t let his handicap keep him from the full school experience. He has been an active participant in clubs and a frequent supporter of school athletics. From the very beginning, he let the teachers and staff of Exeter Union High School know that he wanted to make the most of his education, with no special considerations.

In the summer before his senior year, Obdulio underwent serious and potentially threatening surgery to straighten the curve in his spine. After the surgery, he couldn’t leave his bed for several weeks. When the school year started, Obdulio was right back in class, wheeling around campus wearing a painful body brace.

Despite the pain and great inconvenience, Obdulio persevered, earning above average grades in his first attempts at college prep English, government and word processing.

“I had to have two surgeries,” Obdulio said. “I had one surgery on my left foot, where they put a pin in from my ankle to my toes. That was a little painful, and I was in the hospital for two days. After I got out, I was in a cast and had to use a wheelchair. “Then they did a surgery to take out a broken rib I had. They did a six-hour scoliosis surgery, where they put a rod in my back. That straightened out my back a little. I had to wear this shell that was really tight. It was painful all day. Sometimes I had to ask my teachers if I could go lie down in the nurse’s room or take pills for the pain.”

Through all this, Obdulio had the support of many people at Exeter Union High. On his support team was guidance associate Margarita Reed.

“She helped me a lot,” Obdulio said. “She would ask me how I was doing and how I was handling the pain. She asked me how I was doing in all my classes. When I was out for the surgery, I got way behind and she helped me out.”

“I can’t say enough good things about Obdulio,” Reed said. “He’s a good kid. He’s a good artist and he’s really smart. He’s always willing to help, no matter what it is you need.

“Obdulio is the kind of person that makes you forget he’s in a wheelchair. He doesn’t let that limit him. All the kids here liked him, from the valedictorian to the jocks to the aggies. Everybody knew who he was and they all liked him. He’s really been an inspiration to everybody here at the high school.”

Another person who assisted Obdulio was Assistant Principal Bruce Brandt.

“He would get sad when he saw I was in bad pain,” Obdulio said. “He didn’t like to see me sad, so he would tell me jokes and make me laugh. He helped me to have fun, even when I was in pain.”

Brandt deflected the praise back to Obdulio.

“He became a symbol of what’s possible for everyone when you apply yourself,” Brandt said. “I just took on a counseling role with Obdulio.”

Obdulio has faced and overcome many of the risk factor



Region 12

Silvia Lamas

Val Verde High School, Val Verde USD

When she was 10 years old, Silvia Lamas probably didn’t envision herself being where she is today. She has come a long way to earn ACSA’s Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 12,

Silvia was already running with California gangs by the time she was 10. “I was a ‘chola,’ a gangster,” she said. Her friends were older and lived in a crack house across the street. They were the people she turned to for protection and companionship. She didn’t listen to her parents, and she saw no need for school. She was learning about “life.”

She was 12 years old when she became pregnant.

As her pregnancy progressed, Silvia began to change and question her gang affiliation. She turned to her mother for help. “I didn’t know what to do with a baby,” Silvia said. “My mom kind of adopted her and helped raise her.”

Silvia struggled to get her life on track, but the gang turned against her, and she was forced to flee to Texas to live with her grandmother.

Her grandmother, Nana, knew exactly what Silvia was up against. She too had been a chola. She talked with Silvia and set boundaries for her behavior. She was helping Silvia to see the bad choices she’d made in life when suddenly, Nana had a heart attack and died.

“My grandma really helped me,” Silvia said. “She made me talk to my mom and my dad.”

Silvia moved back home to California at her mother’s request. It was a fresh start for both of them. They communicated and had a real mother-daughter relationship.

Silvia re-enrolled in school, but it wasn’t an easy transition. Her attendance was sporadic. With her mother’s support, she decided to try again at a new school, Val Verde High in Riverside County’s Val Verde USD.

At last Silvia had found the right academic environment. It was a small school with a nurturing altitude, She felt safe and cared for With the encouragement of teacher Wendy Pospichal, she grew and became responsible.

“Ms, Pospichal was a big help to me,” Silvia said “She approached me as a friend. I could go lo her whenever I needed someone lo talk to.”

“I helped Silvia define some of her goals,” Pospichal said. “I encouraged her. She had expressed an interest in medicine and in becoming an emergency medical technician. I said she should do it, pursue her interests. I didn’t know the impact I’d made (at the time).”

Silvia also learned from her principal. Frank Trujillo, to focus on the future and made plans for life after high school graduation.

“He’s like everybody’s daddy,” Silvia said. “We used to go in at 6 a.m. for weightlifting, but after that there was nowhere to go until school opened up at 8. He used to let us come and kick it in his office so we’d have someplace to go. We called it the Breakfast Club because we’d eat breakfast together.”

Trujillo provided more than a place for the students to hang out.

“He helped me a lot with my self-esteem,” Silvia said. “It used to be my only plan was to graduate from high school. One day he brought me into his office and asked me what my plans were for after I graduated. When I said I didn’t know, he told me I had to go to college, and that’s when I started making plans to go.”

“He (Trujillo) was a stabilizing factor for Silvia,” Pospichal said. “He was an anchor for her. She opened up for him, and he helped her sort out her puzzle pieces and structure them, He gave her a sense of hope.”

“I saw the potential in Silvia,” Trujillo said. “I saw what she could do in terms of leadership, in terms of service, and her community involvement skills. During the year I’ve been here I could see a change starting to develop in her.”

Silvia became an honor roll student at Val Verde High, She was student body president in her senior year. She is already enrolled in Riverside Com- munity College and plans to someday be an emergency medical technician.



Region 12

Michelle Baca

Orangewood High School, Redlands USD

Michelle Baca, ACSA Every Student Succeeding Award recipient from Region 12, has learned to slow down and appreciate life.

By the time her ninth grade year was coming to an end, Michelle found herself hooked on speed.

“Things were very bad for me,” she said. “I dropped out of school and that’s when I started using drugs. It just kind of tore me apart.”

Michelle dropped out of school for an entire year. She stayed away from home. Eating and sleeping became sporadic, rather than regular, occurrences in her life. The only thing that means anything to her was drugs.

Recognizing the dead end she was in, she reenrolled in school.

“I just got sick of what I was doing,” Michelle said. “I more or less changed because I wanted to.”

She found a teacher at Mission Community School in an Bernardino County who showed concern for her well-being.

With his support she was able to get off drugs. She then transferred to Orangewood High School in Redlands Unified and found herself more than a full year behind in credits. But the potential and desire she exhibited attracted the attention of several teachers, administrators and her school counselor.

With their help and support Michelle blossomed, becoming strongly involved in school and volunteer activities. She became a writer for her school newspaper and yearbook.

“The writing helped me, and the volunteer work too,” Michelle said. “I volunteered at school and out in the community and it kept me busy in both places.”

Orangewood High’s Sue Hammond was the first teacher Michelle really talked to.

“When I dropped out I got behind and needed a lot of credits. She helped me to get extra homework, to get in adult education, and to get on the school newspaper and yearbook so I could make up those credits,” Michelle said. “She was the first one who really made me want to go further.”

“I met Michelle when she first came into our school,” Hammond said. “I recognized that she had a good mind and I wanted to foster that in her, and a sense of believing in herself.”

“Over time she became a really good student. So, just like any other teacher would, I just showed her things she could do to help make up the credits she needed.”

Michelle also had the help of ACSA’s Carol Ruhm, Orangewood High’s current principal.

“She’s really nice,” Michelle said. “I only got to know her in the last year I was there, but she talked to me and told me how proud everybody was of me.”

In Michelle’s senior year Ruhm was vice-principal, and she noted that ACSA member Doug Wells, Orangewood’s former principal, also played a significant role in helping Michelle.

“Both Doug Wells and I made sure Michelle received the recognition and awards she was eligible for,” Ruhm said.

“Because she really deserved it. She made a big turnaround in her life. I encouraged her and let her know she had the stuff it took to pursue whatever she wanted to do.”

Ruhm said it’s extremely important to her to see a student like Michelle succeed.

“She’s done this amazing turnaround and is a great role model for others. Now her sister is starting to do some of the same sorts of things Michelle did that helped her succeed. So in that way, she’s helping her family. It’s been very positive.”

Hammond, Ruhm and Wells were joined on Michelle’s support team by Orangewood High teachers Ann Van Mouwerik, Janice Gidcumb, Ed Hood and counselor Brad Camp

Michelle’s efforts have garnered her a number of awards and recognitions, including Rotary Student of the Month; Salsa Award for student success; Outstanding Citizenship Award; and Outstanding Student in English, History and Journalism.

Michelle has now graduated and plans to become a correctional officer. “I got a \$300 scholarship and I’m planning on attending Crafton Hills College,” she said. “Even though I don’t need any college to be a correctional officer, I want to go and study law.”



Region 13

Leslie Sandoval

Colina Middle School, Conejo Valley USD

Middle school is a perilous time for adolescents. But the challenges are even greater for students like Leslie Sandoval, who arrived in the United States from Mexico as a seventh grader speaking no English.

Fortunately, Leslie has a family who was determined

to see her succeed, and a group of educators at Colina Middle School in the Conejo Valley USD that made sure that school was an enriching place for Leslie to learn and grow.

When Leslie arrived at Colina Middle School in Thousand Oaks, her mother made it clear that the family expected Leslie to take English as a Second Language classes for just one year, and then be mainstreamed into regular classes. Leslie's counselor, Sam Kane, said the school's response was, "We like that goal, and we'll give it our best shot."

Kane is a member of the support team that made it possible for Leslie to represent Region 13 in ACSA's Every Student Succeeding program.

"Leslie is very spirited," Kane said. "She's not just into herself. She inspires an esprit de corps among other students, encouraging them to get involved in school activities." Kane said Leslie, who is a peer tutor, helps other students who are just learning the language and encourages those who aren't as self-motivated as she is.

Thanks to that motivation, when Leslie enters high school this fall she will be taking all regular classes. She will also have a foundation of success to build on.

Leslie took advantage of several incentive programs Colina Middle School offers. One program, Renaissance Citizenship Development, rewards students for good grades and citizenship. Another program, arranged through a local savings and loan association, offers savings account certificates of \$10 per trimester to students who have a grade point average of 3.5 or better.

The school also offers Passport to Reading and Passport to Writing classes to help promote skills of students who score low on standardized tests. Leslie volunteered to take these extra-hours classes, on top of her regular load.

Educators at Colina Middle School believe that it's important to include all students in as many school activities as possible.

"For everything we do," Kane said, "we always ask, 'Is it clear to all kids what this activity is and that it's open to them? Do they know how to participate?'" Our staff monitors every single activity to make sure every segment of the school population is included."

Kane said it's also important for "motivated kids like Leslie to be encouraged to take leadership positions at school."

Rich Malfatti, president of ACSA Region 13 and superintendent of the Somis UESD, said that when students like Leslie succeed, the role of educators is underscored.

"Kids come to us with different abilities, but that doesn't mean they all can't achieve," Malfatti said. "It's the job of school leaders to find the way to help each student blossom and grow." In addition to Kane, members of Leslie's Every Student Succeeding support team include Colina teachers Tracy Krug, Mike Hozman and Linda Stamper, and Colina counselor Lisa Severns.



Region 14

Krystal Johnson

Downey High School, Downey USD

Krystal Johnson knows there's more to life than hanging out on the streets. Ever since she became a successful student at Downey High School, she doesn't miss gang life, or the drugs.

It was a long road that led to this new life, and along the way she met several educators who were determined to help her set a new course. Now, those educators have made it possible for Krystal to receive ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 14.

Krystal first arrived at Downey High her sophomore year, pregnant and without any credits, because she had not been attending school.

"I was wild. Out of control," she said. "I had been through JO placements in the foster system. I always ran away. I had no need to listen to authority—only to defy it."

But her need to socialize made life on the streets too lonely to bear. So she kept coming to school - albeit sporadically—for the camaraderie. Following school rules didn't come easy to her though.

In fact, Allen Layne, principal of Downey High and an ACSA member, said he was prepared to send her to continuation school.

Despite her defiant attitude and lack of interest in academics, “you could see a spark in her that made you say, ‘Oh, give the kid a break.’” said ACSA member Lyne Marshall, assistant principal at Downey High and a member of the support team who nominated Krystal for the Every Student Succeeding Award.

Sally Neiser, Downey High’s activity director and music teacher, saw a special talent in Krystal that would prove to be the driving force behind her turn-around. Krystal excelled at playing the drums. She soon became the star of the Downey High Jazz Band.

“She was able to get the acceptance and accolades she had never gotten before,” said Marshall. “She’s very popular now. And she has transferred that feeling of success to academics.”

Principal Layne said, “We decided to start hold-ing her to higher standards. Everyone told her, ‘Krystal, you’re going to have to do it on your own. You can’t keep trying to snow us.’”

At the same time, staff went out of its way to support Krystal. “She’s so open, honest and up front you couldn’t help but help her,” Layne said. “Other students might hide when they see us coming. She was just the opposite.”

AB a senior, Krystal carried a 4.0 grade point average. She sings in the choir at her church, where she is trying to start an after-school program to help students with their homework. She also served as an editor of her school newspaper.

ACSA member Gregg Stapp, assistant principal at Downey High and member of Krystal’s support team, said the school works very hard to avoid letting disciplinary issues interfere with opportunities for students to be successful, or to be included in school programs.

“We believe that if a student is going to run themselves out of here,” he said, “it’s not going to be because we haven’t given them opportunities to succeed.

“Looking back on my years as a teacher, I noticed myself getting stuck in a rut of nothing but paper shuffling and presenting a lesson,” Stapp said. “Things become impersonal. As an administrator you have to make teachers aware of the need to step back, to look at students as individuals. To talk to the kids and develop relationships with them. That’s when good things happen.”

Layne said educators at Downey High “might provide the only positive contact with adults that some kids have all day. Your entire school community needs to believe that you must never give up on kids.”

Krystal believes those positive relationships she had at school motivated her to avoid continuation school. Once her daughter was born, Krystal said she knew it was time to stop running and to develop some goals.

“I want to become a teacher and help other stu-dents,” said Krystal, who plans to attend Long Beach City College this fall.

She said she wants other students—and her daughter, who is now 2—to understand what she’s learned the hard way: “There’s so much you can do that’!; better than hangin



Region 15

Gloria Santana

Monterey High School, Burbank USD

Gloria Santana has been in a wheelchair since she was 8 years old, due to muscular dystrophy. But she hasn’t let that stop her from reaching for her goals.

Gloria’s energetic spirit earned her the Region 15 Every Student Succeeding award.

“Gloria is one of the most hard-working, pleasant young ladies we’ve known here,” said ACSA’s Sue Boegh, director of career education and public information for Burbank Unified School District. “Gloria doesn’t know the meaning of the word ‘no.’ She really believes in the power of education.”

There was a time when Gloria found it difficult to reach inside herself for the extra strength she needed. “Sometimes it’s been difficult for me to learn to ask for help,” she said.

“That’s not something that comes easy to me. It was hard for me to ask my teachers for help on things like moving my hands or putting my books in my backpack.”

When she was younger, she still had good upper body strength, which helped her progress through school. But as she got older, she lost that upper body strength and with it some of her motivation.

She was still able to get around with the assistance of an electric wheelchair controlled by a joystick, but she often was reluctant to ask her mother for help getting out of bed and ready for school.

She found it easier to get up later, then hang out with friends or family, or go to McDonald's or the mall.

"That was when I was in 10th grade and I fell way behind in credits," Gloria said.

By this time Gloria was attending the alternative Monterey High School. As she grew more familiar with her surroundings at Monterey her attendance improved and she started earning credits toward graduation. Her grades improved from withdraw/fails to As and Bs.

"I knew I was capable of doing more. I knew I could do better," said Gloria, who received a good deal of encouragement from Barbara Forletta, a special education resource specialist at Monterey High.

"She was a great help to me." Gloria said. "Everything I've accomplished is thanks to her. She trusted and encouraged me. She believed in me. She would always be there to gently remind me to keep going."

Forletta said Gloria has been an inspiration to her as well.

"Gloria has no movement in her body," she said. "It's hard for me to imagine what that would be like. She has to get help to do things like lift her hand or to get ready for school, but to her it's just a minor thing.

"When Gloria transferred in here her attendance was really bad." Forletta continued. "She had stopped caring or thinking she could graduate. I just encouraged her to believe that it was possible for her to get her high school diploma. I just did things like arrange transportation for her to and from school. Gloria is a very bright person. She even helped tutor some of my students in math."

The staff at Monterey High expected Gloria would graduate in June 1998, but a wheelchair that needed repair, and health problems prevented that. Nevertheless, she kept right on going, and earned the credits she needed to graduate in December. She received her diploma at ceremonies in June.

"This is the sort of thing that makes my job rewarding," Forletta said. "Gloria just needed some encouragement. I'm very proud and my heart is very full to see what she's accomplished."

ACSA member and Burbank Superintendent David Aponik echoed those sentiments.

"Gloria is very grateful to Burbank schools for the opportunities they've provided her," he said. "Now she wants to go on and pass along the opportunities she's had to others."

In addition to Forletta, Aponik and Boegh, Gloria's ESS support team included teacher Keith Lang, instructional aides Donna Sagona and Marie Stott and head nurse Sjaan Buck.

Gloria has decided to continue her education and is now enrolled in Valley College.

"I've always had an interest in psychology," Gloria said. "I want to get my degree and work in counseling for marriage or children."



Region 16

Tracy Stewart

Bancroft Middle School, Los Angeles USD

Tracy Stewart has learned firsthand what it's like to run a household—and she is only 15. With her single mom working seven days a week at two jobs, Tracy is often left to look after her two younger sisters and take care of the family home. But things could be worse - and they used to be. For the last few years, Tracy and her family were homeless. They moved from shelter to shelter before they found one where they stayed for a year. With the help of friends and family, Tracy's mother was finally able to secure a small apartment for Tracy and her sisters.

Despite these living arrangements, Tracy still managed to find time for school. As an eighth grader at Bancroft Middle School in the Los Angeles USD, Tracy proved she can handle not only her sizable family responsibilities but her academic responsibilities as well. Her motivation and determination earned Tracy the ACSA Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 16.

Ever upbeat and positive, Tracy exhibited great determination last year at Bancroft, earning A's in both Resource Special Program Math and English, and was recommended for a regular education setting in high school.

"Tracy is a caring girl who has shown that she can survive and thrive despite her troubled family situation," said math teacher Mary Anne Hague. "Tracy cleans the house, does laundry, looks after both a 6- and 10-year-old. She still finds time to do her homework, which is always turned in on time.

"She really wants to prove to her teachers and to her mother that she can be successful. She works so hard to make everyone proud of her."

Not having a stable environment for so many years made it difficult for Tracy to concentrate on her schoolwork.

But, said RSP English teacher Aaron Braxton, “she has said ‘yes’ to education” in an effort to make changes in her situation,

When Tracy first came to Braxton’s class, she was very shy and reserved. She was reluctant to speak in class and seemed very sad.

“She was afraid to make mistakes; it seemed like she wanted to be invisible,” Braxton said. “I definitely saw a change in her behavior once she and her family settled into their apartment.”

Tracy became one of Braxton’s best students. “She even helped the other students with their work in class,” he said. The last school year was a positive one for Tracy.

“She built up her confidence and takes pride in her work,” Braxton said. “Most students just want to get their work done, and they turn things in that are wrong. But Tracy wants to make sure she has done everything right. It is rewarding to see a student really trying to do a good job. The other students can learn from her work ethic.”

Tracy has been fortunate to have a large support group of teachers, counselors, friends and family assisting her to make positive choices for her future. Upon recommendation from her grandmother, Tracy began to see counselor Sharon Slaven at the Aviva Center, an organization that provides comfort, knowledge and opportunity to young people and their families in the Greater Los Angeles area. In addition to Hague, Braxton and Slaven, Tracy’s ESS support team included counselor Romona McNulty and awards coordinator Gwen Lockhart.

This support, along with self-motivation and praise, has proven to be the key to her success.

“She never complains about her situation. She just has a stick-to-it attitude that motivates her to be successful,” Hague said.

Tracy is proud of her achievements and realizes she has had to overcome many obstacles over the past few years.

“The hardest thing for me is that I have to watch my sisters while my mom is at work,” Tracy said. “Math is very hard for me too, but Ms. Hague helps me with that. My teachers have helped me a lot. I am going to miss them.”

Moving on to high school is another challenge for Tracy. She became very comfortable with her support group at Bancroft. Although she is nervous, she is looking forward to making new friends. “I still plan to visit my old teachers, though,” she



Region 17

Andrea Armstrong

La Quinta High School, Garden Grove USD

Andrea Armstrong likes to visit her mom on Sundays.

But the visits aren’t typical family get-togethers.

Until very recently, Andrea’s mother was homeless. Andrea has been supporting herself since March of her junior year in high school. Her job as a restaurant hostess on Sundays is near the bridge her mother lived under. After work, Andrea would go there to find her mother.

“Sometimes I’d take her to McDonalds because they had 39-cent cheeseburgers,” says the cheerful senior at La Quinta High School, in the Garden Grove Unified School District.

Despite having to work to pay rent and buy food, gas and car insurance, Andrea has a weighted grade point average of 4.11. Her combined SAT scores are 1320. She sings in the school choir and has been a member of the volleyball, softball and track teams and the Speech Club.

And on June 22 she will give the keynote graduation address.

For her achievements, Andrea has been named the recipient of ACSA’s Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 17.

Many kids who grew up as Andrea did—exposed to drugs, alcohol and abuse, and then forced into adulthood at such an early age—would have rebelled. But Andrea took a different path—she embraced education and responsibility.

“School has been a release for me, because I didn’t have a good home life.” Andrea explains, “I’ve always had good teachers who encouraged me.”

Andrea says her principal, ACSA member Jim Monahan, “is so wonderful. He talks to everyone. He’ll have a conversation with you and make you feel like a real person.”

Andrea is different than most students, Monahan said. “She’s extremely mature, based on her life experiences, including her difficulties economically and her mother’s situation. She has come to grips with reality at a much younger age. And because she’s so bright, she realized that school is her key to economic independence.”

Monahan said Andrea's teachers have helped her understand that she has "a tremendous amount of ability," and they've taught her how to succeed at some of the school's most challenging courses.

Andrea plans to major in math and minor in chemistry when she goes to Concordia College, near Irvine, this fall. She dreams of teaching math and science. Several scholarships and financial aid will cover all of her college expenses. Fred Johnson is a member of the support team at La Quinta who nominated Andrea for the ACSA award. Johnson, the school's counselor, "helps kids develop personal learning plans that focus on what they're going to do when they leave school," Monahan said. "He makes sure they take the right courses—and the most challenging courses - and that they study hard."

It's no accident that staff members at La Quinta High work hard to establish relationships with each student. That has been the guiding philosophy of Monahan's leadership.

"It's easy to lose sight of the fact that what really matters is one-on-one contact with the kids," said Monahan "It doesn't matter which staff member it is - a counselor, teacher or custodian - there's got to be somebody on campus that each kid can connect to."

Monahan also believes that educators must serve as role models, "so the kids realize they can make something out of their lives in spite of their circumstances." Principals need to remind teachers that "the most important thing we do at school is to model behavior we want to see in our kids. You've got to convey the values you think are important," ACSA member John Oldenburg is La Quinta's assistant principal, and another member of Andrea's support team. He said the school's leaders "constantly try to remind teachers that we're here for the students, And we try to develop relationships with the students ourselves. We also spend a lot of time talking with teachers about each student, especially if they have discipline or attendance problems or special needs."

That attention has been important to Andrea. "It's hard when you don't have anyone at home to talk to. The people at school have al



Region 18

Cesar "Jun" Esmane

Challenger Middle School, San Diego City USD

The Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 18 goes to Cesar "Jun" Esmane, a young man who has, in the words of his counselor at Challenger Middle School, "made a 180-degree turn around" in his life.

Jun is a kid whose life has been messed up by drugs.

But it was his parents and other relatives who were using marijuana and cocaine, not him.

Jun's father lost his job when he confessed to using drugs. The family was living with Jun's grandparents when his father and grandfather got into a fight that led the family of six to be kicked out. They ended up living in a single motel room for nearly three months.

Evicted when they were unable to afford even those meager living conditions, the family lived in a car for a month, while Jun was sent to live with an aunt. He worried constantly about his family.

Around this time, Jun underwent surgery to put a screw in his hip to keep it from separating from his right leg. "After the surgery I couldn't take P.E. any more," he said.

Jun also had to deal with gang involvement. His uncle is a leader in the True Filipino Bloods. Jun had started a younger version of the gang, the Northside Thugs.

But when this younger gang start-ed smoking and doing drugs, Jun realized he didn't want to be part of that lifestyle.

Jun has an outstanding singing voice. When the school chorus instructor heard Jun singing in the halls, he invited him to join the chorus. Jun eventually joined the advanced chorus, practicing singing and dancing after school with friends. Although he couldn't perform in the school talent show the year before due to poor academic and citizenship grades, he qualified to do so last year.

A school counselor found a scholarship that enabled Jun to perform in the musical "Oliver" with the Metro-politan Educational Theatre Network.

"My singing helped me get turned around," Jun said "That, and when I started going to church."

Jun is active in the local Church of Christ. One of his responsibilities there is to watch the children during weekly service. "Jun has had to go through eighth grade twice, " said Challenger Middle School Head Counselor Peggy Chana. "He had to repeat because he was very emotionally fragile and distraught over the things he was dealing with. His mom was in prison for drugs. He was in a gang that he started up, but when he decided he wanted to be a singer, they let him go.

“Jun is such a good singer that he sang at our graduation.”

Chana provided a helping hand to Jun as he went through Challenger, in the San Diego Unified School District.

“I was just there for him,” she said “Some of his teachers became frustrated at the amount of anger Jun had in him, and they were unable to handle him sometimes. I spent a lot of time counseling him and helping him deal with his anger and his frustration.”

“I knew when I had any problem I could go to (Ms. Chana’s) office and talk about it,” Jun said.

“We got him started in the Severely Emotionally Disturbed program,” Chana said. “There are some really rough kids in there, but Jun built up good rapport with the teacher, Jim Makiaris.”

“My experience with Jun has been all positive,” Makiaris said. “I know he had overcome some hurdles with his family and relatives, and his mom and dad not being available. There were also some gang affiliations and just difficult times in general.

“But he had overcome a lot of that when he came to our program, I already knew him because (in 1997-98) he used my room as a place he could go to get away when things were building up on him. I told his teachers that when things got bad to send him down here.”

Makiaris continued helping Jun last year.

“Jun had special needs emotionally and academically,” Makiaris said. “So we did a 50/50 split between having him in general education and special education classes. I developed an IEP that set goals for him both academically and socially.”

Another helping hand along the way came from ACSA’s Sam Wong, principal of Challenger Middle

Region 1

Tina Clark

Warner High School, Modoc Jt. USD

Caught in a downward spiral of drug use, teen turns to school leaders

When her mother died from alcoholism, 14-year-old Tina Clark found solace the only way she knew how: by taking drugs.

Tina, who recently graduated from Warner High in the Modoc Joint Unified School District, said she let the drugs control her life. She stopped caring about her friends, her family and her schoolwork. She was eventually expelled from the eighth grade after passing out drugs at school.

The following year, Tina enrolled at Warner, the district's alternative high school. With the help of her teachers and administrators, she managed to quit her drug habit and get back on track with her life. As a result, Tina is the Region 1 recipient of the ACSA/MetLife 2000 Every Student Succeeding Award.

Tina grew up in a crowded Bay Area home where drugs and alcohol were always present. Her family later moved into her grandparents' Alturas home in an attempt to escape the negative influences around them, but Tina's mother soon fell into the same lifestyle, which ultimately destroyed her.

Tina's grandparents - who suffered from health problems of their own - were left raising four grandchildren, and it wasn't long before the children were out of control.

"Alturas was boring," Tina said. "I needed to find some- thing else to do. I thought I'd find more friends doing drugs." But the more her life went downhill, the more Tina knew she had to put an end to it.

"This was an elevator and it was my time to get off before I went down any more. It was time to go up," she said.

Tina's attitude began to change when school aide Karen Bietz, a member of Tina's support team, invited Tina to stay with her family. Tina was shocked at the Bietz's way of living.

"That was the first time she was in a home where there weren't drugs and alcohol," said ACSA member Ramona Delmas, director of alternative education for Modoc Joint Unified. "She didn't know people lived like that."

Other members of the community followed the Bietz's footsteps and invited Tina to their homes. One family let her stay with them on their ranch for a summer and taught her how to cook. Another family, touched by Tina's drive to succeed, paid thousands of dollars for her orthodontic work.

"Tina said, 'Wow! This feels better than drugs,'" Delmas said.

Tina also found help in the Work Ability Program at Warner High School. Coordinator Bonnie Sherer, another member of Tina's support team, said she placed Tina in the program in the hopes it would give her a taste of the outside world.

"Sometimes when students don't do well in a school set- ting and are in the workplace with adults, they just shine," she said.

Tina worked at a flower shop and performed clerical

work. Sherer said her improvement was almost immediate. "The work skills she gained helped with her confidence. She was able to see herself as a positive person. It lifted her out and gave her the opportunity to choose a better lifestyle for herself," she said.

Sherer, who knew Tina before she began her downward spiral, said she has blossomed over the last few years and is now headed down the right path.

"The strength of her determination is what I've seen change in Tina," she said. "She knows what she doesn't want. And those are the things that almost destroyed her."

Tina has since joined a local church group and has made new friends. One of the friends she met is now her boyfriend, a local entrepreneur who owns an egg hatchery, haying company, hunting guide service and taxidermy shop. Tina, who graduated from Warner in early June, assists him in his businesses.

Although Tina has no immediate plans for the future, she said she is considering going to college to study wildlife biology. She said the importance of her accomplishments will probably mean more to her then, when she looks back on her rocky life.

"I'm shocked," she said. "I never expected I'd be the type to win an award."

Other members of Tina's support team include



Region 2

Prudence Webb

Portola High, Plumas USD

Site leaders help teen leave troubles behind

Overwhelming family tragedy had a profound effect on Prudence Webb early in her life. Her struggle to overcome the pain led to behavior, discipline and school attendance problems she has worked hard to overcome. The marked turnaround earned Prudence the ACSA/MetLife “Every Student Succeeding” honor representing Region 2.

“There have been suicides in her family,” said ACSA member Howard Thomas, principal of Portola High School in Plumas USD, where Prudence recently entered her senior year. “One of her relatives was murdered by another relative. “She’s really managed to come a long way in the last couple of years as far as her attitude and hanging in there. I didn’t think she was going to make it for a long time. As you might imagine, there was a lot of belligerence and not caring about much of anything, let alone herself.”

Prudence is matter-of-fact in discussing the suicide of her father. “My father committed suicide when I was pretty young,” she said. “I didn’t really know him.”

Perhaps affecting her even more was the murder of her aunt, with whom Prudence felt very close. “My aunt was like my second mom,” she said. “She babysat us all the time when my mom was at work.”

Despite her tragic family loss, Prudence has managed to improve and become a good student. She gives credit to Thomas and assistant principal Paul Preston for providing the support she needed .

“Mr. Thomas and Mr. Preston have always looked out for me and tried to keep me on the straight and narrow,” she said. “They’ve always done everything they can to help me. Even when I’ve made my bad decisions, they’d be there and try to help me make the right decisions.”

Thomas helped Prudence find the right school schedule for success, bringing her mother and other family members into the process. In addition, he said, Preston “has just done a great job in talking to her and trying to keep her positive, trying to lay out some plans for her.”

And Thomas reserves the highest praise for Prudence. “She has stayed in there and mainly done it herself,” he said. “We presented the opportunity for her and she has certainly taken it the last couple of years. I’m just as pleased as I can be.” Preston, for his part, says Prudence was able to get her problems behind her when she started attending school regularly.

“Prudence has overcome some big obstacles,” he said. “This is a situation where SARB (the School Attendance Review Board) has really worked. She was brought through the whole process of SARB and brought before the committee in the sheriff’s department. We worked out a SARB contract with her mother and her sister that was really something that provided her with the structure she needed. The SARB contract was designed specifically for her by everybody on the SARB committee. Then it was just the constant day-to-day follow-up that we all had to give her. That really turned things around.”

Prudence said Preston made sure she knew he was in her corner.

“Mr. Preston came to our school when I was a freshman and at first, he didn’t really know me,” she said . “But after a while he’d call me in the office sometimes just to see how I was doing and make sure my classes were going OK. He always showed that he really cared about us.”

Both Thomas and Preston are extremely pleased to see the progress Prudence has made.

“That’s what education is all about,” Thomas said. “It hurts when you lose them. But, this is what we love to do; it’s why we’re here.”

“This is really the fruit of our labors to see this type of commitment on her part,” Preston said. “She’s really taken off and is succeeding . She’s in the Health Careers and Health Occupations Program and she is doing very well. She definitely enjoys being there and looks forward to school every day as opposed to wanting to run away from school.”

After her graduation in June, Prudence said she plans to attend college in the San Diego area before moving into the he



Region 3

Cesar Cruz

Sacramento Country Day

Hard work, school ties help English language learner reach his goals

With the high standards in California's schools today, success is no cakewalk. Cesar Cruz knows how much harder it is when you don't speak English and you live in a rough community.

ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award recipient for Region 3, Cesar is the son of Mexican-American immigrants who do not speak English. He lives in a neighborhood where poverty and high crime rates are a way of life. He began school at age 7 and had to repeat second grade because of low achievement and a lack of English skills.

"Cesar and his parents did not speak any English at all," said Region 3's Martha Roten, principal of Noralto Elementary School in North Sacramento SD. "When he came to Noralto School, he still did not speak any English. That was an obstacle for him, besides being in a community where there is lots of gangs and drugs and regular gunfire. But he's been able to ignore all that and just focus on his education .

"His family came here with absolutely nothing. His dad has worked really hard learning a trade and has learned how to become a roofer. When Cesar got older he worked with his dad every single summer, and that's how the family was able to make ends meet."

Cesar, who graduated in June, kept his nose to the grind- stone and kept trying. He had high attendance at Noralto School, his English began to improve and he began to excel in his schoolwork. He got along well with his classmates, teachers liked him and he joined the school basketball team.

"Cesar had a third grade teacher here who told the class they could all go to college," Roten said. "He believed her and started pursuing his education instead of going the way that many of our students do."

By the sixth grade, staff at Noralto was so impressed by Cesar's efforts they recommended him for the Summer- bridge program. The six-week summer course, which Cesar attended each year, offers a rigorous academic curriculum, preparing students who show the desire for college.

Cesar did so well in Summerbridge, he was offered a tuition-free scholarship to Sacramento Country Day School for his high school years.

He has tutored his fellow students and even taught classes for Summerbridge.

Cesar said making the transition from his community to the more privileged Country Day was challenging.

"The biggest obstacle to me was not being able to get a good education in my own community," he said. "I had to leave my community and live in two different worlds. I lived in my community and commuted to Country Day. The cultural impact of trying to fit in was really hard.

"Coming from a low economic background and being the first one to attend college now, when I was looking ahead college was just a dream. In the community Country Day is in, everybody knows they're going to go to college. In my community, a lot of people don't go to college."

Cesar recognizes that an initial barrier to his education was a lack of English skills.

"I was born in this country, but I didn't learn to speak English till I was 8 years old," he said. "The community I was in was all Mexican and everyone spoke Spanish. In that community, no one had to learn English . It just wasn't a necessity. So, grade school was hard for me. I had to repeat second grade twice. Trying to master the language took me a few years." But Cesar was able to persevere, thanks to the efforts of Roten and the Noralto staff.

"Ms. Roten was very supportive of me," Cesar said. "I knew that I wanted to go to college and become a doctor and they offered a lot of encouragement to me. They were the ones who introduced me to the Summerbridge program and things that were very helpful for my future."

"To me, this is what it's all about," Roten said. "That's what makes me stay at this school instead of going to a middle class school. It's having a child like him who is able to be focused and be successful. That's why we nominated him.

"In my tenure here, he's the fi



Region 4

Crystal Slaten

Regional Occpuation Program, Solano COE

Solano ROP prepares grad to break barriers

Communication is a big part of education. The dialogue between educator and educated facilitates learning. That relationship can be difficult for hearing-impaired students.

Region 4's ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award recipient Crystal Slaten is hearing-impaired, yet has managed her way through school, graduating on time and getting a job through the Solano County Office of Education Regional Occupation Program.

The COE's Workability II is a collaborative project with the Department of Rehabilitation, assisting students with barriers to receive employment training. To get her job, Crystal had to test into Workability's medical lab class.

"When she first came to take the ROP class, she was able to go through our program to help prepare her to take the test," said Joyce Montgomery, vocational specialist, Workability II. "Since she is deaf, she doesn't use language the same (as hearing people), and the test she had to take to get into the class was based on reading and language comprehension. She had to spend time practicing the skills she would need in order to do well on the entrance exam - especially since English wasn't her first language; sign language was. That was a big barrier for her."

But Montgomery scheduled Crystal to meet with project tutor Lorraine Villareal, who spent many hours helping her prepare for the test.

"Once Crystal did take the test, she did very well," Montgomery said. "She had a verbal interview with the instructor. She was asked questions about why she wanted to be a medical lab assistant, and she had to be able to convey why she wanted to do that. Crystal asked her sign language interpreter to leave the room, and she was able to show the instructor that she was able to convey her desire to be in the class on her own."

ACSA Region 4 member Janet Harden, Solano County director of ROP/career education, said the success Crystal has had is a good example of ROP's partnership with the Department of Rehabilitation.

"I think it's important for all of our students to succeed," Harden said. "The fact that Crystal came to us through the Department of Rehabilitation is secondary to me to her being successful. I'm happy we were able to have a partnership with the department where we were able to provide services that enhanced her chances of succeeding. That's what providing services is all about. You find out what people need and you pull together and provide them with it."

Crystal credits her entire ESS support team for helping her achieve success. "They have helped a lot," Crystal said. "Joyce Montgomery has helped by calling all the places I was interested in working at and provided interpreters for me when I needed them. My instructors have done most of the work. They had a lot of confidence in me to succeed."

She downplays the difficulties she had in getting through school. "Oh, I had no problems because I had an interpreter in class the whole time," Crystal said. "And Diane Tyson (Solano COE medical laboratory assisting instructor) also used an overhead projector to write down all her notes.

Another student wrote notes and made copies for me to study."

But Montgomery said Crystal really deserves the credit for her own success. "It's just incredible," she said. "Crystal has far exceeded our expectations by getting a super job with Kaiser Permanente. She's a hard working young woman and she really did do it on her own. We were just able to provide her with some extra support."

Eventually, Crystal plans to go back to school.

"Well, I'm working right now in Berkeley," she said. "In the next two years, I plan on going back to school and finish three more courses for my business certificate.

"I had a lot of support and people who wanted me to succeed and that helped a lot."



Region 5

Sze Ying "Jocelyn" Yee

Abraham Lincoln High, San Francisco USD

New country, family concerns can't slow recent grad's gains

Although she has been in the United States for only three years, Sze Ying "Jocelyn" Lee has shown no fear in overcoming obstacles.

Jocelyn was recognized for her determination to succeed academically and received the statewide ACSA/MetLife 2000 Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 5. The ESS program honors public school students and the educators who help them reach their potential in each of ACSA's 18 regions statewide.

Jocelyn said she was surprised to have been selected. "I feel pretty good and I really appreciate (Region 5) acknowledging someone like me," she said

Jocelyn, a recent graduate of Abraham Lincoln High School in the San Francisco Unified School District, came with her family to California from Hong Kong in 1997 to help care for her mother, who suffers from a mental disorder.

With her father still in China, Jocelyn was forced to become the primary caretaker for her younger sister and cousins, making sure the family ate properly, paid the bills and dressed appropriately, while at the same time balancing the responsibilities of high school.

In an essay titled “My Mother and Me,” Jocelyn described how she was expected to be “xiao” - a respectful and obedient daughter:

“To be ‘xiao’ is to not let my mother, who suffers from mental depression, worry about me, to support my mother through her illness, to lead the way for my younger sister and cousins and to be as academically excellent as the other students who were born here,” she wrote.

Patricia Crawford, Jocelyn’s counselor and a member of her support team, said Jocelyn succeeded despite the challenges of caring for her family in an unfamiliar country.

“She cares for her mother in a way few adolescents have to,” Crawford said. “She is just an incredibly competent young woman.”

Despite the language barrier, Jocelyn managed to keep her grades up, quickly moving through English as a Second Language classes to all English Advanced Placement courses in a short period of time, Crawford said.

“She just keeps on keeping on,” she said. “She just juggles it beautifully .”

Crawford said she and other members of Jocelyn’s support team encouraged her to get through the trying times. They saw her academic potential, and challenged her to take the most rigorous courses, in which she excelled.

“Her attitude has always been positive,” Crawford said. “She’s never complained.”

Region 5 president Sheila Hansen, principal of M.H. Tobias Elementary School in the Jefferson Elementary School District, said the Every Student Succeeding program replaces a major void in the lives of children like Jocelyn who have never before been rewarded for their achievements .

“This is a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge the students and their remarkable inner strength to succeed,” she said.

Jocelyn said her support team helped her in any way they could, sometimes driving her home from school when she stayed late. She said they also helped encourage her and talked to her about the problems she faced.

“They understand it’s hard,” Jocelyn said.

With the help of her “xiao” daughter, Jocelyn’s mother is recovering from her mental disorder and is now able to cook for her family, hold a job and take courses at an adult school, and plans to return to China.

“In my journey, I helped my mother gain her mental health by being a ‘xiao’ daughter,” Jocelyn wrote. “I have learned to use English fluently, to handle time and pressure efficiently and to take care of myself. ... I have developed hope, courage and perseverance in the process of being new to the United States.”

Jocelyn plans to attend UC Berkeley in the fall, where she will study neurobiology, biochemistry and psychiatry, in the hopes of one day helping others who suffer from mental illness. She said her mother is very proud of her academic accomplishments.

“She is happy to see me go to a good college,” Jocelyn said.



Region 6

Aimee Cortada

Fruitville Academy, Alameda COE

Thrown into turmoil, young mother finds bright side at school

Aimee Cortada gave birth to two children between the time she was 14 and 17 years old. She has faced unusual challenges in her young life. Yet the June graduate of Alameda County’s Fruitvale Academy has excelled in school.

Her commitment to education earned Aimee the ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 6. The ESS program honors public school students and the educators who help them reach their potential in each of ACSA’s 18 regions statewide.

Aimee led a normal, even sheltered, life until she was 13. Then, a series of family crises threw her life into turmoil and she was sent to a foster family. This led her on a path to pregnancy at age 13 and, later, involvement with a gang.

“When I was a freshman it was my first time going to a public school,” Aimee said. “I had to fit in wherever I could, wherever I had the chance. . . . Even though I’m Hispanic, I don’t look like it. I got a lot of attitude from a lot of kids. They thought I was snobby or whatever. So, I had to do what I could to fit in. That’s how I got stuck running with a gang.”

Aimee left her foster family and began sleeping at friends' homes. She was doing drugs, and her sister was awarded custody of her first child. She hit bottom when a gang member assaulted her. She was out of money and missed her baby.

"It was hard because I didn't know how much nurturing a baby needed," Aimee said. "I just didn't realize how much of a responsibility it was."

She promised to get off drugs and attend school regularly, and she kept her promises. But she hit another fork in the road when she again became pregnant.

She was sent to another foster care home and enrolled in a pregnant minors program. She attended faithfully and has kept her job, working for the Alameda County Office of Education.

After attending seven different high schools, Aimee found the right place at Fruitvale Academy and the right people to turn to, including Principal Rafael Ramirez.

"Mr. Ramirez has definitely made a difference," Aimee said. "(He) made me aware that there was a brighter side, despite all the changes that were going on and all the things that were going on at home with my family. He helped me get through them and helped me get my head up and looking straight ahead into the future. I think that's what's kept me going, having that support system, knowing I have somebody to look to, and somebody's standards to meet." Ramirez is modest about his role in helping Aimee turn herself around.

"I think that there were many people who played an important role in that," he said. "As an administrator, my role was to channel all those positive qualities she has into a direction where she could be successful. She's self-directed, meaning that if you tell her to do certain things, she goes and accomplishes them. I think that's a very important facet that she has."

Aimee's support team at Fruitvale included teachers Susan Jensen and Manuel Uribe.

"Aimee came to me at Castlemont High School when she was pregnant," Jensen said. "She felt like she really had no one to listen to her. I think I played a motherly role. I think she needed that because she didn't have that in her life. I was also an advocate for her to help get her the things she needed . . . so she could graduate on time."

Aimee said Jensen "provided a shoulder to cry on when nobody else was there." She added that Uribe has been like a father figure.

"Whatever I do, I always run it by him to make sure it's OK," she said. "Both he and Dr. Ramirez have been like father figures to me and made me realize that there are hard working men who take care of their families and who help other people. It

gives me something to go by with my own kids."

Uribe said his role was one of guidance. "To a certain degree, being a male teacher, I was a fatherly figure," he said. "I worked on motivating her and keeping her in line when she needed it. I helped her figure ou



Region 7

Patrick Kelly

Summerville High, Summerville Union HSD

Disability reduces teen's mobility, but not spirit to succeed

It's the little things that make life difficult for Patrick Kelley, an incoming senior at Summerville High School in the Summerville UHSD. But he refuses to let them hold him back.

Patrick, who suffers from Cerebral Palsy, often has difficulty with the simplest tasks - walking across campus, carrying loads of books and taking notes. But he has not let his physical limitations keep him from achieving his educational goals. For that he was selected to receive the ACSA/MetLife 2000 Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 7.

This is the second year Patrick has been nominated for the award. He said receiving it this year makes all his hard work worthwhile.

"I feel rewarded," he said. "It's a very nice thing to have. It's a good recognition."

Patrick said the most difficult obstacle he faces is reduced mobility. Because he must use a walker, getting from class to class can take up to 20 minutes. Summerville is built on hilly terrain, making the task even more strenuous.

"I hate walking up steep hills," he said. "It's a big drag."

He said his administrators have been more than willing to accommodate his special needs. Not only have they been supportive and encouraged him, they have allowed him to schedule his classes close to each other to reduce his commute.

“They’ve always been willing to work with me and adjust my class schedule accordingly,” he said. Although he has lost mobility in his legs, Patrick works to keep his upper body in shape, and has even acquired the nickname “Burly” for leading his PE class in pull-ups and being able to bench press 10 times his own weight. Summerville High Principal Dave Urquhart, an ACSA member, said this is just one example of Patrick’s tendency to focus on what he does have, rather than what he doesn’t have. “He’s just a trooper,” said Urquhart. “He’s one of those kids you think, ‘if every kid was like that, it would be neat.’” Fortunately, Summerville High School is relatively small, making it easier for Patrick to get around. In addition, the students there are considerate of Patrick’s disability and have always been kind to him.

“They treat him pretty much like any other student,” Urquhart said. Despite his disability, Patrick has proven his willingness to help others. He volunteers as an assistant in the school office, and school officials were able to get him a headset and special software to take phone messages via computer. Urquhart said on more than one occasion, callers have commented on Patrick’s polite and professional manner.

“What’s really helped Patrick is he’s gotten involved,” Urquhart said. “He’s decided to do some extra things. He’s not been afraid.”

In addition to working in the office, Patrick helps out both the boys and girls basketball teams by keeping the clock and operating the scoreboard. He has also volunteered with the local police department as an office assistant during the summer.

Patrick’s father, Steve Kelley, who works for the Sonora UHSD, said when his son was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy, he questioned whether he would have the same opportunities as other children. But, he said, Patrick has long since proved that his worries were unfounded.

“I’m very proud of him,” Kelley said.

Kelley said Patrick was never teased or harassed, but he is at an age when he is having doubts about himself and his abilities. Kelley said the award exemplifies Patrick’s limitless possibilities.

“It helps his self-esteem. It helps his self-image,” he said. “I always tried to raise him with the thought that he can do anything.”

Patrick said he hopes to go to Columbia Junior College in Sonora after he graduates in June of 2001. Although he is not sure what he would like to study, he said he is interested in becoming certified in first aid and CPR.

This summer, he, his father and 30 other students will be spending three weeks in Europe.

Other members of Patrick’s support team include Summerville



Region 8

Joe Gonzalves

Sunnyvale Middle School, Sunnyvale SD

Schoolleaders help teen find his focus

Joe Gonsalves is a young man who pulled himself up by the bootstraps. In seventh grade, his grade point average was 0.67. By the end of his eighth-grade year, he managed to raise it all the way to 2.71, earning the ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 8.

Joe exhibited a number of behavioral and academic problems until he entered Sunnyvale Middle School in Sunnyvale School District. By then he had attended five different schools. For a time he did not live with his mother, instead residing with his grandmother. He was in speech therapy through third grade.

“Joe really had a lot of things working against him,” said ACSA’s Tom Sutkus, principal of Sunnyvale Middle School. “He came from a single-parent family that was of modest means. He had a lack of success at school for a number of years. He was in an environment that was less than ideal.

And Joe was really hyperactive and that issue was not being treated, which really compounded his problems.”

“Some of the obstacles Joe had to overcome were, basically, he and his family did not have the means to seek help financially,” agreed fellow ACSA member Elfriede Bagley, assistant principal at Sunnyvale. “They had to live from day to day with very basic means. And with Joe’s family moving around so much, there was little stability.”

But Sunnyvale educators never gave up on Joe. Teachers were urged to hang in there with him when he seemed to be spending more time in the office than in the classroom.

“Here at school a number of folks have really tried to advocate for Joe,” Sutkus said. “One, in getting him medical attention, and two, in helping his mom to see what his issues were.”

The staff at Sunnyvale stressed to his mother the need for Joe to be tested for attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity. He was ultimately tested after his seventh grade year and was diagnosed with ADD.

“I had a meeting with my mom, my seventh grade teachers and the principal last year,” said Joe, who graduated from the eighth grade in June. “They suggested I get tested for ADD to see if that would help me to try and do better. “The reason I’m doing better is that we found out I have ADD and now I’m on the medication. Before I wasn’t able to focus on my work and get the work done because I wouldn’t understand it. But now the medicine helps me to focus and understand.”

With the diagnosis, Joe finally received medication that curbed his behavioral problems. The change was noticeable to everyone around him.

The turnaround was so remarkable that staff at Sunnyvale decided to allow him to be on the football team, despite his previous year’s academic standing. This decision paid off when Joe’s football team made it to the finals in Florida, and he was no longer sent to the office for any problems.

“Joe has turned out to be quite a good athlete, and I helped in getting him involved in Pop Warner football and participating on the school teams here,” Sutkus said. “I also worked with teachers to help them see Joe in a different light, because, as you know, reputations die hard. I just did the things anyone would do in trying to advocate for our clients.”

Bagley played a key role in helping Joe find academic success.

“The role I played came under the umbrella of being his advocate,” she said. “I am his grade-level administrator. This has included discipline, counseling, meetings with his parent or parents, etc. When Joe was having so much trouble last year, I would encourage his teachers to try to hang onto him, as did Dr. Sutkus.

“I was the one dealing with him most of the time when he was sent to the office for various indiscretions. I would counsel him, give him the consequences for his behavior and have him work on his homework or classwork when he was in the office. I would be

the one to call home, send him home and/or meet with mom; whatever the incident warranted.”

Joe’s success has pleased Bagley.

“To see a student like Joe fi



Region 9

Encarnacion Ramirez

Edison High School, Fresno USD

Teen athlete winning battle with leukemia

Encarnacion “Nick” Ramirez was just like any other teenager at Fresno Unified Schools’ Edison High. He studied hard, played sports, and liked to have fun.

That all changed when Nick was diagnosed with leukemia in the spring of 1998. Although he missed more than a year of school, underwent regular chemotherapy treatments and suffered intense physical pain and fatigue, Nick still managed to complete his schoolwork and keep his grades up.

In recognition of his determination and strength, Nick received the ACSA/MetLife 2000 Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 9.

“I’m really excited that people recognized the efforts and struggles I went through,” Nick said. “I’ve never really won anything at all in my life.”

Nick said it took time to get used to the chemotherapy treatments. He said within days of getting an injection, he would have severe muscle pain in his shoulders and legs, making the simplest tasks nearly impossible, even with the help of prescription painkillers.

“It hurts so much you can barely walk,” he said. “You walk slow and it takes a lot of energy.”

Another side effect of the chemotherapy was severe fatigue, which required Nick to stay out of the sun and avoid physical activity. The fatigue was so strong, Nick often forced himself to stay up late to do his homework, even though he wanted to sleep.

“It’s difficult because it takes a lot out of you,” he said. “You don’t want to do any- thing.”

Nick said the first year he was diagnosed with leukemia was the hardest, because he missed much of his sophomore and junior years while in the hospital. To keep his spirits up, Nick tried not to dwell on what he was going through. "I put it aside and I try to distract myself with other things," he said.

Nick said his teachers and administrators were supportive during his recovery, and said he now thinks of them as friends. He said some visited him in the hospital and at home, others sent cards and others even donated blood. Counselor Carlene Tinker, a member of Nick's support team, said when he returned to school in the fall of 1999, she and other staff members pushed him to succeed.

"He was treated just like everybody else," she said. "He's had 100 percent support from everybody, who encouraged him to do well."

Nick used his experience to help other ill children by volunteering as a peer counselor at Valley Children's Hospital, as a camp counselor at "Camp Sunshine," a summer camp for young cancer patients, and by founding the First Connection Teen Group, a support group for teenagers with serious illnesses.

"He's managed to keep his outlook positive and to mentor others," Tinker said.

ACSA member Andre Douyon, principal of Edison High School, said the Every Student Succeeding award not only recognizes the student, but the entire school.

"The award is, quite frankly, something that we're proud of," he said. "This year we got to show off the pride of Edison." Douyon said the award is beneficial to students because it helps their morale. While administrators and teachers try to instill the importance of preparing for the future, many students focus on the short term and don't see the relationship between hard work and the reward it brings.

"It's a nice incentive because it shows the kids there is an immediate return on the investment of their hard work," Douyon said. "Kids start believing 'yes I can!'"

Although Nick is now in remission, he must continue his chemotherapy treatments for at least another year. He graduated at the end of May, and plans to attend Fresno City College in the fall. He said he hopes to become a medical social worker so he can help other people facing serious illnesses.



Region 10

Philip Wheeler

Gonzales High, Gonzales USD

Grad strives to be role model for all students

Most educators are happy when their students do well, learn the curriculum and perform satisfactorily on tests. But every now and then, a student who is an educator's dream comes through a classroom.

Philip Wheeler is just such a student. A June graduate of Gonzales High School in Gonzales Unified School District, Phillip is the ACSA MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award recipient from Region 10.

The oldest of five children in his family and a Native American, Philip served as student body president and student representative to the local board of education. Philip has fulfilled his parents' encouragement to apply himself to his studies by maintaining a 4.0 grade point average and taking honors classes.

He also eagerly participated in student activities and associations, such as the Computer Club and Interact. To top this off, Philip wrestled in the Mission Trails Athletic League, and was seeded No. 1 in his weight class by the final tournaments of the year. If all this sounds like a full load, that couldn't be more correct.

"It's been really hard balancing my sports and all my classes," Philip said. "Especially since this year I was taking calculus and honors language arts, which are pretty tough classes. Basically, I had no time for hanging out with my friends on weekdays. I could hang out on weekends, but weekdays were pretty much go to school, go to practice, do my homework, then go to sleep."

Philip wants to be a role model, not only for young people in the Native American community, but for all students.

"This year I got to coach the Fairview Middle School wrestlers," he said. "I just want to show kids they can have the same success and be as lucky as I've been; that they have the same potential within themselves to do the things I've done. I want to see them succeed. It's been nice to have had the opportunities I've had. I can show that you can be successful in sports and in academics. They can see that you can be in sports and it's still cool to be smart."

An educator who has been enriched by contact with Philip is ACSA member Richard Averett, superintendent of Gonzales USD. Averett got to know Philip when serving as interim principal of Gonzales High. He said he didn't need to do much to help Philip succeed.

“There were times he needed a little support and we provided that for him,” Averett said. “When he was student representative on the school board, I was able to show him the ropes there.”

But Philip says Averett has offered him not only support, but also the opportunity to take part in decision making for student activities. “He nominated me for Every Student Succeeding, which is a huge compliment,” Philip said. “In the last year, since he took over as interim principal, I got to be a representative on the school board as ASB president. He helped me out there and he’s asked me for ideas on ways to improve our school.”

“It’s great to have a student like Philip, because you’re not just seeing a student, but also a young adult you can talk to rationally,” Averett said. “When we’re planning dances, Philip will detail the things we need to do to get kids to come and to make sure there are no problems. He’s had a number of good ideas to help make things around the school better.”

Philip’s wrestling coach, Roger Fernando, also played a role in his life. He was Philip’s wrestling coach for two years, and for a year and a half was an activities director. He also worked with Philip when he was a class officer and ASB president.

“This guy is remarkable,” Fernando said. “You run across students every once in a while where you don’t have to tell them much about what they need to do. Philip just goes and does the things that need to be done. And if there are any problems to be corrected, he’ll do that.”

Fernando said Philip has been a remarkable student to teach. He said Philip is willing to try just about anything, including wrestling in higher weight classes.



Region 11

Jesse Ray Caldera

Avenal High, Reef-Sunset USD

Boot camp teaches ex-gang member to respect self, others

Jesse Caldera’s 180-degree turnaround in life earned him the ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 11.

As a child, Jesse saw many of his family members wind up in prison. He was in a gang himself by the time he was in sixth grade. His grades slipped as he began to have less and less control over his temper. By middle school, his hands were proudly adorned with tattoos glorifying his gang affiliation.

Finally, in the eighth grade he wound up in real trouble. He was expelled from school after assaulting two teachers. Experimentation with drugs and a period as a runaway followed. Citations and arrests eventually led to probation.

Even that wasn’t enough to deter Jesse from the path he was on. He violated probation by testing positive for drugs and was sent to boot camp. He spent his freshman year locked up and entered high school with a lot of baggage.

“Jesse had a family background where gang involvement was just accepted,” said ACSA Region 11 member Mike Arredondo, principal of Jesse’s Avenal High School in Reef-Sunset USD. “He had family members that were hard-core gang members and there was no place he could go to avoid it. He couldn’t avoid it at school, he couldn’t avoid it out on the street with his friends, and he couldn’t avoid it when he got home.”

“There was a lot of peer pressure to be in the gang life,” Jesse said. “It was very hard. Every day you have to get up and face the same thing and try to overcome it. It’s all based on your choices.”

Knowing Jesse’s background, Arredondo sat down and had a serious conversation with him when he wanted to enter Avenal High.

“He’d spent almost his entire freshman year in boot camp in Kings County,” Arredondo said. “When he came back to us, we had just expelled his older brother less than a week earlier. Everybody said, ‘Oh no, here comes Jesse.’ They thought he was just as bad as his brother, if not worse. His older brother had never been locked up, but Jesse had been.

“I told him he was starting off with a couple strikes against him and it would be hard for him here. I told him we were willing to help and work with him, but I couldn’t have the kind of behavior that got him in trouble in the first place, or the kind of things his brother had been involved in. We just wouldn’t tolerate it.

“I can remember his words to this day,” Arredondo continued. “He said, ‘Mr. Arredondo, you don’t ever have to worry about that. I’m not the same person, and you’ll never see me in trouble. I want to go to school and be involved in activities. I’ve changed and you’re never going to have a problem with me.’ To this day, he’s been absolutely true to his word and he’s never been in my office for anything.”

Jesse says boot camp changed him.

"I loved boot camp, I swear," Jesse said. "It taught me a lot. It taught me discipline and self-respect and how to care for others. There's no individual here; we're all working together as a team.

"I loved the exercise. I love to run. And, it made me feel good to think about others, not just thinking about myself." Arredondo says Jesse has truly turned over a new leaf. "He wanted to play sports, and the football coach took him under his wing," Arredondo said. "He wanted to be in drama and choir, and the choir director took him under his wing. He was the dentist in (the school play) 'Little Shop of Horrors.' He was captain of the football team. You talk about your ideal kids, that's what Jesse was. Coming from where he had been, the change was phenomenal."

The change came from Jesse, Arredondo said. He wanted to change and he wanted to go in a different direction.

"You know, people can leave an area, go somewhere else and get a fresh start. But Jesse came right back to the spot where he had all his problems. The same surroundings, the same community, the same kids he'd been around, and he just said, 'I'm not doing that any more,'" Arredondo said. "It was probably the to



Region 12

Brandon Salas

San Andreas High, San Bernardino CUSD

Student prevails over personal, family trials

For nearly half his years in public education, San Bernardino City USD student Brandon Salas has battled trauma in one way or another.

When he was in the seventh grade, Brandon collapsed at school. Doctors later discovered he had no hip joints. In May of 1999, after Brandon had undergone years of surgery and physical therapy, his father died of a sudden heart attack. That summer, his brother was injured in a car accident. Soon after, his mother, a diabetic, was diagnosed with a heart condition. At the same time, his grandmother, who has cancer, underwent chemotherapy.

But even in the face of overwhelming medical uncertainty, Brandon was determined not to lose his educational focus.

This brave June graduate is the ACSA/MetLife 2000 Every Student Succeeding Award recipient for Region 12.

Brandon's own physical problems started in junior high, and have affected him through the years.

After his hip condition was discovered, he underwent surgery and spent more than a month in the hospital and another on bed rest. For the next year, he was confined to a wheelchair and then another two weeks on crutches before doctors discovered a pin in his hip had punctured the bone.

After spending another month in a wheelchair and a few more weeks on crutches, he finally regained his ability to walk, with the help of physical therapy and pain medication .

Thanks to the help of school staff, including San Andreas High principal and ACSA member Margaret Hill, Brandon made it through. He said Hill assured him he could do it, and helped him get the credits he needed to ensure he graduated on time.

"If you're not careful, you can fall through the cracks, and she didn't let that happen ," Brandon said.

Hill said when Brandon came to San Andreas, he had given up on everything, including graduation. She said her job was unusual, because although Brandon's physical pain had subsided, he still deeply felt the pain of losing his father.

"When he came to us, his medical problems had been taken care of but his emotional problems had not," Hill said.

Counselor Victor Buyco, a member of Brandon's support team, said when he first met Brandon, he was suffering emotionally and had trouble keeping up in school.

"He wasn't doing well, both emotionally and academically," Buyco said. "I was just trying to get him to a safe place."

When Brandon disappeared from school after his father 's death, Buyco met with the teenager and tried to encourage him to return to an independent study program. In the fall of 1999, Brandon took his advice.

When Brandon, who has always been artistic by nature, began drawing again, and when he later started working as a teacher's assistant, Buyco knew he was on the road to recovery.

"We knew he started to come back into the light again," Buyco said.

Hill said she encouraged Brandon to return to San Andreas, which he did in March. From that point, his attendance improved dramatically.

Hill said Brandon is the perfect candidate for the award because despite the difficulties he faced in his life, he didn't let go of his goals.

"I knew all the trials and tribulations that were going on in his life," Hill said. "I thought (the award) would give him that little sparkle, which it did."

Brandon said without his father's help during the years following hip surgery, he would have had a more difficult time staying in school. But his father brought him to school every day, and even stopped by to check on his progress. Brandon said his father's belief that the first 12 years of school are free and should be taken advantage of sticks with him, even though his father is gone.

"He was a rock. I depended on him. He was such a big believer in education. That's why I do it - for him," he said.

Brandon said his family is extremely important to him, and he worked hard to graduate in June in order to help his mother and grandmother.

"We've got to do everything we can to take care of each other,



Region 13

Arturo Villagomez

Colina Middle, Conejo Valley USD

Strong family support helps teen avoid pitfalls

Unlike many students his age, Arturo Villagomez has managed to steer clear of gangs, drugs and other negative influences that surround him.

A recent graduate of Colina Middle School in the Conejo Valley Unified School District, Arturo is this year's recipient of the ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 13.

"He has a lot of chances to have negative influences in his life, and he's rejected those and embraced the positive ones," said Lisa Severns, a counselor at Colina and a member of Arturo's support team. "Arturo is doing everything right."

Arturo has set high academic goals for himself and has achieved them with flying colors. He participated in the school's college preparatory program in mathematics and he elected to take an accelerated, high school level, college-preparatory Spanish class in junior high, while maintaining a grade point average of 3.54.

In addition, Arturo has a top-notch citizenship record at Colina, which uses a point system to track students' tardies and absences and rewards good standing with barbecues, games and trips to local beaches and amusement parks.

Throughout his educational career, Arturo has kept a perfect record and receives marks of "excellent" in both work habits and citizenship.

Arturo has also gained athletic success. In the seventh grade, he placed first in all three school-wide track races and came in first in the Turkey Trot, a 5K Thanksgiving run. He also races in the local chapter of USA Track and Field, and placed fifth nationwide last year.

Arturo has also shown dedication to his community. In his spare time, he volunteered to teach an art class in his neighborhood, inviting the local children to come to his home to learn to paint and draw.

Severns credits Arturo's success to lessons he learned from his family.

"His parents work very, very hard and they instill the work ethic - to work hard and make the best of your talents," Severns said.

ACSA's Jerry Gross, superintendent of the Conejo Valley USD, agreed that strong family support has helped Arturo follow the right path, proving the importance of a positive home life.

"It shows what students can do when they get this kind of family support," Gross said.

Arturo maintains he didn't do anything extraordinary, he just followed the guidelines set forth by his parents, Joel and Monica Villagomez. He said they are happy his hard work has been recognized.

"They're really proud of me," he said. "That's what they expect of me."

In addition to his family, Arturo has the support and encouragement of administrators and teachers who help him in his endeavors, Severns said. "We try to create opportunities for him to develop his talents and succeed," she said. "We try to provide opportunities here at Colina, to allow kids to shine."

Arturo agreed, and said that if it weren't for school staff he probably wouldn't be where he is today. He said they always taught him that he could do anything he wanted.

"They help me out," he said. "They're good people." ACSA Region 13 President Roberta Heter, principal of Lompoc High School, said the Every Student Succeeding award is a positive way to reach out to the people who are affected most by the California education system - the students.

"Any way we can highlight student success is important," she said. "That's why we're here. It draws a picture of what education is all about."



Region 14

Kathryn Prior

Hickory Elementary, Torrance USD

Remarkable 5th-grader doesn't allow health to interfere with school

Kathryn Pryor has had 17 major surgeries before the age of 10. While some students have significant obstacles to overcome, Kathryn has had to climb mountains.

Her struggles and subsequent success make Kathryn a very deserving recipient of the ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award, representing Region 14.

Kathryn was born with a complete cleft palate and a semi-cleft lip. Over the first few months of her life other problems surfaced: bilateral hearing loss, an enlarged left side of her heart, bilateral cataracts, facial muscle deformities, and her jaw was missing adjacent to where her teeth would normally be.

Because of her cleft palate, Kathryn could not feed as a normal baby would. So, her very first surgery was to have a gastric tube inserted. It stayed there for the first six months of her life.

When she was three months old, a surgeon closed her lip.

Her mother agonized as she saw Kathryn, a tiny baby in a hospital bed, with her arms splinted to keep her from pulling apart her repaired lip.

Many surgeries followed, and the results presented hurdles for Kathryn in the course of her education.

"One of Kathryn's major obstacles has always been that she looks very different from other children," said Jann Feldman, principal of Hickory Elementary School in Torrance Unified School District, where Kathryn attends fifth grade. "Children are hyper-aware of facial and physical differences, so she's had to become pretty strong.

"Even though we teach kids not to tease and try to help them to be more compassionate toward others, I'm sure she's had to endure unkind remarks. That, for her, might be as hard as anything she's had to deal with."

But Feldman said that hasn't kept Kathryn from participating in school activities.

"She's so frail she's had to become almost superhuman in terms of her being able to participate in a lot of activities," she said. "That she has been able to participate has kind of normalized things for her a little bit. She's always participated in soccer, and she gets in there and does the very best she can." Kathryn's soccer prowess recently earned her a sportsmanship award.

"She's just a remarkable young lady," Feldman said. "When she's in the hospital, which is often, the minute she's out of surgery she wants work to do and she wants to keep up with what's going on at school. All her work is always on time because she will work ahead."

Kathryn is modest when asked how she manages to keep up in school with all her hospital time.

"It's not that hard," she said. "I get my homework from school, and when I come home from the hospital, I can work on it."

Kathryn is aided by the fact she really likes going to school. "I just like learning," she said. "I like seeing all my friends. I want to get a good education."

Feldman said she has tried to help Kathryn by smoothing the way for her a little bit.

"Whenever she's assigned to a classroom or a teacher I sit down with her teachers and really lay it out for them how to make things as normalized as possible for Kathryn in the classroom," she said. "I let them know that she doesn't want any special favors. I act as a facilitator and a buffer; some-one who's there for the family to make things work."

Kathryn acknowledges Feldman's assistance, and feels particularly boosted by her Every Student Succeeding nomination. Not surprisingly, though, she calls her mother her biggest supporter.

"I think my mom has helped me the most, because every time when I'm feeling down she always brings me back up," Kathryn said. "When I go to the hospital, she's always there for me."

Feldman said it has meant a lot to see Kathryn succeed. "How important is it on a scale of 1-10? A 10," she said. "I have a special ed background, and with a child like Kathryn, what she has gone through I think is even more difficult than a child who maybe has mental or intellectual disabilities. Many times, the



Region 15

Terry Dyer

Monterey High, Burbank USD

Young artist overcomes learning disability, finds confidence to succeed

For one student in the Burbank Unified School District, all it took was some brushes and paint to keep his learning disability at bay and get his life back on track.

When Terry Dyer transferred to Monterey High School in August of 1997, he had only a dozen credits under his belt and a poor attendance record. To make matters worse, he had a learning disability, which made processing and retaining information difficult.

But it wasn't until Terry became involved in an art project to create murals of zoo animals for a fund-raiser at Los Angeles Children's Hospital that he began to blossom. Later, he won a local art competition and would begin creating murals for display along San Fernando Boulevard in Burbank.

To recognize his turn-around, Terry was selected to receive the ACSA/MetLife 2000 Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 15.

Terry said he was surprised to have been chosen for the award because there are many other students who turned their lives around in the same way he did.

"I'm very honored," he said.

ACSA's Ann Brooks, principal of Monterey High School, said the award is beneficial to students because it proves to them their hard work is worthwhile.

"I believe that receiving this kind of award helps reward them for their growth," Brooks said. "It's a very nice way for kids to be validated for the progress they have made.

Teacher Barbara Forletta, who is part of Terry's ESS support team, said before coming to Monterey, Terry was a quiet student who simply got lost between the cracks. She said he suffered from a lack of self-esteem due to his learning disability, and devoted his every waking minute to computer games.

"He suffered from a lack of (direction) and depression," Forletta said.

But she and other support team members encouraged Terry to pursue his goals and challenged him to overcome his disability, as they could see the potential buried deep beneath his sadness.

Forletta said their nurturing, caring attitudes finally paid off when one day Terry exclaimed, "I can do this!" Now, Terry has confidence in himself. His teachers instilled in him the idea that he could succeed.

"It was that little kernel of belief that it was possible he could have a career," Forletta said.

Brooks said the teachers and staff at Monterey have also helped Terry by providing opportunities for him that are unique. They gave him special assistance in his class work and made themselves available for him to discuss issues or concerns.

Since September of 1998, Terry improved his attendance dramatically and gained the credits he needed to graduate in June. In fact, he had perfect attendance for the last three quarters and was even named Student of the Week and Student of the Quarter. He was also awarded the Youth Appreciation Week award from the Burbank-Magnolia Park Optimist Club.

Terry devoted himself to school. He began volunteering his time on campus by stocking the soda machine, helping with open houses and back-to-school night, participating in recycling efforts and assisting with spirit week. He also joined the choir and sang at local retirement homes and senior centers. And he participated in the school's agricultural program, tending his part of a vegetable and flower garden.

Brooks said Terry totally committed himself to school in the last few quarters. He even stayed late to assist his teachers. "Terry used this as a home away from home," she said.

With only five credits left before graduating, Terry received scholarships from the Burbank Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Kiwanis and La Cadena Women's Club of Burbank. He plans to attend art college, and said he hopes to be a character animator for Walt Disney.

Terry said his teachers and administrators are to thank for helping him receive the Every Student Succeeding award. He said without them, he wouldn't be following his dream.



Region 16

Karla Hernandez

Fairfax High, Los Angeles USD

Administrators nurture teen through adversity

You can't do well in school if you don't go to class. Some students never learn that simple lesson, but Karla Hernandez is one young woman who heard the message. That lesson enabled her to be named the ACSA/MetLife Region 16 Every Student Succeeding honoree.

It took some time for the "stay in school" message to sink in. Karla started off at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles USD by ditching most of ninth grade. When she did bother to show up, she hung out with a rough clique and exhibited a bad attitude toward teachers and classmates.

"In ninth grade I started hanging out with the wrong crowd," Karla said. "I started not coming to school. In 10th grade, I started getting into doing drugs. I kept ditching and my grades were D's and 'fails.'"

Nobody knows the amount of trouble Karla was getting into better than Carolee Bogue, dean of students at Fairfax High. Bogue is in charge of student discipline.

"Karla would just see school as a way of not being around home, and hanging out on the streets as a way of not going to school," Bogue said. "She was hanging around with lowlifes and she had relationships with gang members."

Karla continued running with that same crowd until her junior year. Then it hit home that at the rate she was going she wasn't going to graduate from high school. Karla turned herself around and began not only attending class regularly, but also going to summer school and night school.

Things really began to turn around for Karla when she joined a student support group called "Impact" in her 11th grade year. "I started going to night school and summer school to get my credits back up," she said.

"Impact is a federally funded program that comes out of Title 4 funds for being a drug-free school," Bogue said. "It offers support groups for kids where there's suspicion of drug use, where there is a person who's trying to recover from drug use, where they're living with drug or alcohol abuse, and a group for kids in crisis. Karla qualified for three out of four of those groups.

"These kids are really there for each other. When one of them misses even a period, they're calling up and asking, 'Where were you? What's wrong with you?'"

But fate threw Karla a curveball. Just when she thought she was catching up, she became pregnant. Karla started to revert to her old ways, slacking off and skipping school. Her grades began dropping again, and she even failed classes. She ultimately decided to have an abortion. She agonized over the decision, but believed if she had a child this early in life, she'd be giving up on so much she wanted to accomplish. She wanted to be the first in her family to go to college and do big things with her life.

But she wasn't prepared for the mental shock of the first couple months after the abortion. She said it was the "most mentally painful event so far in my short life." Karla credits Bogue with helping her get through that rough period. "I started getting depressed after the abortion, and I stopped going to school again," Karla said. "It was hard for me to deal with it at first and she helped me get through that. I knew if I felt like talking to somebody, ... she would see me."

"When I first saw Karla I thought she was gang to the ground," Bogue said. "That's what we call them when they never get out. But the thing that attracted me to her was that she had a very sharp wit. And I could see that inner strength she had."

Bogue says all Karla needed was a little support to get her back on track.

"I kept picking her up and putting her back on track and networking her to people," Bogue said. "I really believe in that. After two of her counselors left us, I got her with a counselor I knew was very dependable and had a lot of continuity. I just kept her in support groups and kept her moving."

Bogue says Karla has always been a strong person. And now she has herself turned around and is on the right track. "I've been in Impact now for



Region 17

Faith Mote

Santiago Creek Day, Orange COE

Art discovery helps teen mom overcome odds, finish school

Seventeen-year-old Faith Mote knew the odds were against her. As a child, she had been abused, and by the age of 16, she was in and out of foster homes, addicted to drugs and alcohol, and pregnant.

But as her name suggests, she knew she could achieve her goals despite the obstacles, and in doing so earned the ACSA MetLife 2000 Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 17.

Faith said she knew she had hit rock bottom when she became pregnant, and knew she had a decision to make regarding her future and the future of her child. Suffering depression and in denial that she was about to become a mother, she enrolled in the Orange County Office of Education 's Santiago Creek School.

"I wanted to prove the statistics wrong," Faith said. "And I became very good at it."

Because her mother had become pregnant as a teenager, Faith knew she had a rough road ahead of her. But she was determined to finish high school before her baby's due date at the end of March, and set out on an accelerated schedule to complete one and a half years of coursework in only three months - all while working a part-time job.

Faith set a stringent coursework schedule for herself, often asking her teachers for two new assignments for every one she turned in.

"She just pushed herself and worked day and night to get the credits she needed to graduate," said Cyndie Borcoman of the district's alternative education program.

Although Faith was determined not to give up, she was still very depressed. Like other students at Santiago Creek, she took an art class in which she was able to express her emotions through a visual medium in the hopes of coming to terms with her problems.

"She was beaming. She had transformed like a flower blooming," said Borcoman. "It's very expressive. It's a good way we've found students can express themselves. She really benefited by it."

Art therapist Lisa Albert said when Faith began the class she was angry, violent and had no enthusiasm. But that all changed when Faith was assigned to make a sculpture of herself, and created a beautiful image of a pregnant woman.

"It was probably the most beautiful because she really let her emotions go into it," Albert said.

Slowly, Faith began opening up, and let her anger and depression wash away. She connected with her peers and her teachers, and most importantly, she connected with her unborn child and soon became excited at the idea of becoming a mother.

"Art was a very good tool for her to have that release and find the path to go forward," Albert said.

Borcoman said although Santiago Creek School caters to students who need special guidance, success is something that must come from within, which Faith soon found out despite her hardships.

"You can help somebody, but they have to do it themselves," Borcoman said. "She could be a victim but she rose above it and chose not to be."

Faith said she could not have achieved her goals without the help of school staff, who encouraged her and challenged her along the way.

"They knew I was determined to do something and they let me do it," she said.

Faith's son, Krystian Jesus Wilson, was born at the beginning of April, soon after Faith received her high school diploma. Faith said her main goal now is to provide for her child. She hopes to attend Santa Ana College in the fall and pursue a career as a pediatric nurse, "so I could take care of him to the best of my ability."

ACSA member John Dean, superintendent of the Orange County Office of Education, said the Every Student Succeeding award is beneficial to students because it rewards those such as Faith who might otherwise miss out.

"The program is wonderful. I think it's the best thing ACSA has ever done," Dean said. "We're excited she's getting this recognition."

In fact, Faith was completely shocked when she found out she had been chosen to receive the award because she never thought she accomplished anything extraord



Region 18

Monica Villegas

Castle Park Elementary, Chula Vista ESD

Aspiring dancer leads with enthusiasm after tragic burn accident

Fourth-grader Monica Villegas, a student at Castle Park Elementary School in the Chula Vista Elementary School District, hasn't let tragedy destroy her childhood, and has become a source of inspiration for others.

Monica's strength and perseverance have earned her the ACSA/MetLife 2000 Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 18.

When Monica was in the first grade, a barbecue exploded during a family party, engulfing her in flames. The blaze left such severe burns that her heart stopped and she was in a coma in a critical care burn unit for more than a week. Monica spent seven weeks in the hospital, undergoing dozens of surgeries and painful skin grafts. Even two years after the accident, Monica had to wear restrictive burn garb over most of her body almost 24 hours a day. But she did not give up. While recovering at home, her first-grade teacher, Stephanie Petitt, paid daily visits to her home to assist her with her second-grade school work, which Monica completed with enthusiasm despite her pain and suffering.

"She had a lot of emotional and physical scars she was trying to deal with," Petitt said.

Petitt, a member of Monica's ESS support team, said the situation was especially challenging, not only because Monica was four months behind in her coursework, but because she was transitioning from Spanish to English classes. She wasn't able to fully develop her English skills, since her injuries prevented her from playing with other children. Despite the difficulty, Monica stuck with it, and managed to complete all of her work on time while keeping her grades high.

"She achieves no matter how hard or difficult it is," Petitt said. "In our minds, she's gone above and beyond the call of duty. She has surpassed all of her peers at her grade level."

ACSA administrator Gretchen Donndelinger, principal of Castle Park Elementary, said Monica, a blossoming singer and dancer, returned to school just so she could help her classmates with a holiday performance.

"That's what drove her," Donndelinger said. "She wanted to do something for them."

School officials explained Monica's tragedy to her classmates, but her positive attitude and friendliness made her as popular as ever. Donndelinger said Monica has proven the importance of not losing hope and doing the things you love to do.

"We've all learned from her that our little problems are really little," she said. "Every time I think of her I want to cry. Nobody - nobody - has that much bravery."

Terri Spurgeon, Monica's fourth-grade teacher and a member of her support team, said the entire school has helped Monica get through the ordeal by respecting her and treating her as they would anyone else.

"The school has grown with Monica," Spurgeon said. "There's not a person who doesn't treat her with kindness. We've learned how to work together as a school for a child with a disability."

Spurgeon said since Monica has been back in school, she has grown less and less dependent on her mother, who initially attended class every day with her. She said returning to school has been extremely beneficial to Monica because it teaches her to be strong.

"This has been good for Monica," she said. "She's taking more responsibility on her own. She's spread her wings a little bit. I really feel she's become very independent. I see a giant growth."

Since her return, Monica has become a peer tutor in her class and in Petitt's first-grade class, helping students in Spanish and English. She also tutors after school and volunteers at the school's homework center.

Monica has also gotten involved in her community. She recently raised \$147 for the Jump Rope for Heart program and raises money for a local children's hospital and UNICEF by collecting pennies.

Although she can only attend school part-time and still wears her burn garb, Monica continues to dance, assisting in the school's talent shows and musicals. She said she hopes t

Region 1

Rosa Castorena

Red Bluff Union High, Red Bluff Joint Union High School

High school can be a very tough time. Classes get harder, social situations change day by day and adult-hood beckons. But these issues can pale in comparison to what some students must deal with.

Rosa Castorena, ACSA's Every Student Succeeding Award recipient from Region 1, is one of those students. For three years, she was in and out of hospitals and doctors' offices before she was finally diagnosed with a germ cell tumor on her pituitary gland.

She underwent chemotherapy and radiation treatments and had to miss the entire spring semester of her junior year. Because of the tumor, Rosa is only 4 feet, 5 inches tall and weighs about 67 pounds.

"When I was first diagnosed with my tumor, I couldn't attend school," Rosa said. "It was hard for me. I was down and I felt like I wasn't going to survive. I wondered why it had to happen to me and felt like I was no one. I was worried about going back to school."

But even all that couldn't keep Rosa down. Small in stature but large in heart, Rosa was determined to keep up with her schoolwork and graduate with her classmates. And that she did.

"I was going through my treatments and still kept up with all my schoolwork by doing home study," she said. "I always was calling my teachers and asking them what I missed. I was always aware of where I was so when I came back to school I hadn't fallen behind."

"I was worried about graduating with my class, and I didn't want to stay behind and go through another year."

ACSA's Joe Pelanconi, principal of Rosa's Red Bluff Union High School, said Rosa gets all the credit for her accomplishments.

"Most of her success came from within her," he said. "We just helped by providing an environment where we could be flexible if we needed to be. She's pretty determined. That we were cheerleaders is probably the best way to describe our role."

"She is just a very courageous and determined kid. Whoever happened to be there when she needed support did it, and did it eagerly because you knew it was going to work."

Red Bluff Union High counselor Jody Brownfield, a member of Rosa's support team, said it's been a pleasure to see Rosa succeed.

"It's been a wonderful opportunity to see her blossom after all the adversity she's overcome in her life," she said. "She's so tiny in stature but such a powerful and big person on our campus. She's a beautiful person and has the respect of all of her classmates. She's so full of life."

Despite continuing with chemotherapy through the fall semester of her senior year, Rosa managed to maintain nearly perfect attendance, not to mention a 3.1 grade point average. Rosa said her family and the faculty at school have provided her with lots of support.

"My family helped me a lot," Rosa said. "They told me 'C'mon, you can fight this. You'll survive.' My teachers and the people around me in school were always helping me out whenever they could. I saw all that, and how much school meant to me, and I said I wasn't going to let this hold me down from accomplishing my goals. And my goals are to finish school and go on to college, and that's what I did."

In turn, Rosa has touched the lives of those around her.

"Even though I'm not Rosa's counselor, I think all of the counselors here have adopted Rosa," Brownfield said. "It's not only a counselor-student relationship but also a friendship. She's touched the lives of everyone within our counseling department."

"This is a kid who has overcome overwhelming odds and did it in such a courageous and positive style that she's an inspiration to everybody she touches," Pelanconi added.

Rosa now plans to go to community college, then transfer to a four-year university. She wants to be an accountant or financial advisor.

Region 2

Tivonta Bradford

Oroville High School, Oroville Union High School District

Broken homes can hurt a child's chances for success. But imagine the shock to a little boy's psyche when the one parent he's living with must go to prison.

Tivonta Bradford is ACSA's Region 2 Every Student Succeeding honoree, and he has overcome such odds to become a promising young man. He was just a third grader when his mother was incarcerated, and it was almost too much for him to handle. "I was the biggest mama's boy," he said.

He went to live with his uncle and aunt. But even with their support, he had a lot of anger inside. He acted out by bullying other kids, withdrawing in class or lashing out at his teachers.

ACSA member Liz Capen, principal of Durham Elementary School, knew Tivonta back then.

"I was the principal of the elementary school Tivonta attended," she said. "I saw an angry kid who lashed out the way angry kids do. I was aware of his difficult back-ground and saw my role as being someone who watched and guided him through some difficult times. When we made the decision to promote him from third to fourth grade, I handpicked his teacher because I knew he'd need someone special."

Now entering his junior year in high school and living with his grandmother, Tivonta recognizes the help Capen gave him, calling her his "best friend." With Capen's assistance and through the help of his friends and family Tivonta has begun to overcome his emotional hardships.

"They helped me develop my mind," Tivonta said. "I started to think, 'my mother's gone, I can't do poorly in school just because she's gone. I'll never succeed.'"

Also helping out along the way was ACSA member Ed Loman, principal of Oroville High School, Tivonta's current school.

"I've tried to be a support network for him, constantly monitoring and checking to see how he's doing on an ongoing basis," Loman said. "He's dealt with myriad other obstacles in some of his younger years in life. I wasn't a part of that but since he's come to high school, I feel I've been instrumental in networking with him."

After taking anger management courses, Tivonta slowly began to emerge from the dark cloud that was consuming him. And little by little, through elementary school, middle school, and now high school, Tivonta is back on track.

"I got over it," he said. "I learned how to control myself."

Eventually, Tivonta accepted his mother's absence in his day-to-day life. But most importantly, he realized he could still be a mama's boy.

"Even though my mom's gone, she plays a big role in my life," he said. "She's spiritually here. She gives me good advice and she talks to me."

All of the adults in Tivonta's life are glad to see the outstanding young man he's become.

"Certainly, that's one of the rewards of education," Loman said. "The fact is that there are kids we recognize, who are out there day-to-day, dealing with many obstacles we are either unaware of or unsure of how we might be able to deal with those. When you see them able to manage school and personal lives and other issues that come up and confront them that's a critical piece."

Tivonta now considers himself a normal student. He said he never expected to be given an award for doing what he should have been doing all along.

"When I first found out I was shocked and surprised," he said. "I feel great because they chose me out of all these students."



Region 3

Tasha Goff

Encina High School, San Juan Unified School District

One of the most ubiquitous refrains heard these days in the education community is that parental involvement in learning makes a huge difference. There's no doubt this is true, which makes it all the more remarkable when a student without the benefit of strong parental support succeeds.

Tasha Goff, the Region 3 ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding honoree, exemplifies this kind of student.

"I've been living on my own for the last two years, since my junior year in high school," Tasha said. "I've been working since I was 16 years old. My senior year, I worked two jobs, played sports and went to school."

Even with all that activity, the lack of parental involvement in her life has been the hardest thing for Tasha to deal with. "One of the toughest obstacles I've had to overcome is getting over the fact that I was a ward of the state and the sense that I didn't really have parents and was raised in custody homes," she said.

Just after she graduated in June from Encina High School in San Juan USD, Tasha made a discovery.

"I actually just found out where my real mom and dad live," Tasha said. "I think talking to them and getting answers to some questions, even if they're answers I don't want to hear, will give me some closure to that part of my life.

"That's probably the biggest obstacle I've had. There are questions I have that are not answered about my life when I was born until the age of six. I was out in the world, realizing that I'm not an ordinary girl. I don't have parents and I have to make it on my own. It's all about me and if I don't wake up every morning and go to school, no one is going to make me do it."

ACSA member Karla Dellner, principal of Tasha's elementary school, Oakview Community Elementary, also in San Juan USD, said Tasha has succeeded through her own hard work.

"This is an amazing girl," Dellner said. "This is a young lady that, through her own perseverance and inability to stop striving, has succeeded. To see her succeed is proof positive that people can achieve beyond all odds. She's been an emancipated minor since she was a near teenager. She took on all kinds of leadership positions at the school in addition to making good grades and taking care of herself. She's just a great kid."

For her part, Tasha said keeping focused on her goals while staying strong for herself hasn't always been easy. She said things were especially tough in her junior year when she lost a roommate at almost the same time she got in a car accident.

"I was totally flipped for about two months," she recalled. "I thought I was not going to survive, The only thing that kept me going was the thought, 'There's going to be college and law school. Then I'm going to get married and have a family, not continue the cycle I went through.'"

Tasha credits the supportive people around her for getting her through some tough times.

"Believing in myself and forming a surrogate family is what kept me going," she said. "If I hadn't formed my surrogate family, I don't think I would have made it. There were coun-selors and friends, people who became my mom and dad (even though they) had their own families. Without that, I think I would have gone off the deep end."

Because of her background, it wasn't easy for Tasha to reach out to others. She said learning not to push people away was a real challenge for her. The lack of familial support made her pull away when people got too close to her.

"I used to think it was me that did it all by myself," she said. "I never really understood the true meaning of love. I sometimes had too much pride and didn't want to reach out. I had to learn that you can't do it all alone. It takes a whole community to raise a child and it takes a community to keep a school going."

Now, thanks to her hard work and the support of some key educators, Tasha has received a scholarship to the University of Denver, where she plane to study political science and international affairs.



Region 4

Leanne Mejia

Vallejo High School, Vallejo City Unified School District

It's tough to adjust to a brand new living situation when a youngster is In high school. But Leanne Mejia was able to handle that well, all the more admirably since she is visually impaired and has been since birth.

Leanne is the Region 4 ACSA/MetLife Every Stu-dent Succeeding honoree. A recent graduate of Vallejo High School in Vallejo City USD, Leanne began her school career in Southern California.

"During that time my parents separated and toward the end of my sophomore year I had to move to Vallejo and start going to school there," she said. "I was living with my aunt and her family and was away from my family for most of my high school years."

Luanne said she had trouble adapting to her new living situation, since the way her aunt raised chil-dren was very different than what she was used to.

"My cousins and I had been close, but as we began living together, we started having a lot of issues, and I to get through that,," she said.

Compounding the difficult adjustment was the fact that Leanne has a congenital vision impairment. She hos an extreme sensitivity to sunlight, no color vision and is very nearsighted. This made situating herself in her new home a struggle.

“With my vision, I had to get reacquainted with everything again, and get adjusted to a new environment. That took time,” Leanne said.

What got her through this tough time was school, where she found a support system.

“I was surprised that (people) didn’t judge me,” Leanne said. “It was a lot easier to get to know people. I learned to cope with a lot of stuff through the people I met at school.”

One person at school who played a big role in helping Leanne was Stephanie Leong, a teacher at Vallejo High who works with visually impaired students.

“Mrs. Leong helped me a lot with my vision needs,” Leanne said. “I went to private school ever since I was in kindergarten and I didn’t get that much help, I guess because it wasn’t public (school). I wasn’t able to get that many things. I didn’t know that I could get help for my vision because they never said anything about it.

“I got connected with her and she started showing me that I could get help. I was really shy about it and she helped me to become more aggressive about seeking out help.”

Leong’s involvement in helping Leanne went beyond dealing with visual needs.

“The more I worked with Mrs. Leong, the more she found out about my problems, and the way I was acting in school,” Leanne said. “She would talk to me about it. She helped ease my pain and suggested alternatives, instead of me feeling miserable. I found it easy to talk to her and that helped a lot.”

Leong said she simply helped Leanne understand that people in public education would help her when she needed it.

“She came up here thinking public schools were all the same and nobody would be there to help her,” Leong said.

“Fortunately, we have intermediaries who advocate for children in our school system here in Vallejo.”

The staff at Vallejo High has been gratified to see Leanne’s progress.

“She’s done very well and we’re all proud of her,” Leong said. “She’s taken six or seven of the Golden State Examinations and done well on those, and is a Governor’s Scholarship candidate.”

ACSA’s Peter Curren, a program specialist with Vallejo City USD, said he is pleased with Leanne’s success.

“It’s a wonderful triumph for the student, to be able to overcome her disability and to succeed in a very competitive world,” Curren said. “It’s very important because Leanne will be one of those people who’s out there in our community being a productive member of society in spite of her limitations. I think that’s a wonderful thing for all of us who are currently able-bodied to experience and appreciate.”

Now Leanne will attend San Jose State University and major in business administration and management. When asked what she hoped to do after college she laughed and said she hoped she’d “be an executive.”

“Right now, I’m still thinking abo



Region 5

Babe Kawaii-Bogue

Lincoln High School, San Francisco Unified School District

Some students struggle and never are able to fulfill their potential. But these stories are balanced out by those who face obstacles and overcome them to become high achievers. Babe Kawaii-Bogue, Region 5’s Every Student Succeeding recipient, is just such a student.

Babe became a true leader at Lincoln High School in San Francisco USD. She was chosen to be the 2000-01 Black Student Union President. She worked to develop a club to help students with their self-esteem.

She became actively involved in the Peer Resource Program, became a peer tutor, took part in a middle school outreach program and mentored incoming high school students.

“She’s wonderful,” said ACSA member Pat Aramendia, a counselor at Lincoln High. “It’s very important to see people like her succeed. She’s a very deserving student.”

Aramendia said Babe has been a high achiever, even getting elected to a student seat on the San Francisco Board of Education.

“She’s done extremely well in her classes and has taken AP classes,” Aramendia said. “She’s the student representative to our school board, which, in San Francisco, is a big deal. There was competition (for the school board) in all our high schools and she was selected. The school board meets every other week, and she sits in on all the meetings and is on some of their standing committees.”

In that endeavor, Babe was assisted by ACSA’s Frank Tom, principal of Lincoln High.

“She didn’t understand about board policies and the Ed Code and the board package,” Tom said. “I explained to her what these different aspects were all about and gave her the global perspective. And she absorbed it all.

“One of the things she did was to work with the other student board member to address common issues throughout all the high schools in San Francisco. They were able to draft a resolution that the board adopted to look at concerns with the restrooms and how to make them more attractive.”

Tom said he was just part of a larger team at school providing assistance for students like Babe, a team that includes teachers, counselors and other staff.

Besides her academic accomplishments, Tom has also been impressed by Babe’s giving nature, reaching out to those around her. He said that trait has really blossomed through her involvement with the Peer Resource Program.

“When she felt down she would think about helping somebody else who was more needy than herself, and that would help her work through it,” he said.

Now the payoff for the educators who supported her comes in seeing Babe go to college with aspirations of becoming a psychologist.

“It’s wonderful, Tom said. “This is the intrinsic reward we get in seeing someone who is a potential leader succeed. We provide a little bit of assistance and we do it together. A team of people provided support to Babe, and her success story is reflected by the fact she’s going to UC Berkeley on a scholarship.”



Region 6

Jeff Mehl

Harvest Park Middle, Pleasanton Unified School District

In today’s world, students often struggle to overcome obstacles that present themselves on the road to success. Sometimes, as we’ve seen with the ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding program, these obstacles are very significant.

Region 6’s Jeff Mehl, a student at Harvest Park Middle School in Pleasanton Unified School District. is such a pe1-son. But perhaps the most amazing thing about the way Jeff has succeeded is that he not only conquered his own learning disability, but he has gone on to become a student leader.

“I have dyslexia, which is a learning problem,” Jeff said. “I have trouble in spelling and reading. I’m a lit-tle slower (than other students). I can do it, but it takes me longer. My homework takes me a while to do, and my mom helps me with that.”

Jeff also struggled with his parents’ divorce several years ago and his father not being in the picture as much as he would like. Fortunately, his mother, Patty, has provided a strong shoulder to lean on.

Jeff downplays the problems he’s faced, saying it was just a matter of working hard. He said using alterna-tive learning methods such as read-ing and spelling practice plus spending extra time on homework has been the key.

“I find other options to keep me concentrating and motivated,” he said.

ACSA’s Jennifer Lewandowski, principal of Harvest Park Middle School, said it’s been an extra pleasure for her to see Jeff do well.

“It’s very important to me to see a student like Jeff succeed because my background is as a resource special-ist,” she said. “Jeff was actually one of my students, and to see the growth he’s made academically in the last couple years has been great to watch.”

In her role as vice principal, Lewandowski has a special appreciation for the leadership role Jeff has taken on campus.

“He’s Mr. Leadership in character education,” she said. “He’ll ask a girl to dance at a dance where she might be by herself feeling not very popular, kind of hanging back. He’ll take kids under his wing to make them feel a part of the group. He’s just an incredible kid.”

That leadership also showed itself last year when Jeff began hanging out with a group of kids Lewandow-ski found questionable.

“They were a little more on the delinquent side, shall we say,” she said. 111 was worried that he was getting pulled into that. But he is the kind of kid who can hang out with all different types of people and not get himself in trouble. He was honestly trying to get these students to make better choices.”

Jeff is a big kid for his age, standing over six feet tall in the eighth grade. Rather than intimidating his classmates, Jeff uses his size to act as peacemaker to head off trouble on campus.

“His ability to handle issues like that, as a 14-year old, is incredible,” Lewandowski said,

"I think it's just my personality and how my mom and dad raised me," Jeff said modestly. "They taught me the right etiquette and how to be nice (to others). I like to be nice to people and to give a lot. It makes me feel good if I'm giving." Lewandowski notes Jeff never uses his learning disability as a crutch.

"He's one of these students who doesn't like for others to know he's a special education student," Lewandowski said. "He tends to cover his learning disabilities in the class-room. He's very verbal and always willing to ask questions, give responses and not worry about making mistakes in front of his peers. He's always been able to maintain himself in classes and get the extra support from school staff and his mom."

In turn, Jeff gives a lot of credit to the role Lewandowski has played in helping him.

"She was my resource teacher in sixth grade and she helped me with my learning disability," he said. "She also helped me get into leadership and get involved with everything. She treats me equally. She's been a good role model for me."

Jeff is now going to attend Amador High School, and will be arriving as freshmen class president. He hopes to wrestle and play foot



Region 7

Tanya Sabin

Tioga High School, Big Oak Flat Groveland Unified

Taking care of yourself when you're a high schooler is hard enough. Throw in looking after two younger sisters and a brother and it's a wonder any student could survive, let alone succeed.

But Tanya Sabin, the Region 7 ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding recipient, is just such a student. Tanya is a June graduate of Tioga High School in Big Oak Flat-Groveland USD. She has grown up in a single-parent home where, although now working and supporting the family, her mom wasn't always there.

"My mom went to jail and I had to take care of my (younger) brother and sister," Tanya said. "I had to help them with their homework and make sure they got fed, make sure the bills got paid."

Tanya said she and her family have struggled to get by. "It's not easy not having enough money," she said. "I got a job so I could drive the car my dad got me, and to pay for any extra stuff I wanted."

Sometimes students with money problems and heavy family responsibilities can find a haven of sorts in school. Unfortunately, Tanya has had to deal with taunts from schoolmates.

"In eighth grade, I got Bell's Palsy," she said. "It's where half your face gets paralyzed. Most of the time (the muscular control) comes back. Well, I never fully recovered, so I have a lazy eye. It really bothers me sometimes because people make fun of me. But it's just something I have to deal with."

"My freshman and sophomore years were really hard for me to deal with. But then it got easier and I got more focused on what I needed to do. I needed to do things for me and not for anybody else; not to care what people think about me."

Tanya credits many at Tioga High with helping her overcome her difficulties, including her principal, ACSA member Sandra Bradley, and teacher Jude Hawkins.

"They both talk to me; they both call me in and ask me how I'm doing," Tanya said. "They care and they realize what I'm going through. They give me suggestions and try to help me out."

Bradley downplays her role in helping Tanya.

"I think I was just part of the process," Bradley said. "I felt privileged that she felt comfortable enough with me to share what was going on. When she would get frustrated or upset she felt she had somebody whose shoulder she could cry on. Or, there were times when she said to me that she felt I was being unfair, and I respected the fact that she felt she could stand up for herself and be candid. I feel privileged to have that kind of relationship with the kids at this school, and Tanya in particular."

That's one of the advantages of working in a small school, Bradley said. One gets to know all the students.

"I only have 125 kids at my school, so I know the things that are going on in their lives," she said. "I'm not cloistered in an office or only getting to deal with a certain type of kid. I get to deal with all of them."

And it's been particularly rewarding for Bradley to see Tanya do well.

"It's the epitome of being an educator and a teacher, being able to watch somebody change and grow and still make it despite all the odds," Bradley said. "It's easy to share in the accomplishments of kids who have not had a lot of difficulties in their lives, but when you see somebody who really perseveres and hangs in there and makes it, it really makes it all worthwhile. It's one of the best things."

Now that she's graduated high school, Tanya plans to move to Sonora and enter the certified nursing assistant program at the local community college.

"I want to go to college part-time to become a registered nurse, because I want to help people," she said.



Region 8

Tina Louangprasert

Caroline Davis, Oak Grove Elementary District

Sometimes students have high hurdles to overcome before they can do well. That's what the ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding program is about: recognizing kids who surmount obstacles and achieve above and beyond expectations.

Tina Louangprasert, ACSA's ESS honoree from Region 8, is a great example of what this program is all about. Tina recently completed her seventh grade year at Caroline Davis Intermediate School in Oak Grove ESD. Her support team cited her strong character, determination and resilience in overcoming the difficult circumstances she has faced.

Tina comes from a large family, with six brothers and sisters. She was bounced around between San Jose and Fresno, and often put in the position of caring for the younger children. As a consequence, she missed out on many activities in school and with friends.

The situation soon worsened.

"I had to overcome being in a home where my mom was abusing me," Tina said.

Eventually, Tina ended up moving out of the house. She split time spending the night with various friends before finally being placed in the San Jose Children's Shelter.

She attended several schools before finding the environment she needed at Caroline Davis Intermediate. Tina said school counselor Wayne Delcrew and her teacher, Ms. Perry, played leading roles in getting her on the right track.

"They would talk to me and helped me so I could get good grades," she said. "And I've been getting good grades recently."

Delcrew said Tina deserves most of the credit.

"Once I found out that Tina had some adverse conditions in her background, I felt it necessary to contact her and make sure she was alright here," Delcrew said. "After that, she took the ball and ran with it. She's a great student and doing really well here. We made sure she was in the appropriate classes and kept in contact with her at all times. Any time she felt she needed some time out or was feeling bad, she could come in to see us. She had a pass to see us almost all the time."

ACSA's Art Peters, assistant principal at Caroline Davis, said it's been heartening to see Tina do well.

"It's important to know that she has enough confidence and has learned to trust other people to help her so she can overcome her personal issues and have the chance to be in society again," he said.

Delcrew also has delighted in Tina's accomplishments.

"Any time I see a young person, especially when they have had some adversity in their lives, and they still have a super-positive attitude. They play sports, they have a lot of friends, it really means a lot to me. It's very heartwarming. It substantiates my job here," Delcrew said.

Tina's situation has improved enough to where she can go back to live with her mother now. Her caring attitude and resilience continue to propel her toward success.

She earned a 4.0 grade point average last year and has made many new friends.



Region 9

Dana Hausman

Gateway High School, Clovis Unified School District

Growing up in a single-parent household can be challenging for a young person. But imagine the challenges if you suddenly find yourself cast in the role of that parent's primary caretaker. That's the situation Dana Hausman, ACSA's Region 9 Every Student Succeeding honoree, faced and handled with a maturity beyond his years.

Dana recalled that up until he was 10 years old, he and his mother didn't live in the greatest of neighborhoods. He said that situation made it hard to concentrate on schoolwork. Consequently, he received poor grades through sixth grade.

During that time, he remained very close with his mother. They would often spend time together going to sporting events, concerts, and other activities. Then tragedy struck when Dana was in junior high.

His mother was attending a concert, when another concertgoer fell on top of her from the balcony. She suffered a disabling brain injury and was later diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and fibromyalgia.

The catastrophic event changed Dana's life.

"It made it even worse," he said. "Then I really couldn't concentrate on my work and I got in fights."

But fortunately, Dana found support from educators in his school.

"I felt like nobody cared too much about what was happening to me," he said. "But my teacher, Mrs. Brough, saw that I had a lot of potential from my writing. So, she decided to get me involved in peer counseling. From that point, everything else just fell in place."

Dana also received support from ACSA member Gabe Escalera, current principal of Gateway High School in Clovis USD, and former principal of the intermediate school Dana attended.

"We were kind of buddies," Dana recalled. "He helped me along, asked how I was doing, made sure I was doing my work. He's very personable. Since it's a small campus, he can speak to just about everyone. He'll walk up to you and see how you're doing. If he hasn't met you before, he'll ask your name and see what's going on."

Escalera said he saw his role as simply being there to offer a friendly ear and good advice to Dana.

"I would talk with him and listen when he had problems," Escalera said. "At first, Dana did not want to talk to anybody. He kept everything internalized. In middle school, he lashed out. He had some problems in classes and was not doing his homework."

Since then, Escalera said, Dana has really done an about-face with his life.

"Just to see his growth, maturity, and how he's turned himself around is just tremendous," Escalera said. "It started four years ago when he was in seventh grade. He had started to get in a little bit of trouble. But to see how focused he is now, how he includes his family in his life, is just tremendous. He's active in the school and the community. I use him as an example all the time with some or the other kids because he's looked upon as one of the site leaders here by the other kids."

Escalera noted that Dana helped himself by helping others. He was involved with the Make a Wish program and Winners on Wheels, a program to help disabled youngsters. He volunteered at a senior citizens home with his mother. He became active in the peer counseling program at school. He also is the school representative on the Inter-School Council and was selected by classmates to take part in the Principal's Advisory Council.

"When you start helping kids, it does something to you personally," Escalera said. "It gives you a sense of worth."

Dana wants to continue his helping ways as he continues through life. "I want to go to medical school and become a pediatrician," he said.



Region 10

Joseph Hayes

Prunedale Elementary, North Monterey County Unified

Sixth-grader Joey Hayes has been through more in his short lifetime than most adults. Born in Brazil, he was abandoned as an infant and thrown into a government-run orphanage. Untreated diseases left him paraplegic and developmentally disabled.

Despite his handicap, the Prunedale Elementary School student has blossomed into a strong youngster full of optimism and determination. For this, he has been chosen to receive the 2001 ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 10.

Hope came to Joey after he was adopted by an American couple at the age of five. Although he was confined to a wheelchair, faced psychomotor delays and only spoke Spanish, he began attending school in his new country, picking up English and replacing his wheelchair for crutches.

Joey's father, Allen Hayes, said life in the United States is very different than in Brazil. Living in a huge, government-run orphanage, Joey often went without the care or support he desperately needed. But here, he is surrounded by loved ones who help him do well.

"We encourage him to do as much as he can" Hayes said. "In fact, we push him to go further than he thinks he can."

Even after numerous surgeries and hours of physical therapy, Joey still remains upbeat and positive. It is his optimism, Hayes said, that has led Joey to prosper in light of the trouble he has faced.

“With all of these disabilities, it’s amazing how he takes them in stride without complaining,” Hayes said. “He’s a real trooper.”

Hayes also credits the staff of Prunedale for his son’s remarkable recovery. Principal George Dutro was especially helpful, working directly with Joey, his parents and his teachers to develop an education plan just for him.

“He’s an incredible principal,” Hayes said. “He’s a hands-on principal. He’s involved directly in Joey’s education. He’s taken him under his wing.”

But Dutro said it was Joey himself who made his own success possible. Despite his disability and despite being abandoned, Joey never lost hope.

“I’m most impressed by his resilience,” Dutro said, “The resources available to him were pretty limited, but he was able to make something out of being in that situation.”

Joey’s transition into American culture was nearly seamless. After learning English and enrolling in Prunedale, he immediately started making friends with classmates as well as adult staff members.

“He came in and adapted right away,” Dutro said. “He seemed to really blossom and he made a lot of friends. He didn’t let his physical handicaps stop him from drawing other students and adults to him. He loves people, he loves to talk and he loves to interact.”

Joey’s strong personality is reflected in the classroom as well. In his special day class for students with physical disabilities, he quickly set an example for his peers, who looked up to him for encouragement and support.

“He’s going to be a role model for others someday,” Dutro said. “He’s going to be a leader.”

Leadership is definitely in Joey’s long-term plan. Although he would like to become president of the United States, Joey won’t qualify because he wasn’t born in this country. But he’ll settle for vice president, following in the footsteps of one of his favorite politicians, Dick Cheney.

Joey said his secret to success is hard work and determination. While it isn’t always easy, he said he doesn’t let that stop him from doing what he has to do.

“Sometimes it’s difficult and I struggle,” he said. “But I practice and don’t give up. You never give up. You try and try and never give up until you’re better at it.”

His candidacy may be a long way off, but in the meantime, Joey will continue to do his homework, play on the Internet and hang out with friends. Regardless of what happens in the future, he said he is happy to have been nominated for the ESS award.

“I feel good and I’m proud of it,” he said. “I feel lucky I was even nominated. It surprised me.”



Region 11

Sheng Moua

Golden West High, Visalia Unified School District

Eighteen-year-old Sheng Moua spent the majority of her teenage years involved in gangs, drugs and violence. But now, she uses her experiences to help other youngsters facing the same adversity.

Sheng, who graduated from Golden West High School in Visalia USD in June, went on to volunteer with some of the same programs that helped her. She became a peer counselor, relationship abuse counselor and a volunteer with the program Reaching out for Enrichment, Achievement, Commitment and Honesty, which promotes healthy life styles for youngsters. She currently works at her former foster care agency.

It is because of Sheng’s rapid turn-around and commitment to others that she received the ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 11.

Physically Abused by her father from a young age, Sheng fought back in the only way she knew how— by turning to gangs and drugs. The violence soon followed, and Sheng ended up in juvenile hall before being sent a string of group homes, foster homes, and alternative education programs.

It was here Sheng realized it was up to her to change her life around. With the support, love and stability of foster parents, counselors and educators, Sheng started to get her life back on track. After enrolling at a regular high school, she has managed to keep a near-4.0 grade point average.

“I learned to raise my self esteem,” she said. “I learned about my drug addiction and how to stop it. I learned how to take one day at a time. I had a lot of dreams and a lot of goals.”

But Sheng couldn’t have done it without the help of several dedicated educators, including counselor Sarah Sproles.

“She listened to me when I needed to cry,” Sheng said. “She helped me establish my goals. She’s helped me a lot and is still supporting me.”

Sproles said Sheng showed a will to succeed. While many students facing similar situations tend to give up, Sheng didn’t let the extra work stand in her way.

“She took a situation that was hopeless and said, ‘I’m not going to let it defeat me!’ She made the decision that she wasn’t going to let that happen. She kept her head above water and was able to become successful at school,” Sproles said.

Another educator who made a difference in Sheng’s life was counselor Dorothy Collins. Not only did Collins help her with her classes, she became her friend and listened to whatever concerns she had.

“She’s helped me because I was able to share with her and she has given me advice and supported me,” Sheng said. Collins said Sheng’s success can only be attributed to her own determination. While Collins provided encouragement, it was Sheng’s “resilience factor” that led to her turn-around.

“Some kids are able to rise above their adversity and become resilient,” Collins said. “Sheng overcame it. She said at one point, ‘I don’t want to live this way.’ She’s one of those kids who is the epitome of that resilience factor.” What is amazing about Sheng is her dedication to helping others. After becoming involved with the peer counseling program, Sheng helped other students learn that it is possible to get out of gangs. She can help migrant workers during the holiday season through the Adopt-n-Family program.

“Sheng is so passionate. She just radiates warmth,” Collins said. “She’s an incredible young woman. She really wants to make a difference in other people’s lives.”

ACSA’s Brian Dale Mark was Sheng’s principal when she attended Golden West. He said she is a perfect candidate for the Every Student Succeeding program because she fought hard to turn her troubled life around.

“The program lifts up students who have overcome tremendous adversity and have succeeded in public education.” he said. “I think it’s a wonderful program. Supporting kids who have overcome adversity is extremely important.”



Region 12

LaTonya McFarland

Sierra High School, San Bernardino City Unified School

One of seven children born to four different fathers, LaTonya McFarland was forced at a very young age to take care of herself. Without the support of her family, LaTonya stopped attending school. Sometimes she had no way of getting there. Other times she just chose not to go.

But despite poverty and a broken home life, LaTonya ultimately managed to excel in school. A senior at Sierra High School in San Bernardino City USD, LaTonya has been chosen to receive the ACSA/Metlife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 12.

Not only was LaTonya forced to care for herself emotionally, she was forced to take care of herself financially as well. Living in poverty, she took a job at a local fast-food restaurant to buy the necessities of life.

Region 12 President Louise Bigbie, director of student services at Moreno Valley USD, said LaTonya is an extremely mature young woman who used her own inner strength to fight the negative forces surrounding her.

“I was really impressed by her,” Bigbie said. “She has come a long way. She’s a wonderful student with a lot of odds against her.”

LaTonya’s struggle is especially unique because it was a silent struggle.

She kept most of her personal problems hidden from her friends, teachers and administrators, and few had any idea what she battled day in and day out.

“We were shocked to hear she had all these problems,” said Lorie Jacobson, Sierra High School principal.

Jacobson said LaTonya had earned only one credit during her freshman year. But after coming to Sierra at the end of her sophomore year, LaTonya cracked down and earned 20 credits in less than two months, and the following year she earned 95 more.

“Her family situation is the reason she wasn’t able to get her credits the way she would have otherwise,” Jacobson said. “But she became one of our better students.”

Not only did LaTonya improve her academic performance—earning mostly As and Bs—she also became very involved in extracurricular activities. She joined student council, volunteered with a local literacy program, and became the first African American female to become president of the Chicano group on campus.

“She is one of those kids who is always here, always cheerful, and always involved,” Jacobson said. LaTonya has also given much of herself to her Peer Leadership class and helped facilitate a teen-parent support group. LaTonya was so dedicated to Peer Leadership she was selected to represent Sierra High School at a national youth conference in Washington, D.C. Even after she stopped earning credit for her work in Peer Leadership, she continued taking the course.

LaTonya also showed commitment to helping others in developing the school’s “Unity Forum,” a program designed to help students of different backgrounds interact with each another. On occasion, she would even buy pizza for the participants and pay for it out of her own pocket, said advisor Norm Wenzel.

“She was very enthusiastic about it,” he said. “She planned, organized and orchestrated a number of activities almost single-handedly. She really made it work.”

LaTonya proved her dedication to her education in another unique way. Because Sierra is a continuation school, classes are graded with either credit or no credit. Although unusual, students have the option of requesting letter grades, which is exactly what LaTonya did.

In all his years as a teacher, Wenzel said he has never seen a student as dedicated and compassionate as LaTonya. Somehow, she managed to set aside her troubles and give wholeheartedly to school and work.

“She doesn’t allow difficulties to distract her or deter her from what she has to do,” Wenzel said. “She accomplishes what she sets out to accomplish.”

In addition, Wenzel said LaTonya has broken the mold, and her abilities never cease to amaze him.

“She’s a very determined young lady,” he said.



Region 13

Mary Lou Jicha

Colina Middle School, Conejo Unified School District

Mary Lou Jicha may have spent most of her life surrounded by turmoil and trauma, but she didn’t let it stand in the way of high academic achievement.

Because of her ability to overcome her personal hardships and succeed in school, Mary Lou has received the ACSA/MetLife 2001 Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 13.

Mary Lou, who graduated from Colina Middle School in Conejo Valley USD earlier this year, grew up in a home troubled by drug abuse and conflict. Her mother was diagnosed with cancer and died as Mary Lou entered the seventh grade. Mary Lou went to live with her father, who was involved with illegal drugs and failed to register her in school for two months. Even then, her attendance was sporadic. Her father would often leave her alone for days at a time, and Mary Lou missed much of the seventh grade.

“It was hard for me having so much on my mind,” she said. “It was hard to concentrate.”

When her father was arrested and jailed, Mary Lou moved in with her stepfather. With his support, she began to attend school on a regular basis, participated in extracurricular activities and received good grades.

“I didn’t try hard enough,” Mary Lou said. “But once I started trying, I did good. I go to school every day now. I want to do good. I do what I have to do and I get it done.”

By the middle of eighth grade, Mary Lou had turned her life around. With the help of school staff, she was encouraged to do well academically and to join the school chorus and the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program on campus.

“I had a lot of people trying to help me,” she said.

The secret to Mary Lou’s success was simple. Her teachers, counselors and administrators just supported her and gave her the attention she lacked at home for so many years.

“They were just nice to me. It was good to have someone be nice to me,” she said.

Mary Lou’s counselor, Lisa Severns, said that when Mary Lou first began Colina Middle School, she lacked the motivation to do well. But after time, she made the conscious decision to do better.

“Her grades were not good when she got to us and her attendance was-n’t good at first.” Severns said. “But she just decided she was going to turn it around and go to school and pass her classes.”

Severns helped as much as she could by keeping her eye on Mary Lou and being there when she needed to talk to someone. But the real work came from Mary Lou.

“When 11 student decides she’s going to do better, there isn’t much for a counselor to do,” Severns said. “It really has to come from the student.”

Just knowing people were there to support her and help her made all the difference in the world. Behind the scenes, Mary Lou's counselors were busy checking her grades and her attendance to make sure she was staying on track. "She felt that people cared about her and that really helped a lot," Severns said. "Before, she never felt like anyone was ever paying attention to whether she was in school or not."

Mary Lou made it to graduation, and has now started attending Westlake High in Conejo Valley USD. After high school, she hopes to attend junior college and go on to cosmetology school.

No matter what Mary Lou does, it is without doubt that she will succeed, Severns said.

"I think she's on her way to a different life," she said. "She has turned her life around. I think she's going to be successful and she's going to live the type of life she wants to live."



Region 14

Chanell Marie Share

Leuzinger High School, Centinela Valley Union High School

Born to drug-using parents, Chanell Marie Sharp suffered abuse and lived with various relatives throughout her childhood, attending five different schools in just three years.

Although school was difficult at times, Chanell doesn't see her success as anything special, and is humbled to have received the 2001 ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 14. "I didn't understand," she said. "I didn't feel I did anything."

Chanell became used to her troubled childhood, as it was the only childhood she knew, jumping from home to home, she never stayed at any one school long enough to get established, and it began to take its toll. Not once was she at a school long enough to even finish reading a whole book,

"It was pretty hard," she said. "I couldn't fill my potential. Dealing different schools and different people all the time made it hard."

But things began to calm down after Chanell got settled at Leuzinger High School in Centinela Valley UHSD. Almost immediately, Chanell underwent radical improvements. She got involved with school, joined several clubs and volunteered her time working on campus.

What made the difference for Chanell were the administrators, teachers and other staff members at Leuzinger who consistently encouraged her to succeed. Never before had Chanell been surrounded by people who genuinely cared about how well she did in school or where she ended up in life.

"They helped me be better and do something," she said. "They were constantly on me. Whenever they saw me out of class they would say, 'why aren't you in class?' They were really persistent in what I needed to do."

Chanell's principal, Gail Garrett, said the secret to her success was challenging her in a way she had never been challenged before.

"We didn't accept the mediocrity," Garrett said. "I held her to a high standard. My expectations for all students are the same, and I wouldn't accept less from her. She could do better, despite her situation or circumstances."

Unused to having someone push her, Chanell rebelled at first. But eventually, she understood why Garrett was giving her such a hard time.

"She realized I had to care about her to do that to her," Garrett said.

The turning point came when Chanell offered to hire Garrett as her personal tutor. Not having the funds to pay for private tutoring, Chanell requested—and received—funding from the Department of Social Services for these purposes.

"When she did that I knew she was serious," Garrett said. "I thought, 'Wow!' I guess it does make a difference."

ACSA member Trina Della Gatta, coordinator of federal and state programs at Centinela Valley UHSD, agreed that without the help of the staff of Leuzinger, Chanell may not be where she is today.

"Several staff members took her under their wing and she felt valued," she said.

Although it is common to say this type of success story proves the system works, it is the people that make all the difference.

"It's not necessarily the system working, it is the people in the system working," Della Gatta said.

Chanell graduated in June and is considering attending junior college or joining the Navy. Meanwhile, she is working and trying to save up enough money to buy a car and get her own place to live.



Region 15

Nicholas Brown

Charter Oak High, Charter Oak Unified School District

Eighteen-year-old Nick Brown spent much of his childhood bouncing from foster home to foster home. Abused and isolated, he expressed his feelings through violent outbursts, and school was the lost thing on his mind.

But Nick overcame his troubled past and managed to graduate in June from Charter Oak High School in Charter Oak Unified School District. For this, he has been chosen to receive the 2001 ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 15.

After living in 10 different foster and group homes by the age of 10, Nick finally found a permanent residence at the Research and Treatment Institute Children's Team Center. Attending school there, he learned to transform his negative energy into positive energy on the playing field. He used football, basketball and track to release his aggression and was able to gain confidence, discipline and maturity. He then turned U1iR positive energy toward his schoolwork, and began to improve academically.

After his first year of high school at RTI, Nick had his eyes set on transferring into a regular public high school. Although it seemed impossible at the time, he worked hard to make the change from a 30-student school to a 1,800-student school. His dream came true and Nick enrolled in two special education classes at Charter Oak High during his sophomore year. Assistant Principal Diane Sauvageau said Nick had trouble at first, but with a little help from school staff, he managed to turn his life around and succeed despite the odds against him.

"He really is a huge success story," Sauvageau said. "He was one of those students who responded well to alternate means of instruction and self-monitoring."

Sauvageau said it was Nick's passion for sports that gave him the motivation to be mainstreamed into regular schooling. "When we move these kids in, we try to find a hook," she said. "The hook we found for Nick was sports."

While playing sports drew Nick back to school, it was the people at school who helped him get through. School staff made it clear that they were there for him.

"Nick knew. he had people here he could turn to," Sauvageau said. "We told him if things start to go bad, come and see us immediately."

It wasn't just one person who made it happen for Nick. It was the team of teachers, coaches, administrators, social workers and counselors, among others, that came together to help him succeed.

"It wasn't just one person who, made a difference," Sauvageau said. "This kid would never have made it without the help of all these people."

Nick used his experiences to help others facing the same adversity he once faced. Classmates see Nick's success and realized they too could achieve their goals.

"Nick became a role model for other students in his program," Sauvageau said. "He'd say, 'here's what I did to make it.'"

Now, Nick has traded in his anger and frustration for kindness and gentleness. From a lonely, isolated child he became a friendly, sociable young man ready to take on the world.

"Nick is one of those kids who beat the odds," Sauvageau said. "He's going to become a wonderful contributor to society."



Region 16

Armando Andrade

Sepulveda Gifted, Los Angeles Unified School District

The Every Student Succeeding program normally honors students who have made spectacular academic gains. But in some cases, students who have made spectacular gains socially are honored as well.

Such is the case with eighth-grader Armando Andrade, a recent graduate of Sepulveda Gifted Magnet Middle School in the Los Angeles USD. Although an excellent student, Armando is autistic and lacked the social skills needed to interact with others and obtain a well-rounded education.

But Armando managed to overcome his disability and went on to succeed socially. For this, he has been given the 2001 ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 16.

ACSA's Barbara Charness, principal of Sepulveda Middle School, said not all autistic students can break out of their shells and re-enter the world like Armando.

"Armando is quite a unique young man. He's autistic but he's succeeded despite the odds against him," Charness said. In fact, Armando managed to turn himself around completely. Like most autistic children, Armando was with-drawn and rarely spoke to others. But with the help of his teachers and other school staff, he became like any other student. "Autistic students don't usually express themselves the way we'd like them to. But Armando is so outgoing now," Charness said.

Charness said Armando's demeanor has improved dramatically over the past school year. Being honored for his hard work only added to his jubilation, and crossing the stage at the end of the school year made it all worthwhile.

"This award really boosted him up quite a bit." Charness said. "He's so proud. He was beaming at his graduation." Armando's math teacher, Jenny Davis, wrote a nomination letter supporting him. In it she said when she first met Armando, he only spoke on an academic level and did not interact with classmates. She said his turning point in her class came when she encouraged him to complete a math problem on the board in front of the class. With hesitation but a lot of courage, he completed the problem.

While that one small act may seem minor to most, for Armando it seemed to have been the key to unlocking his mind. Since then, he has become more and more talkative and has even been known to socialize with his classmates and help them with their assignments.

"He has moved beyond the basic academic communication to expressing needs and showing his sense of humor," Davis said. "For me, working with Armando has been like watching a time-lapse movie sequence of a butterfly emerging from its cocoon."

Seeing him progress from a quiet, withdrawn child into an outgoing, talkative young man has made Davis all the more certain that if anyone deserves the ESS award, it's Armando.

"He truly deserves recognition for his positive attitude and determination to overcome his handicap and get on with life," she said.

Armando's middle school counselor, Troy McElhaney, said Armando is a very different student than when he first entered Sepulveda two years ago. Before, his disability overshadowed his intelligence, and the misunder-standing landed him in special educa-tion classes, which, no doubt, led to extremely low self-esteem.

He went from special education to full immersion in a gifted program," McElhaney said. "Once he was chal-lenged he rose to the occasion."

Armando slowly but surely began to change, suggesting that at last his walls were breaking down. He developed a passion for Shakespeare and spent many hours studying the Elizabethan bard with his English teacher. He started participating in lunchtime activities on campus. He played basketball with his classmates and even signed on for a field trip to see a Dodgers game.

"It's quite a success story," McElhaney said. "It's unbelievable."



Region 17

Navid Lively

Brea County Hills, Brea Olinda Unified School District

For most children, elementary school is innocent and carefree. But for 11-year-old Navid Lively, it is exhausting and, at times, painful.

Navid, who just completed the fifth grade at Brea Country Hills Elementary School in Brea Olinda USD, suffers from such severe allergies he is often unable to sleep at night. Complications have led to eczema, asthma, hair loss, stunted growth and eyes so dry that without artificial tears he would go blind.

But despite his physical maladies, Navid manages to do well in school and maintains a somewhat normal childhood. For his courage and commitment he is being honored with the ACSA/MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 17.

Navid's condition was recognized when he was only three weeks old. Since then, Navid's mother, Lily, has gone to extraordinary lengths to protect her son from the things that can harm him, which include bare wood and even his own hair.

Hours are spent reading product labels, food ingredients, and screen friends and family members to ensure they or their homes don't contain contaminants. He requires daily doses of medication, repeated applications of eye drops, medicated baths, and sessions on a mechanical nebulizer.

Throughout it all, Navid has maintained a positive attitude and hasn't given up on his future. He still goes to school, rather than learn through a tutor. He does his homework, and plays with his friends, just like any other kid his age.

"He's such a trooper," his mother said. "He takes his medication and he does what he has to do. He's got a very good attitude."

But Navid's illness has caused him to miss a lot of school over the past several years. Sometimes the pain is so bad it is difficult for Navid to wear clothes or to sleep. He sometimes requires several medicated baths and relaxing car rides to calm him down.

"Even though he's tired and exhausted he still gets up and goes to school and does his homework," Lily Lively said. "He wants to do good and he wants to catch up even though he doesn't feel good."

Navid's personality is stronger than the adversity he faces. His mother, teachers and administrators taught him to accept himself the way he is, and fellow students quickly followed. Now, few of his classmates can see beyond his sense of humor, charm and zest for life.

"I want people to like him for who he is," Lily Lively said. "I want him to have a normal life."

For the most part, Navid has escaped teasing and taunting at school. But from time to time, there will be a new student unaware of his condition.

"Some things are pretty hard for me at school," he said. "The new kids make fun of me."

But Navid doesn't let their words upset him. He said he realizes they only laugh because they don't understand his problem, and once they learn about it they back off.

"Usually I don't care. I just ignore them," Navid said. "It sort of bothers me sometimes, but I get used to it. I really don't mind."

Navid's success at school would have been unlikely without the help of his principal, Diane Mazurie. But she attributes his success to his determination and positive attitude. Not only is he kind, funny and upbeat, but he works well with his teachers and fellow classmates. And he never lets his condition get the best of him.

"He never complains and he never says 'I need help. I'm not feeling well,'" Mazurie said.

Navid is so confident and determined that it is often hard to tell he has missed school at all. When he returns from an extended absence, he picks up his missed assignments and completes them right away, without asking for special favors or exceptions.

"He misses quite a bit of school. But the way he handles himself you don't realize he's been gone and just came back. He gets what he needs and he does it. He just does it," Mazurie said.



Region 18

Koren Henning

Scripps Ranch High, San Diego Unified School District

For most of her life, Koren Henning was trapped in a dark world all her own, unable to communicate with those around her. But with the help of several talented educators, she was able to break out of her shell and do things she could only dream of before.

Koren, who will be a senior in the fall, is autistic and has severe physical and mental disabilities. Hard work and determination have allowed her to achieve her academic goals, earning her the 2001 ACSA/ MetLife Every Student Succeeding Award for Region 18.

Before Koren enrolled in the Integrated Life Skills program at Scripps Ranch High School in San Diego USD several years ago, she was diagnosed as severely retarded with an IQ of 19. She was unable to communicate and needed assistance to feed, clothe and bathe herself.

After working with the staff of Scripps Ranch, Koren was slowly able to communicate with the outside world by learning to type. Months later, she was able to enroll in general education classes and complete regular classroom assignments. Scripps Ranch principal David Le May said Koren's turning point was when she learned to type. When she first came to the school, she was cloaked in silence. With the use of the computer she was able to break out and tell the world what was on her mind.

“Before, precious little was known about what she was thinking and what she was feeling inside,” Le May said. “The breakthrough came with the ability to communicate using the computer. Before, we didn’t have a clue as to who Koren was inside.”

Le May said the transformation could not have occurred without the dedication of Koren’s teachers and other school staff members. Not once did they lose faith, and not once did they brush Koren off as hopeless.

“It’s all about never, ever giving up on a child, whether they have a handicap or not,” Le Moy said. “(The staff) has done miracle work with Koren and accomplished some remarkable stuff as far as unlocking the door.”

As Koren progressed, her personality and demeanor began to change. Initially, Koren seemed to be angry inside. But when she learned to type, she became more confident and proud and flourished academically.

“The frustration of being locked inside I d to much more acting out,” Le May said. “But she has made tremendous progress. She was inspired in terms of not being confined because of her handicap.”

Koren’s Integrated Life Skills teacher, Joan Wolfson, said Koren was a different person before she learned to communicate. She had essentially no oral or motor skills whatsoever.

“It was hard for her to do things independently,” Wolfson said. “She could move her arms and legs but she couldn’t move them in a way to gain independence or for normal movements.”

By encouraging Koren to push herself, teachers helped her learn to type with increasing skill, thereby keeping her disability at bay.

“Her brain had never been asked to work,” Wolfson said. “Over a period of time she began to type sentences and then paragraphs. Now she can type whole pieces, and her writing is beautiful.”

Koren now takes regular classes and maintains close to a 4.0 grade point average. While it may take her a little longer to complete assignments, her coursework is not modified. But sometimes, schoolwork can be pretty tough.

“It’s very time intensive and stressful,” Wolfson said. “Koren has worked really hard. She stays after school every day and by the time she gets home, she’s beat.”

Because Koren can now communicate, she has told her teachers how lucky she is to be given the opportunity for a new life.

“She’s extremely grateful,” Wolfson said. “She always said how blessed she feels. In a lot of ways, she’s a new person.”

Region 1

Amy Larkin

Alps View High School, Trinity Union High School District

Amy Larkin's life was spiraling out of control by the time she was a freshman in high school. She was using drugs and alcohol and hanging out with a bad crowd. She was arrested for petty theft and alienated her loved ones. But when Amy decided she needed to turn things around, she did it with a vengeance.

Amy enrolled in an alternative education program at Alps View High School and sought help achieving her new goals. She has now reached a level of achievement worthy of praise.

Amy is on track to graduate one semester early from high school and plans to enter the military. Amy's teacher says Amy shows maturity beyond her years. She is making huge steps toward an attainable goal not commonly sought by most 16-year-old girls. While counseling and support at school provided Amy some help she needed to achieve her goals, she alone is responsible for turning her dreams into reality.



Region 2

Sheila Dominic

Yuba City High School, Yuba City Unified School District

Sheila Dominic turned her dysfunctional early childhood into success—at school and in life. Sheila's mother and father are both from small villages in Southern India. Neither spoke English. Her father felt very uncomfortable with American society and turned to alcohol.

Early in life, Sheila spent many nights sleeping in the family car or at a neighbor's house to avoid her father's rage. But when Sheila turned 10 years old a cousin moved to the Bay Area from India and provided support so Sheila and her mom could escape to an apartment and start life with a clean slate.

Sheila is now a National Merit Scholar and has a straight A average. She has taken every advanced placement and honor class available, plus she serves on the school newspaper and is a member of the girl's basketball team.

Sheila says you have to put life's troubles behind you and use it as a motivation to work harder and have a better life.



Region 3

Rogelio Rubio-Montano

C.K. McClatchy High, Sacramento City Unified School District

Rogelio Rubio-Montano stands out as one of the hardest working students in McClatchy High School's Humanities International Study Program.

Rogelio's father passed away when he was 12 years old. To make ends meet, his mother worked multiple jobs and his brothers worked while Rogelio cared for his younger sister and did the housework. By the time he was 15, Rogelio too, was working to help his mother pay the bills.

Rogelio says he is blessed because part of his father lives in him and gives him the strength to succeed. He uses this strength as a driving force in the classroom and the community by showing initiative and contributing a winning attitude 'in hopes of serving as a positive example to others. In addition to his academic success, Rogelio played soccer, football, volleyball and track and he managed the men's varsity basketball team.

He volunteered in the classroom and with many youth groups in addition to carrying two jobs. Rogelio dreams of attending the University of California and someday attaining a law degree.



Region 4

José Pat

Fort Bragg High School, Fort Bragg Unified School District

José Pat's earliest memory is saying goodbye to his mother as she left Mexico for America to improve her family's quality of life. José came to Fort Bragg in 1994 when he was in the fifth grade. He spoke no English and disliked school. His teacher often got him out of bed and drove him to school.

In middle school, José was still in the ESL program. He received constant encouragement from his school support team. By the time he entered high school he had opened up to the possibilities and to his own potential. Today he is the epitome of an outstanding American youth.

José recognizes he can and he will improve his life through education. A former teacher says that if we have the fortune to have such a generous and authentic young man ne one of our lenders in years to come, we will be well-served and undoubtedly become a better people for it.



Region 6

Kimberly Armstrong

Oakland Technical School, Oakland Public Schools

At age 5, Kimberly Armstrong saw her mother get shot 16 times through the chest and fall on the living room floor in a puddle of blood. Her stepfather had killed her mother. Kimberly and her two younger brothers were left to live with an abusive alcoholic grandmother. Often in a drunken rage, her grandmother would beat all the children until scars were left on their bodies.

Eventually an aunt, struggling to make ends meet, took in Kimberly and her siblings. Thanks to government aid, Kimberly's home environment began to change for the positive and she began to apply herself in school. She joined high school tutoring programs, the cross-country team, and women's varsity soccer team. She entered the Early Academic Outreach Program that helped develop her leadership skills. She attended summer sessions at UC Berkeley, the Scholastic Aptitude Teat Academy and the Pre-College Academy. She was elected senior class president for her high school.

Kimberly has certainly overcome the odds and changed her life.



Region 7

Patrick Ward

Sonora High School, Sonora Union High School District

Patrick Ward has Rod-Cone Dystrophy, on extreme sight disability that requires him to work twice as hard at almost everything. Patrick's disability was not discovered until he began school, during the first and second grades.

He got into a late start learning Braille and was forced to play catch-up in subjects like reading and spelling. But thanks to perseverance and support from his mother and his entire school support team, Patrick succeeded in grade school and in high school.

During his four years at Sonora High School, Patrick has taken a solid course of college prop classes and all other courses required for graduation. He is now enrolled at Columbia College and will ultimately move on to California State University, Monterey Bay. He plans to earn a teaching credential and touch blind students.

Patrick's support team at Sonora High School nominated him for this honor. They say they know of no other student more deserving.



Region 8

Taylor Stankus

San Anselmo School, Oak Grove School District

Taylor Stankus has the incredible talent of inspiring others, giving love and being a support for everyone who comes within eyesight. Taylor was hypoglycemic at birth and suffered from apnea. He has endured several operations for cleft palate and orthopedics. He is near-sighted and has extremely low muscle tone.

Taylor moved to San Anselmo from Pennsylvania at the beginning of third grade. Despite his numerous

disabilities, Taylor has been in general education classrooms since kindergarten.

Taylor strives to learn and has made significant gains in reading, math and writing. His daily journal offers insights into his interests and personality. Taylor is so proud of his success that he volunteers to read to the entire class.

He is a role model for other students who are unsure or feel less confident about their abilities. His school support team describes Taylor as a hard worker and a charmer. In an hour, they say, Taylor can sell more candy bare for science camp than other students in a day.



Region 9

Javier Vasquez

Roosevelt Elementary, Selma Unified School District

Javier Vasquez' desire to succeed stands head and shoulders above other young men his age. Thanks to support from his parents and his school community, Javier has overcome learning disabilities and many life challenges.

Javier's parents are hardworking immigrants from Mexico. They have worked hard to help Javier and his older brother who is handicapped.

Early in his school career, Javier was placed in the Special Day Class at Roosevelt Elementary. He received constant encouragement and tutoring that have helped him excel.

Javier volunteers in the press box for the Fresno Grizzlies AAA Baseball Club.

The staff of the Grizzlies say Javier's smile and laugh lighten the mood after a long, stressful day of seemingly endless work. Javier also works at the Fresno Youth Baseball League in the concession stand.

As a result, he has learned to count money and make change quickly.

Javier is working very hard to accomplish his main goal of returning to the regular education program.



Region 10

Arielle Brich

Shoreline Middle School, Live Oak Elementary School District

Arielle Brich has dealt with more obstacles in her young life than most people will face in their entire lives. As a sixth grader, Arielle was removed from her home and placed in foster care in September 2001. She was originally separated from her younger brothers but eventually placed in the same home.

Despite all of these setbacks, Arielle continues to persevere academically and in her home life. All of her teachers have commented on her enthusiasm, her willingness to learn and her progression toward more academic success. Arielle takes school seriously and she often sacrifices breaks and free time to get a head start on her homework.

Arielle says that her school support team has had a very big role in keeping her motivated and on track in school and in life. Her ultimate goal is to continue her education and someday become an animal trainer.



Region 11

Richard Figueroa

Arvin High School, Kern High School District

Richard Figueroa fought off pressures from gangs and from siblings and chose to succeed in school and in life. For most of his school career, Richard was known to be negative, combative and disrespectful to teachers and fellow students. His older siblings were constantly in and out of jail and pressured Richard to follow in their path.

But during his freshman and sophomore years, he decided to start focusing on his education. To avoid being ostracized at home, he did homework in the middle of the night. He kept two sets of textbooks, one at school and one hidden under his bed for his late night studies.

At one point, his school support team provided food and money to help the family when Richard's" mother was incarcerated and he was left to care for his siblings for two months.

Through it all, Richard improved his grade point average to 3.8, participated in honors courses and was team captain for the Varsity Football Team.



Region 12

Erica Cook

Arlington High School, Riverside Unified School District

Erica Cook is an amazing young woman who has turned a lot of life's lemons into lemonade. Erica has lived in foster care since she was 10. She remembers hitchhiking to school in the first grade and canvassing the neighborhood to earn money for food for herself and her sister. She washed cars and watered plants and flowers for money.

She says all the money her parents ever earned was spent on drugs. She and her sister were left alone for days.

Eventually Erica and her sister became foster children and moved from home to home until about 6 years ago. Finally, Erica found a stable living situation, although her sister doesn't live in the same home.

She has worked hard to boost her GPA and prepare for college.

Erica looks forward to attending a California State University and continuing her education. She says she'll survive and succeed because of all the things she has already had to go through.



Region 13

Jamie Feinstein

Colina Middle School, Conejo Valley Unified School District

Jamie Feinstein is the kind of student - who lives in a teacher's memory forever. Jamie suffers from juvenile osteoporosis. The bone density in Jamie's back is about 60 percent of normal and has been decreasing. She has obvious concerns about how long she will be able to walk on her own.

Jamie is often in a great deal of pain. She suffers from extreme exhaustion and stress-influenced migraines.

Although it has been suggested that Jamie be home schooled, her parents and school support team disagree. Together they've worked to support Jamie and provide her extensive opportunities for academic and social development. Her teachers allow her extra time on tests and assignments. Jamie has been a member of the school chorus, attends dances and school functions and she has run for ASB offices.

Jamie tries hard to overcome her physical problems and she is working very hard to remain an honor student. Her attitude should be an inspiration to us all.



Region 14

Erneshya Morrison

Downey High School, Downey Unified School District

Erneshya Morrison entered Downey High School as an angry ninth grader. She was a habitual truant and in her sophomore year, her GPA dropped to an all-time low of 0.2. She joined a girl's clique and was held responsible for hundreds of dollars worth of graffiti damage to Downey High School. She swore and threatened other students and was suspended for fighting.

Erneshya ran away from home and watched as many of her girlfriends dumped out of school and got involved in drugs. Several of her friends became pregnant. At this point Erneshya decided to break from the pack.

She requested and received a transfer to Columbus Continuation School so she could get back on track. With help from her teachers and administrators, she raised her GPA to a 3.4 and finally was able to return to Downey High School.

Erneshya says her teachers took a special interest in her progress. She says, "They had faith in me so I could be successful."



Region 15

Robbie Reed

South Hills High School, Covina-Valley Unified School District

Robbie Reed began life with many disadvantages. He was born addicted to heroin, cocaine and PCP. He was taken from his drug-addicted parents in his first few months of life and placed in a foster home. During elementary school, Robbie was diagnosed with ADHD, Tourette's syndrome and severe learning disabilities. He spent much of his elementary and middle school years on heavy medication and struggling academically. Robbie's start in high school was rough. He had difficulty staying on task and focusing on academics. But his love for clogging eventually helped him get back on track and succeed in school and in life. Robbie got involved in the performing arts at South Hills High School during his junior year. He performed at Disneyland, won two national championships and kept up with his school work. With the support of his teachers, school staff and mother, Robbie has overcome the many challenges he faces and he allows his talents and abilities to shine.



Region 16

Angel Castelan

Sepulveda Middle, Los Angeles Unified School District

An unfortunate accident caused Angel Castelan to lose both his arms from the elbows down. But Angel has never let his disability get in the way of accomplishing anything he sets his mind to. Angel carries himself with dignity, a positive attitude and a constant smile. He is an active participant in Sepulveda Middle School's College Capable Program, Future Scholars and Burn Support Group. Angel believes his skills should be measured by the same assessments as everyone else. In art class, he uses his mouth to draw his ideas on paper and then comes up with clever ways to complete the assignments. He uses a tiny bit of glue on a paintbrush paper mosaic. He has no problem writing notes and essays. Angel encourages his teachers to avoid treating him differently. He is an inspiration to his peers as well as to his teachers: He is a daily reminder of what can be accomplished if we choose to never let an obstacle deter. His determination and resourcefulness encourage others to challenge themselves.



Region 17

Daniel John Alberian

George B. Miller School, Centralia Elementary School District

D.J. Alberian exemplifies what it takes to achieve in the face of adversity. When D.J. was 1 year old, he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy with spastic quadriplegia. Walking, writing and speaking are daily challenges. His muscles simply won't do what his mind directs them to do. But D.J. has worked hard to face his challenges. Working together, his parents, teachers, specialists and administrators have helped D.J. develop the skills he'll need throughout school and into adulthood. In school, D.J. resists having work that is different. He has received the Super Kid and Character Counts awards in recognition of his determination to do the best. One of D.J.'s hopes is to speak more clearly. He soon will have to endure additional surgeries on his feet. And he may have to miss out on some portion of junior high to recover. But his strong determination and positive attitude certainly will help him through.



Region 18

Amanda Cline

Meadowbrook Middle, Poway Unified School District

Amanda Cline spent her first formative years of life in a Romanian orphanage with little or no formal education.

But since entering school in the Poway Unified School District, Amanda has transformed from a shy, self-conscious non-learner to a caring, compassionate young woman.

Amanda has a speech impediment and has been a special education student since enrolling in public school. Through support and caring from her parents, friends and teachers, Amanda has blossomed into a confident student.

Amanda is not afraid to express her opinion, or to admit she is in the wrong. Amanda has won the heart of every adult on campus and is liked and admired by her classmates. She is on the honor role and has received numerous awards for perfect citizenship.

Amanda is extraordinarily caring and reaches out to students who are sad, injured or crying. She has gone from a shy, uneasy little girl to a strong, confident, compassionate student everyone can admire.

Region 1

Bethany Brownfield

Red Bluff High School, Red Bluff Joint UHSD

Bethany Brownfield has worked very hard to be like any other high performing student, but the road has definitely been uphill. Bethany suffers from Hurler's syndrome, a rare disease that has ravaged her body, damaged her optic nerve and rendered her legally blind. Educators at Red Bluff High School in Region 1, though, attest that Bethany is a warrior, capable of doing almost anything given the opportunity.

Bethany was diagnosed before the age of 2, and was not expected to live to see her fifth birthday. As a toddler, she became only the sixth child in the United States to have a bone marrow transplant for Hurler's syndrome. While the transplant was a success, the disease took its toll on her bone growth and development, causing severe crippling and affecting every joint in Bethany's body. She has had her hips, femurs, hands, back and knees reconstructed over the past 18 years. All of these challenges she has overcome.

Bethany graduated with honors this summer. She's an outstanding student, an avid sports fan and a positive role model for her peers.



Region 3

Michael Roy Cottrell

Encina High School, San Juan USD

As a freshman in high school, Michael Cottrell faced his crossroad: Continue down the path of ambivalence and underachievement or choose a new destiny. Educators at Encina High School in Region 3 take great pride in knowing that Michael chose success.

During his freshman year, Michael cut classes and had low grades and poor citizenship. He says he felt that as long as he passed all of his classes with a "D" then everything would be fine.

But Michael soon changed his course. During his sophomore year, Michael became involved in school activities and began volunteering at the North Area Teen Center. He served on the student council, eventually being elected Encina High School Student Body President.

Michael is a conflict mediator, and was elected as the Carmichael Chamber of Commerce Youth Ambassador. Michael's support team says no matter where he goes, Michael will make a difference. His career goal is to help other teens succeed and to avoid the path he once traveled.



Region 4

Jesse Bracisco

Middle-town High School, Middletown USD

Students like Jesse Bracisco help remind us why we choose to educate. According to Jesse's support team in Middletown Unified School District in Region 4, Jesse is an inspiration to all. His support team gains as much from working with Jesse as he gains from their support.

When Jesse was 10 years old and in fifth grade he suffered a tragic accident, breaking his fourth vertebrae and leaving him paralyzed from the neck down. While in ICU he was told he would be in a wheelchair unable to move from the neck down and only able to breathe with the use of a ventilator.

His determination, rehabilitation and support have helped him overcome many of his challenges. Upon returning to Middletown after seven months in the hospital, Jesse became a leader academically and socially. With the help of an aide, his teachers, and his family, Jesse maintained a 4.0 grade point average and was elected student body president. Jesse is now in his senior year, with hopes to someday attend UC Berkeley.



Region 5

Gladys Hernandez

Redwood Continuation High School, Sequoia Union HSD

Gladys Hernandez says her life might not be normal, but it is certainly special. Her support team at Redwood High School in Region 5 say Gladys has not only changed her life, but she has made an impact in her community and among her peers.

In the seventh grade, Gladys and her family relocated to Redwood City from Los Angeles. She began to experiment with drugs, eventually overdosing on cocaine, ecstasy and marijuana.

To help Gladys her family placed her in a therapeutic community for addicts. There she learned about addiction and recovery and gained a new perspective on her life goals, including earning her high school diploma.

Once enrolled at Redwood High School, Gladys took control of her life. She maintained her honor roll status, worked part-time and did community service projects.

Gladys says she'd like to continue her education and practice law. She says for her, education is everything.



Region 6

Camille Cruz

Eden Area Regional Occupational Program

Camille Cruz spent many years feeling disconnected and under-appreciated in school. As a junior in the Eden Area ROP program in Region 6, she seemed withdrawn and her attitude raised red flags for educators.

Camille soon realized that the hands-on learning environment in ROP removed the stress she felt in school and encouraged her to engage in learning.

She joined the Vocational Industrial Clubs of America, eventually running for office as a VICA state officer and then representing the Bay Area at the state level for VICA.

Through her senior year Camille remained an active part of the ROP program. She participated in campuses activities, attended advisory committee meetings and assisted in board presentations.

Camille says the "ROP fostered a new sense of purpose and a reason to continue on in life. My success could not have been achieved without the hard work of teachers and the supportive staff at the ROP center."



Region 7

Carrie Hay

Sonora High School, Sonora Union HSD

In her young life, Carrie Hay has already overcome more obstacles than most people have to face. When Carrie and her brother were very young, her mother abandoned them. Her father struggled to make ends meet and the three of them often lived out of the car or in a park.

By the time Carrie enrolled at Sonora Union High School she was labeled an at-risk student, her scores on state assessments placing her in the bottom range in all areas.

Thanks to support from her teachers and other educators, Carrie began to thrive in her stable environment at Sonora High. She remained committed to her father's lessons about honesty, integrity and determination.

During her junior year, Carrie enrolled in a Certificated Nurse Assistant program where she learned skills, gained employment and began to focus on her lifelong career goal of becoming a surgeon.

Carrie is enrolled at Columbia College with hopes to eventually transfer to UC Davis.



Region 8

Theo Batiste

Martin Murphy Middle School, Morgan Hill USD

According to the students and staff at Martin Murphy Middle School, Theo Batiste has all the qualities and characteristics of a true winner and an inspiration. Born with osteogenesis imperfecta, or brittle bone disease, Theo spends his school day in a wheel chair. Although Theo has had to endure numerous broken and fractured bones, some requiring surgery and lengthy physical therapy, he remains cheerful and upbeat. Theo makes a point of being involved with everything surrounding him, whether it's with his family or in school.

Watching Theo interact with his schoolmates, you'd never guess that he's relatively new to the district. He sets the tone by accepting himself with ease, which makes it easier for his peers to accept him as well. Theo is active in ASB, he serves as a DJ on campus and volunteers for many school functions. He supports his classmates by attending basketball games and cheering from the crowd. He participated in the annual Thanksgiving Turkey Trot Marathon as friends took turns wheeling him around the track.

Theo embraces life with strength and curiosity.



Region 9

Jessica Morris

Jessica Morris is tenacious, wise beyond her years and resilient. She was born into military family, both parents in the airforce. When she was just a few months old, her parents divorced. Jessica lived with her mother and older sister. She saw her father once when she was five years old. He stopped paying child support when Jessica was ten.

Overwhelmed by responsibility, her mother became alcohol dependent. Jessica first smoked cigarettes in fourth grade. By seventh grade she was addicted to crank and other drugs.

She was failing in school and in life. She eventually began living with her aunt and uncle, although she still struggled with her addictions and negative behavior.

When she was sixteen her mother committed suicide, then later good friends were killed in car crash.

Jessica took all this negative in her life, and turned it into something positive. She got involved in counseling programs, boosted her grades and started work with community service projects. Her goals are to graduate high school and eventually earn a degree in Criminology.



Region 10

Annabel Garcia

North Monterey County High School, North Monterey County USD

Annabel Garcia has maintained high academic achievements while facing a lot of adversity in her life. She comes from a farm working family and this fall she became the first member of her family to enter college. Her teachers and support team at North Monterey County High School in Region 10 use words such as leadership, intelligence, compassion and competence to describe Annabel.

Not too long ago, Annabel's younger brother had a stroke. Her father had to keep working to support the family and her mother served as primary care giver for Annabel's brother. In turn, Annabel took on the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning and taking care of her siblings. All this while maintaining a 4.0 GPA in school.

While others her age might have used this situation as a reason to fail, she used it as a learning experience and a way to catapult her maturity to another level.

Annabel also is an academic leader among her friends and other migrant students.



Region 11

Jill McAllister

Exeter Union High School, Exeter USD

According to those who know her best, Jill McAllister's response to adversity is to put on her boots and march ahead. Jill has almost complete hearing loss and wears hearing aids in both ears. She reads lips to compensate for the impairment, but never stumbles when it comes to maintaining her stellar academic achievements or zest for life.

Jill's drive and commitment for academics in school placed her overall grade point average at 4.04, ranking her 3rd in her class of 201.

In addition to her academic success Jill participated in Madrigals for 3 years. This elite group of singers has numerous performances and Jill was a mainstay among the sopranos.

Jill also served as a leader in the Bible Club and with other children through a cross-age tutor program. She has participated in national youth leadership conferences, won numerous awards and recognitions and been selected as an honorary youth member of the Fammersville City Council.

Jill's plans to obtain an undergraduate degree in Psychology and eventually teacher elementary school.



Region 12

Alex Gonzalez

Mojave High School, Hesperia USD

Alex Gonzales knows what it means to go the extra mile. He's been there and back, and he's chosen to keep moving forward toward his personal goal of a high school diploma.

Alex was born in California in 1984. When he was two years old, he moved to Florida. At the age of 4, Alex was abducted by his biological father who took him to Cuba. Two years later, at the age of 6, Alex was reunited with his mother, who remarried and moved again. At age 8, Alex's mother was in an accident, so Alex took over cooking, cleaning and caring for his younger sister. At 13, Alex's parents separated, and his family moved again. Alex had to drop out of school to work. In the morning he delivered ice and in the afternoon he changed tires on big rigs.

When Alex was 16, his family returned to California. His school support team says when you need help, Alex is always there. He always has a pleasant attitude and a winning smile. One of teachers said, "If I had a son, I would be proud if he were just like Alex Gonzales."



Region 13

Ruby Griffith

Santa Maria High School, Santa Maria Joint Union HSD

When you ask Ruby Griffith what she's most proud of, she says it's "staying in school." Her support team in Region 13 says she is the most determined student they have ever met.

Despite language barriers, poverty and homelessness, Ruby has been able to excel academically in AP and honors classes. She's also excelled in school leadership roles. Ruby lives with another family, her mother lives in Oakland and her brother is in jail. When Ruby chose to enroll at Santa Maria High School, she made the choice for a brighter future. Ruby enjoyed getting up at 6 in the morning to sit at a desk for ASB at her school. She says she did that for her sisters. When she volunteered with senior citizens, she said, "I am volunteering for my mother. When I make friends with strangers in school, work and the street, I am making friends for my brother. But as I graduate from high school and college, I am conquering obstacles for myself."



Region 14

Miles Gilbert

Hickory Elementary School, Torrance USD

Miles Gilbert came to first grade at Hickory Elementary School kicking and screaming and he had to be pulled away from his supportive mother. His protests were understandable, given that he had just received his final chemotherapy and radiation treatment only one week before. His behavior was indicator of the spunk, determination and character of Miles Gilbert.

When he was five, Miles was diagnosed with medulloblastoma, a malignant brain tumor. He underwent a craniotomy and received six weeks of cranial radiation and one year of intensive chemotherapy. Miles has significant hearing loss and wears bilateral hearing aids.

Despite all of this, Miles has persevered and prospered. He's now in fifth grade, he's a great student, a hard worker and well liked by his peers. He is a wonderful artist and an excellent Little League Baseball player. The words "I cannot because" are not in Miles vocabulary. For his strength, dreams and inspiration, ACSA salutes Miles Gilbert and the Region 14 support team who selected him for this award.



Region 15

Juanita Herrera

Howard J. McKibben School, South Whittier School District

Juanita Herrera has been blind since birth and has had many obstacles to overcome. She is an exceptional student, fluent in English, Spanish and Braille. Juanita's mother is credited with making sure Juanita had the skills she needed to be a successful, independent person.

Tragically, Juanita's mother was killed in an automobile accident during the summer of 2002 while on a family vacation.

Through a lot of support from her family, Juanita returned to school in the fall and she has continued to excel.

Juanita has participated in the National Braille Challenge where she took first place. She is a very artistic person, using crayon to create her drawings. She has been a member of the choir and she has been chosen as secretary of the student council.

Juanita says that her hobby is reading, and she hopes one day to become a teacher. Juanita is winner, with many friends and family who support her.



Region 16

Nicole Fahmie

Los Angeles USD

Nicole Fahmie has had to face many physical challenges, but always with a positive attitude.

Nicole was born with multiple handicaps, the most serious a hip malformation requiring six surgeries. At the start of middle school, Nicole had to maneuver in a wheelchair. Eventually, after surgery, she was able to go to all of her classes with the help of a walker.

Considering the size of her school campus, Nicole's efforts to stand, walk and maneuver the hallways are truly remarkable. Nicole has received numerous recognitions for her academic achievements, and she has been a leader in many school service programs. She's helped decorate a float for the Rose Parade and she was an active participant of the Jr. Optimists Club.

One of the most important contributions Nicole has made it to be an example for others, especially for her classmates and educators who face difficulties. Nicole makes us all try a little harder.



Region 17

Veronica Hinojosa

Loara High School, Anaheim USD

Veronica Hinojosa is an amazing young woman who fought through personal adversity, tragedy and hardship to succeed against the odds. When Veronica was just 9 years old, her mother attempted suicide by jumping out of a moving vehicle. She survived but was in intensive care for many months paralyzed on the left side of her body from the waist up.

Veronica's father did what he could to support Veronica and her four younger siblings' living with relatives and moving frequently. Veronica took on the role of caregiver, preparing meals, cleaning clothes, helping with schoolwork and shopping for groceries.

Then, Veronica's father was arrested. After a two year trial, he was sentenced to 25 years in a maximum security prison. Veronica's mother sunk into a deep depression and became delusional. Veronica and her siblings were eventually taken in and adopted by an aunt.

Through all these hardships and responsibilities, Veronica has managed through sheer guts and determination to be an outstanding student, a community volunteer, and active in extra curricular activities.



Region 18

Wyatt Harper

Borrego Springs High School, Borrego Springs School District

Wyatt Harper has turned his life around against stiff odds. When he first enrolled at Borrego Springs High School in his sophomore year, Wyatt had little ambition or direction. His grandparents had taken him in after his parents couldn't care for him any longer.

During that year, Wyatt applied for and was accepted in a newly created information systems intern program created by the district. Early in the program, Wyatt struggled with his grades and behavior. His support team quickly reminded him that his internship was based on good grades and behavior. Wyatt's grades improved and he became a model student by the spring of his junior year.

Wyatt successes in the program include preparing power point presentations, reconditioning the computer systems on campus, answering email questions, taking trouble calls and training students and staff on a daily basis. Educators held Wyatt to high standards and he rose to the challenge.

His support team says Wyatt deserves the rewards of this life. He's earning them.

2004

Region 1

Jamie Jennings

Modoc High School, Modoc Jt. USD

When Jamie Jennings graduates from Modoc High School next year, she'll do wheelies across the stage as she goes to receive her diploma. Jamie and her school support team can't wait.

Jamie suffers from cerebral palsy and has vision and learning challenges. While her body is confined to a wheelchair, her spirit is filled with optimism, a great sense of humor and an excess of charm and grace.

Jamie moved from Sacramento to Modoc County in 2001, and she had to learn to make her way through campus no matter the weather.

While she started high school as a shy, quiet young woman, she has blossomed into an outgoing person.

Thanks to the ongoing support, encouragement and love of her mother, Jamie meets her challenges head-on.

She volunteers on campus, and she was the first wheelchair participant to go on Dream Quest, a three-day vocational event.

Jamie plans to attend community college and write children's books.



Region 3

Colleen Bartlett

Galt High School, Galt Jt. Union High School District

Colleen Bartlett has more resiliency and determination than adults twice her age. She's experienced more, suffered more and overcome more than a young woman her age should ever have to.

As a young child, Colleen suffered from kidney reflux disease and endured more than a dozen surgeries. She's spent most of her 18 years in chronic pain. She also is a victim of sexual harassment and sexual abuse.

As a teenager, Colleen spoke out against her abuser.

She persevered, stayed in school and remained at the top of her class.

Through all of her obstacles, Colleen maintained a GPA of 3.95. She has taken on many leadership roles in the FFA and has been a member of the California Scholastic Federation and Lettermen's Honor Society. She played basketball, volleyball, and track and field.

Her school support team says Colleen epitomizes the leadership needed in our communities in the future.



Region 4

Bonnie Drake

Napa Valley Adult School, Napa Valley Unified

Bonnie Drake is a role model. She's a role model for adults, she's a role model for kids and she's a role model for all of public education.

Bonnie returned to school as an adult to earn her high school diploma with what initially appeared to be overwhelming obstacles. She had fractured two discs, she has Graves disease and she suffers horrible migraines. Bonnie also worked, she had twin 1-year-olds, a 2-year-old and a 12-year-old. Her childhood was riddled with neglect and abuse, group homes, drug addiction, mental hospitals and depression.

Last summer Bonnie received her high school diploma and gave the graduation speech at her commencement ceremony.

Bonnie praised her eldest daughter for being her cheerleader and taking on caretaking and household responsibilities so Bonnie could achieve her goal.

She says "going back to school for my diploma is about choices. It is a choice I made to participate in life instead of just observing. It is a choice I made to stop wishing that I had finished high school and just do it."



Region 5

Maria Casteneda

Redwood High School, Sequoia UHSD

Maria Casteneda grew up in poverty. She moved to the United States with her mother and brothers at a young age. When the family arrived here her mother collected cans to earn money and her brothers worked for minimum wage at restaurants to help support the family.

When Maria was a sophomore in high school, she became a teen mother.

Despite her challenges, Maria has remained positive and hard working. Although she's responsible for a household, she has worked hard and made school her focus. So much so that she graduated a semester early.

Maria was a role model for other teen parents at Redwood High School because she placed education first, and she also has been a support person for students who speak limited English.

According to her school support team, Maria is a bright, positive, mature and mentally strong young woman. She is a wonderful mother and has an admirable ability to recognize and embrace all her responsibilities.



Region 6

Nicole Martin

Village High School, Pleasanton USD

Nicole Martin took life's lemons and made lemonade.

Nicole's parents were both drug addicted. Among many traumatic events, Nicole's mother died and then Nicole moved in with her grandparents.

When she arrived at Village Continuation High School in the middle of her sophomore year, Nicole was angry and frustrated, and she lacked most of the credits she needed to graduate on time.

As Nicole adapted to Village's small school setting, with its clear limits and warm and supportive staff, she began to change.

Her success in school and at improvement became very important to Nicole.

Nicole's school support team describes her as reliable, responsible and conscientious. She volunteered as a teacher's assistant, had good-to-perfect attendance, received numerous awards, and represented Village High on a week-long academic outing to Washington, D.C.

They say she "lifts the spirits of the educators who have the privilege of working with her."



Region 7

Charisee Yonetani

Glick Middle School, Empire USD

When Charisse Yonetani was 7 years old, she, along with her mother and oldest brother, were involved in a serious automobile accident. An ice chest came through the back seat of the car and hit Charisse in the back of her neck while she was sleeping. She spent seven months in Valley Children's Hospital and in Stanford University Hospital. Because of nerve damage, Charisse is a quadriplegic and cannot breathe on her own. Her mother provides her round-the-clock care. While doctors told Charisse she wouldn't be able to talk, she proved them wrong. Charisse talks very well, she eats, she whistles and she sings. She can write and draw beautiful pictures, and she loves school.

In elementary school, Charisse participated in the annual jog-a-thon and in Outdoor Education in the mountains during her sixth grade year.

At Glick Middle School, she maintains A's and B's in all of her classes.

Her school support team says having Charisse on campus in mainstream classes has enriched all of their lives. She exemplifies the truest spirit of accomplishment in the face of tremendous odds. She is articulate, conscientious, outgoing and persistent.

Every day Charisse overcomes tremendous odds.



Region 8

Veronica Toscano

Wilcox High School, Santa Clara USD

Veronica Toscano says her life is like a river with heavy rapids. But through her mother's love and support of her community she has risen above the hardships.

When Veronica was 6 years old, her father murdered her brother. Veronica, her older sister and her mother were left to deal with the sadness and the pain. Veronica's older sister rebelled, and she was eventually sent to the Youth Authority, where she spent three years.

Veronica too wanted to rebel and escape life's hardships. But she chose to persevere.

At the beginning of her sophomore year at Wilcox High School she began her educational turnaround.

Veronica attended a youth leadership conference in Washington, D.C. She served on Congressman Mike Honda's Student Advisory Committee. She maintained good grades and earned awards on two Golden State Exams.

Veronica says that being the first in her family to graduate from college will make all her efforts worthwhile.



Region 9

Erica Wainwright

Edison High School, Fresno USD

Erica Wainwright has always had a lion's share of leadership skills.

But for Erica those leadership skills led her to trouble during her early high school days. She had a quick temper, bad attitude and sharp tongue. She challenged authority and was in the vice principal's office every day for discipline problems. By the end of her freshman year she had been suspended several times and she passed only one class.

Thanks to the support of the vice principal and others at Edison High School, Erica found a way to redirect her leadership skills into something positive.

By the end of her sophomore year, Erica had shown significant improvement. In spite of her obstacles, Erica showed a strong desire to achieve. She participated in school sponsored activities and her grades improved dramatically.

Her support team says Erica has become a delightful, sensitive and compassionate young woman. They agree Erica will continue to succeed in school and in life.



Region 10

Andrea Diaz Gonzalez

Valencia Elementary, Pajaro Valley USD

When you witness third grader Andrea Diaz Gonzales twirling on the playground bars at Valencia Elementary School, you'd never guess she is almost totally blind.

Andrea was born in Mexico with glaucoma in her left eye and another disease in her right eye. Her left eye was removed when she was 1-1/2 years old. And Andrea is rapidly losing sight in her right eye.

Through an amazing support effort at her school, Andrea is now reading and writing successfully in Braille and speaking, reading and writing in English. And Andrea has many friends and she doesn't miss a beat on the playground.

Her support team says Andrea readily answers questions in her reading group – a remarkable accomplishment for a child who has only been learning English for two years.

We have the utmost confidence Andrea will achieve all her dreams.



Region 11

Michelle Barrios

Tulare Western High School, Tulare Jt. UHSD

Michelle Barrios is known for her extraordinary inner strength and courage.

When Michelle was just a preschooler, a hit-and-run drunk driver struck the car in which she was riding. The accident left Michelle a life-long paraplegic.

Michelle underwent numerous surgeries and many physical therapy sessions at Valley Children's Hospital. She had to re-learn how to sit up, how to feed herself, transfer from a chair to bed, or chair to chair and how to be as self sufficient as possible.

Through her school years, Michelle has excelled. In elementary school she performed in a dance troupe and with Winners on Wheels. In high school she was a cheerleader, she was in choir, she was a member of the yearbook staff, and she was nominated for Homecoming Queen. She's earned excellent grades and was given an Outstanding Achievement Award by the Board of Education.

Michelle has hopes to become a teacher after she graduates from college.



Region 12

Trevor Johnson

Arlington High School, Riverside USD

Trevor Johnson graduated from high school in June. That's no small feat for a young man born with liver disease.

When he was very young, Trevor endured his first liver transplant. While five years passed without major complications, Trevor endured his second transplant in elementary school.

At age 13, Trevor was diagnosed with kidney disease. Through medication, the disease was controlled until high school. Trevor then had to depend on dialysis while he waited for a joint kidney and liver transplant. During his junior year, Trevor received the transplant and he's now flourishing in his education and in his life.

Through high school Trevor maintained excellent grades. He was ranked 11th out of a class of 416 students. He participated in a biotechnology program, on a mock trial team and he was a member of the band.

Thanks to his resiliency, his parent's strength and his teachers' support, Trevor is succeeding.



Region 13

Nelida Aceves

Delta High School, Santa Maria Jt. Union HSD

As a freshman in high school, Nelida Aceves was disinterested, absent a lot, and had no plan for her future.

But when Nelida finally arrived at Delta High School her focus and her life began to change.

Nelida set her goals at a high standard and stayed focused on them. She became a very popular student. Her school support team says she's cordial, outgoing, interested and ambitious.

She attended school regularly. She had a 4.0 grade point average and she participated in numerous school activities.

Nelida received awards for her academics and her attendance.

She participated in a local Business Leadership Luncheon and a canned food drive. She also served on the yearbook staff.

Nelida's teachers say she is highly deserving of any recognition that is given to her for her academic performance. We're confident she will make a difference in any endeavor she pursues.



Region 14

Vanessa Ayala

Craig Williams Elementary, Bellflower USD

Vanessa Ayala might not have a permanent home, but she does have a permanent goal: to succeed in school.

Vanessa says her personal life shouldn't have to interfere with her school life. And, with her perfect attendance, good grades and steady volunteerism, she's proven that to be true.

Vanessa's family suffered a major setback when her father – the family's wage earner – lost his job when she was in fifth grade. The family lost their apartment, their belongings were sold and they moved from hotel to shelter in confusion and despair.

During sixth grade, Vanessa's family found temporary housing in a shelter. She says that from her top bunk, Vanessa used her biggest textbook like a desk so that her schoolwork didn't get wrinkled.

Vanessa's sixth grade goal was to earn perfect attendance. She says her secret to life is to try her hardest each day.



Region 15

Will Brown Jr.

Rose City High School, Pasadena USD

Will Brown Jr. was headed for trouble by the time he was in sixth grade. He was involved with drugs and gangs, his grades were poor, his attendance even worse and he soon ended up in Juvenile Hall. He transferred from school to school, at one point even dropping out entirely.

Will says he went whichever way the wind blew.

That is, until he met a police officer who questioned him about his life. Will thought about his future, and he made a personal choice to get his life on the right track.

Will enrolled in Rose City Continuation High School in 2003 and he has worked hard to succeed among his peers.

Through ROP training, Will saw an opportunity to excel. Will was selected to attend the Black American Political Association Conference last year. His goal for the future is to become a real estate developer, and he plans to attend college after a June graduation.



Region 16

Alicia Collins

University High School, Los Angeles USD

Alicia Collins is kind and gentle, curious and thoughtful, smart and humble, emerging from dire circumstances to repeatedly defy expectations.

When Alicia was in eighth grade she was removed from her mother's home and sent to live with her father.

In addition to having to adjust to a new home, Alicia was poor and lonely. She had a poor self-image and she had no interest in improving.

Thanks to intervention and perseverance from her school support team, Alicia has overcome her challenges to succeed in school and in life.

During high school, Alicia traveled 90 minutes each way by public transportation. She excelled academically, and was involved in volleyball, softball and track. At night she returned to a small home in a gang infested neighborhood and locked herself in a closet or the bathroom to finish her schoolwork.

Her school support team says they admire both her commitment to learning and her overall ambition of going to college.



Region 17

Sha'Rhonda Robinson

Gilbert West High School, Anaheim UHSD

At the caring and positive environment of Gilbert West High School, students like Sha'Rhonda Robinson work at their own pace.

Such a program works well for a single, teenage mother who has set her sights on college and a career in medicine.

When Sha'Rhonda was 13 years old, she gave birth to her son, Elijah. Because the father was in jail, she received no financial or emotional support. For a time she lived with her mother, but because of her mother's illness, Sha'Rhonda had to move in with an uncle.

When there were too many people living in her uncle's apartment, Sha'Rhonda moved again, from place to place, just so she could keep Elijah.

All the while Sha'Rhonda continued to attend school. She completed the ROP course to be a certified nurse's assistant. Her school support team says that Sha'Rhonda is intellectually capable of doing anything she chooses.



Region 18

Gricelda Alva

Oceanside High School, Oceanside USD

When Gricelda Alva was 12 years old, her mother died in Mexico. Soon after her mother's death, Gricelda and her four sisters and one brother moved to Oceanside. They were alone because their father no longer lived with them. As a seventh grader, Gricelda knew no English.

Her two older sisters took care of the family and Gricelda is responsible for her younger siblings.

She enrolled in English development classes and rapidly excelled in all of her courses.

In high school she maintained a 4.25 GPA and flourished in AP English, AP Government, Physics and Pre-Calculus.

Gricelda's school support team says she is responsible and very mature and that she clearly wants to succeed in life.

She set her sights on attending USD and hopes to pursue a degree in the medical field.

2005

Region 1

Lauren Howard

Hope High School

When Lauren Howard was 2 years old she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. She suffered through radiation, isolation and being terribly sick. But Lauren never gave up. Her mother and father gained hope and inspiration from her each and every day.

When she was 12 years old, Lauren learned she was losing her hearing. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, Lauren embraced the challenge head-on. She committed to learning sign language and to succeeding in life.

Lauren's school support team says they gained from Lauren's experience. They say Lauren has turned each obstacle into a positive challenge.

Lauren has not let her hearing loss stand in her way. At Hope High School, Lauren made the cheerleading team and the snowboarding team. She taught her classmates to use sign language with music.

Lauren's teachers say she is a success because of her ability to ask for help. After graduating high school this summer, she worked at a camp for deaf children and now she's pursuing her studies and her dream to be a sign language interpreter.



Region 2

Samantha Burt

Elk Creek High, Stony Creek Jt. USD

Samantha Burt has a learning disability that affects her ability to read and write. But Samantha does not consider herself limited in any way. Samantha has developed a positive, can-do attitude. She participates fully in general education classes, and she is always committed to completing her assignments.

At Elk Creek High School, Samantha earned the respect of her teachers. She was on the honor roll, and has her sights set on attending college to become a pre-school teacher.

Samantha has great pride in her 4-H activities. She's won awards for presentations, goat showmanship and crafts. Living on a ranch has helped Samantha hone her skills, raising and caring for goats, lambs and cattle.

Samantha is also an active community volunteer. She's helped with community dinners, cleaning up the local cemetery, and visiting and making crafts for senior citizens.

Samantha's teachers and counselors say they have no doubt she will achieve her goals.



Region 3

Joshua Smith

Laguna Creek High School, Elk Grove USD

Joshua Smith was deemed a "crack baby" when he was born. When he was 3 years old he was placed in foster care because his parents couldn't care for him. He was diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder early in life. In Joshua's 18 years he had 11 foster parents and three foster homes, and he lived in two shelters. He has transferred schools a dozen times.

Joshua's resiliency and sense of hope are remarkable. Joshua says he's proud to wake up and go to school, even though he endured a two-hour commute. In addition to his academic successes, Joshua is actively involved in his church, has served in 4-H, tutored young children, served on the student council and worked at the community center. Joshua is proud to be the first person in his family to attend college.

Joshua's school support team says, "Few students have the strength of character, determination and support to rise above their difficulties as powerfully as Joshua Smith."



Region 4

Nancy Lopez

Sem Yetto, Solano COE

When Nancy Lopez immigrated to California in 2002 she didn't speak English and was placed in a class for English language learners. As soon as her need for more intensive instruction became apparent, she was welcomed at Armijo High School in Region 4, where she benefits from a functional skills curriculum and a small staff-to-student ratio. Nancy has cognitive and physical challenges due to a birth defect. Still, Nancy has a strong spirit. She is a hard worker who needs little direction. Her school support team is not only helping her learn job skills, but also to read and write in English.

Nancy was born with webbed fingers, but she has learned to hold pencils and write clearly. She completes writing and math assignments, and uses a computer.

Through a transition skills class, Nancy acquired a job at a local pizzeria and coffee house. Nancy moves from one task to another very easily, not letting her limited hand dexterity slow her down.



Region 5

Delida Wong

Lowell High School, San Francisco USD

Delida Wong is motivated to create a better life for herself and her mother. When she was 4 years old, Delida's father died of lung cancer. To make ends meet, Delida and her mother moved to a low-income housing project in San Francisco's Chinatown. Delida's two grandmothers died when she was a freshman in high school. But through love, hard work and never ending perseverance, Delida is on her way to a very successful future.

Delida's school support team at Lowell High School say Delida motivates everyone around her. During high school, Delida juggled a full load of Advanced Placement and other courses, plus a well-paying job – all to support herself and her mother and to save for college.

Delida says that while she has been poor financially, she has never felt poor in spirit. Delida's goal is to be successful in life and to provide her mother with everything she would ever want. Delida wants her mom to know that all her sacrifices were well worth it.



Region 6

Minh Tra

Briones High School, Martinez High School

Minh Tra was born in a refugee camp in Thailand with a life-threatening blood disorder. Because his body does not produce red blood cells, he must give himself regular injections, and every three weeks receives a blood transfusion. In 1989, when Minh was 4, he immigrated to the United States with his parents. When he was 6 years old, he was hospitalized for four months so doctors could remove his spleen and address other health issues.

Minh transferred to Briones School and the Environmental Studies Academy in Region 6 two years ago. His willingness to learn was readily apparent.

Those who know Minh are quick to point out that his daily trek through physical pain and emotional complexity would paralyze most people. But the only thing that holds Minh back is urgent care at the hospital.

In the Environmental Studies Academy, Minh has been the glue that holds the group together. He is a profound example of the possibilities for every student to succeed.



Region 7

Victor Neese

Sonora High School, Sonora UHSD

Victor Neese is a caring young man who is always ready to lend a hand. A recent graduate of Sonora High School, Vic did not enjoy a typical childhood and had to take on adult responsibilities at a very young age. Vic has two older sisters, one of whom has severe developmental disabilities.

After the death of his father, Vic's mother became alcohol dependent. The care of Vic's sister, Sarah, fell to Vic and his sister Sonja. Just children themselves, Vic and his sister had to change Sarah's diapers and clothes and feed her. Sarah needs physical therapy, a back brace and help getting in and out of her wheelchair.

When his mother's condition deteriorated, Vic and his sisters were placed in foster care. Vic's mother died two years ago. Now Vic and his sisters remain connected even though they live miles apart.

Throughout his life, Vic has taken each negative and turned it into a positive. He plans to continue his education and work in foster care.



Region 8

Katelynn St. Amour

Hayes School, Oak Grove USD

Katelynn St. Amour faces obstacles every day. She suffers from a rare chromosomal disorder called Turner's syndrome and bipolar disorder. Katelynn has a short stature, a broad chest, puffy hands and feet and other unique characteristics, and she has gradually lost her hearing. She was also traumatized by a horrific car accident in which several people were killed.

Early in her education, Katelynn would hide under her desk and try to harm herself. She ran away from school several times.

When she entered Hayes School in second grade, Katelynn struggled academically and socially. But she persevered. She responded positively to feedback about her strengths and weakness and followed the firm guidelines set by her school support team.

In her Special Day Class, teachers work with her to increase her vocabulary, build gross and fine motor skills and learn sign language. Her teachers say Katelynn shines as bright as the sun.



Region 9

Gina Gutierrez-Sua

Gateway High School, Clovis USD

In her 18 years of life, Gina Gutierrez-Sua has faced more challenges than most adults ever endure. Gina's father died in a car accident when she was an infant. Her mother is an alcoholic, and Gina has had to bear the brunt of her negative, hurtful comments.

For 14 years, Gina and her mother, brother and sister lived with a heroin addict who was in and out of prison.

The family has been homeless several times. When Gina was an infant, her family's apartment burned down, along with all their possessions.

Gina became a mother when she was 15, and has raised daughter Mikayla without any support from the father. Gina has had to sacrifice time with friends and endured financial and emotional hardships.

Gina has struggled with depression, which has made it difficult to attend school and complete her work. Through it all, though, Gina has never lost sight of her goals to graduate from high school and become a nurse.



Region 10

Zenayda Torres

Mt. Toro High School, Salinas UHSD

Zenayda Torres became a mother of twin girls when she was 16 years old. Thanks to help from her support team at Mount Toro High School, Zenayda can proudly say she's among the elite 30 percent of teen parents who receive their high school diploma.

Zenayda was 3 years old and living in Salinas when her parents divorced. She lost contact with her father when she was 11. Zenayda has attended Salinas area schools her whole life and she has overcome many obstacles to succeed. Early in her pregnancy, Zenayda was referred to the Teen Parent Program at Mount Toro. When the twins were born and struggled with constant ear infections, balancing parenting with school work became too much. Zenayda dropped out, but she did not give up. Eventually Zenayda was readmitted to the program and worked hard to succeed. She stayed after school, attended summer school and did all she could to graduate. She was even chosen to give the graduation speech last summer. Zenayda Torres uses every negative as a positive motivator to succeed.



Region 11

Deanna Bustamante

Golden West High School, Visalia USD

Deanna Bustamante is determined to reach every one of her goals. Deanna was a top senior student at Golden West High School and has high academic and life goals for herself, even though she has faced great adversity. When Deanna was in middle school, her mother was incarcerated for a year. Deanna had to care for her older sister, who is disabled, and learn how to manage daily household responsibilities in addition to her school work. Deanna's older sister has Down's Syndrome and she is autistic. Deanna struggled with giving her a shower, taking her to the bathroom and getting her dressed and ready for school. Deanna was constantly late for her own classes, lost touch with her friends and isolated herself in her home. By the end of her eighth grade year, Deanna says she learned how to manage her schoolwork and her household duties. Her mother was released from prison, and now they work together toward the future.



Region 12

Amy Thompson

Ayala High School, Chino USD

Amy Thompson fractured her ankle playing basketball when she was 11. Since then life has never been the same. At 16 Amy was diagnosed with Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy, causing her to live in constant severe pain. The normal system of pain management in Amy's body has misfired, causing an abnormal cycle of pain that affects her skin, muscles, joints and bones. Amy walks with crutches, uses a motorized scooter on campus and can no longer walk up stairs. Despite her problems, Amy reaches out to the less fortunate. She helped organized a hygiene drive for the homeless, helps build houses in Tijuana with her youth group and teaches Sunday school to 4-year-olds. Her teachers say she is a true role model for other students facing adversity. Amy is an honors student and is involved in school activities such as the Student Honor Society and Students Against Drunk Driving. Amy's school support team says she is richly deserving of recognition. ACSA couldn't agree more.



Region 13

Kelli Cuiilty

The High School at Moorpark College, Moorpark USD

Kelli Cuiilty is an exceptional young lady, mature beyond her years. From an early age, Kelli has learned to never lose sight of her dreams. There were days in Kelli's early life when she and her mother slept in the car because they were thrown out of their home. Kelli's mother was diagnosed with brain cancer, and Kelli's aunt – a pillar of strength for the family – was diagnosed with breast cancer. Through it all, Kelli continues to care for her mother, appreciate and support her aunt, and work hard at school.

Kelli's diligence with her school work are proof of her success. Staff at the high school at Moorpark College say Kelli is an inspiration to all who find it difficult to overcome adversity.

Kelli comes to school each day with a smile on her face, a kind word for everyone and a strong desire to succeed. Her life goal of becoming a teacher is well within her reach.



Region 14

Ashley Gonzales

Paramount HS, Paramount USD

Ashley Gonzales strives to be a good student and great mother. Ashley is the daughter of a teen parent who abandoned her at birth. She was raised by her grandparents, but always yearned for the love of a mother. Ashley was a rebellious teenager and not interested in school.

When she was 15 years old, she was savagely assaulted by a man who had attacked several other women. She kept the assault a secret until she learned she was pregnant. Ashley then decided to make dramatic changes in her life and give her son all the love possible. That life change, her teachers say, made Ashley "a teacher's dream come true."

Ashley focused on her school work – attending high school and college at the same time – and improved her parenting skills.

She graduated from high school this summer with extra credits and months of perfect attendance.



Region 15

Michael Worley

Clark Magnet High School, Glendale USD

Michael Worley was born with cerebral palsy, which greatly affects his ability to walk and speak. When he first arrived at Clark Magnet High School, staff worried that the seven-period day and steep hillside campus would be too much for Michael.

They were wrong. Michael faced the challenges of Clark and his life head-on. Michael maintained a 3.8 grade point average, selecting rigorous course work. He has served in many leadership roles, including freshman orientation and editor of the school newspaper. At the end of his sophomore year, Michael was awarded the Coaches' Inspiration Award from the P.E. department and received a standing ovation from every one of his classmates.

Michael never lets what some might see as a handicap stop him from doing anything.

His school support team says that more than any member of the team, Michael has done his part to work hard and be successful. Michael inspires us all.



Region 16

Ricardo Angel

Fairfax High, Los Angeles USD

Three months into his sophomore year, Ricardo Angel was arrested and served 11 months at a juvenile detention facility. He left school with five fails, a D and an incomplete.

Ricardo says juvenile hall was a scary place. He says he recognized how he disappointed his family and how much his actions affected them. He decided to turn his life around and set new goals.

When Ricardo returned to school, he focused on his grades and attendance. He endures a 90-minute bus commute from East Los Angeles, and holds a job at a local shoe store, where his supervisor says Ricardo is doing great.

At Fairfax High School, Ricardo worked with other students to plan an event to help senior citizens, and he volunteered at the school Career Fair.

Last year, Ricardo held a 3.5 grade point average. He is set to graduate from high school at the end of the school year.

Ricardo hopes to attend college and devote time to helping his community



Region 17

Julio Sanchez

La Habra City School District, Las Lomas

Julio Sanchez lost his hand in a factory accident in Mexico, but he did not and will not ever lose his spirit to succeed. When Julio arrived at Las Lomas Elementary School, he was quiet and shy. Julio spoke no English and wore long sleeves and jackets to cover his arm. He also suffered frequent nightmares about the accident.

The teachers and staff at Las Lomas rallied to help Julio succeed. His teacher and fellow students helped provide a welcoming environment and he received appropriate counseling services. Plus, the school support team helped the family find a prosthetic hand for Julio.

With the support of these adults, Julio began to smile, make friends and achieve academic success. Julio is a happy, self-reliant, positive student who sees no barriers to any of his dreams.



Region 18

Jorge Saldana

Central Union High School, Central UHSD

Jorge Saldana was born with cerebral palsy that significantly affects his range of motion on his right side. But Jorge does not let this challenge become a barrier that holds him back. It just pushes him to work just a little harder and give a little more to be the best person he can be.

Earlier this year, Jorge was recognized as the Kiwanis Club of San Diego's Most Inspirational High School Football Player because of his efforts. At Central Union High School, Jorge played four years of football and two years of basketball. He ran practice drills over and over again, never whining or complaining. Even after breaking his leg, Jorge was not deterred.

His school support team says Jorge is a polite young man with a solid support network of parents, teachers, coaches and other team members. Jorge says he's tried his hardest and he's proved to people he can do more. He's not going to let anything stand in his way.

2006

Region 2

Wylín Abarca

El Dorado High School, El Dorado Union High School District

Wylín Abarca is a rare young man who is able to juggle the considerable demands of family, work and academic life.

When Wylín entered his freshman year at El Dorado High School in Placerville, he had just come to the United States from Mexico. He was a shy and reserved student targeted for English-learner classes. However, he persuaded his counselor to allow him to take mainstream classes with no extra help.

Amazingly determined and self-disciplined, Wylín quickly found success in school, but continued to think he would end up in the food service industry. Educators encouraged him to take the tough classes that would get him into the UC or CSU systems. He did so while maintaining a 4.08 grade point average.

In addition, Wylín had to work long hours to help his family pay for living expenses. Now he has applied to Harvard and Stanford and hopes to become a journalist.



Region 3

Chloe Walker

Casa Roble, San Juan USD

Chloe Walker rose from the very depths of family dysfunction to regain a series of dignity and achieve academic success. Chloe's stepfather began to sexually molest her at age 11. By the time she was 15, she had two children by this man, whom she said "ruined every goal, dream and all the plans for my future."

During this turmoil, Chloe attended Sierra Nueva, a continuation high school in San Juan USD. The school was very supportive, especially during the time Chloe decided to give up her daughters for adoption and have a normal teenage life.

She transferred to the mainstream Casa Roble High School, where she maintained a 4.0 grade point average. She even served as a teaching assistant in the special education and science department, and now plans to study social work or psychology in college.



Region 4

Fatima Montanez

Ridgway High, Santa Rosa CS

Fatima Montanez found the courage and educational support to get back on track after falling behind in high school. Ridgway High in Santa Rosa City Schools has an advisory system as well as a program that monitors student attendance and productivity. Fatima took advantage of both. She also worked on campus as an aide to the student advisor, where she found good listeners when she was depressed about her home life.

Fatima entered Ridgway behind in English. She soon found the Literature Circles program, which encouraged her to complete many books and discuss them with other students. She also participated in writing courses designed to prepare her for college.

Extra classes and a rededication to education ensured Fatima will graduate as a fifth-year senior after the first semester of 2006-07. She plans to enter a nursing program at Santa Rosa Junior College.

ACSA applauds Fatima Montanez and the Region 4 support team who selected her for this award.



Region 5

Madison and Ashley Yates

Capuchino High, San Mateo UHSD

Madison and Ashley Yates overcame childhood disease and teenage homelessness to become model students and humanitarians,,
At 18 months old, Madison was diagnosed with a rare cancer and given little chance of survival. She and Ashley, who is her twin sister, lost their father to cancer five years ago. Their mother has suffered from depression ever since, and the family became homeless last year.
Despite their hardships, Madison and Ashley are an inspiration to Capuchino High School in San Mateo UHSD, and to the community at-large. They donate time to many charities through Rotary, the Humane Society, church, and the shelters in which they live. Madison has been a representative to Girl's State and a member of the GATE Club since ninth grade. Ashley served as 2005-06 student body president. Both young women tutor others in math and science.
Madison and Ashley have maintained near perfect grade point averages, while taking rigorous college prep courses, They have been accepted to a number of colleges, including Chico, Humboldt and San Francisco State.



Region 6

Adam Lawrence

Ygnacio Valley HS, Mt. Diablo USD

As a younger student, Adam Lawrence was suspended several times for drug possession, theft and fighting. After being expelled from high school as a freshman, Adam joined the Education Academy in Contra Costa County, where educators hoped the smaller class sizes and individual attention would help him do better in school and stay out of trouble.
His sophomore year was difficult, as his anger toward authority led to suspensions, and a GPA of just 0.5. But once Adam realized that educators were not going to give up on him, he started to see the Academy as a safe haven
Adam took school more seriously and controlled his temper. His grades improved and he became a Link Crew leader, helping younger students feel more connected to the school. In his junior year, Adam achieved a GPA of 3.5 and has continued to slay out of trouble, Adam's goal is lo become a teacher and use his experience to help other students succeed.



Region 7

Cristina Sauno

Thomas Downey High, Modesto City Schools

Cristina Sauno came to the United States from Mexico in 2002. In four years, she has learned to English, maintained a 3.0 GPA and passed the High School Exit Exam. But her path to success has not been easy.
When Cristina was 8 years old her mother immigrated to the United States because she was no longer able to support her three children. Cristina, tired of the harassment she received at school, dropped out and started work as a dishwasher. At the age of 14 she became pregnant, and decided to join her mother in the United States,
Cristina immediately enrolled in Riverbank High in Modesto, and after the birth of her son went on independent study until she was able to return to school full time. Cristina has always been very proactive in her education, taking advantage of counseling and health services and many other school- and community-based programs.
Cristina's long-term goal is to major in accounting at UC Davis.



Region 8

Natalie Bragg

Davis Intermediate School, Oak Grove SD

For her first five years of life, Natalie Bragg lived in four different cities as her single mother sought different job opportunities. Finally, they settled in San Jose, where Natalie entered Country Lane Elementary School and was described as a gentle, patient girl who was making progress at developing academic skills.

But as things became chaotic with Natalie's home life, life at school became difficult. A victim of abuse, Natalie was suspended from school for fighting. Then her mother died, and Natalie spent the next couple of years at a residential treatment facility.

Natalie began an intensive process of counseling to overcome the sad events of her life. She now lives in a loving foster home where she is thriving, while maintaining a 4.0 GPA.

Natalie says she believes that "life can bring you hard times, but you can get through them." Her goal is to attend Stanford and become a middle school teacher so she can help others.



Region 9

Precious Hall

Sunnyside High, Fresno USD

Precious Hall was one of 40 students selected as a freshman to attend the Doctor's Academy, a rigorous school within a school at Sunnyside High School. Described by her principal, Sheryl Weaver, as a "natural leader," Precious has participated in several school activities.

Precious was president of the Black Student Union, coordinator of Link Crew, HIV/AIDS Peer educator and manager of the varsity girls basketball team.

During her junior year Precious became pregnant. But six weeks after the birth of her son, she was back at school, continuing with her AP classes, labs and tutorials and a six-week senior internship program.

Then, tragically, her father was killed in a drive-by shooting while attending a family gathering last year. Yet through these challenges, Precious has always taken full responsibility for herself and made no excuses.

Precious has earned the respect and admiration of her peers and school staff, and is committed to attending college and studying medicine.



Region 10

Fernando Moreno

Fernando Moreno's success shows that sometimes all it takes is to find the right path. Fernando came to North Monterey County High School as an immature, violent and impulsive young person, but he has become a thoughtful, respectable young man.

When Fernando went out for football as a freshman, his coach thought he was a junior or senior because of his size and grownup appearance. However, the responsibilities of football were too much for him and he quit the team. Then he broke his wrist in a violent confrontation with an older student.

But Fernando decided to give football another try. This time he was ready and he made sure he stayed on the team by getting good grades and passing the High School Exit Exam in his junior year. He also began attending Native American ceremonies, including a traditional sweat lodge, which helps revitalize and focus the participants.

Fernando played every game on the varsity squad and earned the designation of outstanding defensive lineman. Two junior colleges have recruited him to play for them in 2006-07. He also earned the Presidential Academic Achievement Award from North Monterey County High School.



Region 11

James Brown

Tulare Western High, Tulare JUSD



Region 12

Blanca Orozco-Banderas

Bloomington High, Colton JUSD

Blanca Orozco-Banderas has faced many emotional setbacks in her life. Born in Mexico, her father abandoned her at birth and her mother abandoned the family when Blanca was 12. With her three teenaged sisters, Blanca came to the United States to search for her mother in 2003. But the reunion did not go well. Her mother rejected her again, saying she had started a new life.

Blanca did not let this prevent her from getting an education, and she enrolled in Bloomington High School in the Colton Joint Unified School District, which was her first English-speaking experience.

Living with her sisters with no adult in the home, Blanca learned English well enough to maintain a 3.3 GPA. Incredibly, she also worked full-time, from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. six days a week, in order to pay her rent and living expenses and support herself financially.

With the help and guidance of her counselors and other school staff, Blanca succeeded in school and plans to attend college with the hopes of becoming a doctor.



Region 13

Joseph Martinez

Delta High, Santa Maria JUHSD

When Joseph was 12, his younger sister was diagnosed with cancer. Soon after, Joseph’s father had trouble coming to grips with the severity of the illness and left home.

Cancer eventually left his sister with paraplegia, and Joseph took on the responsibility of caring for her. Already experiencing difficulties in school Joseph was overwhelmed and became hostile and disrespectful to others.

Joseph then joined the Police Explorer Program, which taught him discipline and gave him a new attitude. He was chosen from among 60 students to attend Delta High School in the Santa Maria Jt. USD. The smaller school gave him the individualized attention he needed.

But during his senior year, his grandfather became ill, and Joseph was needed at home to care for him. While this slowed his progress, he did not let it stop him, thanks to the support of his advisors. He is on the track to success, and hopes to join the police academy.



Region 14

Jessica Bailey

South High School, Torrance USD

Beginning in elementary school, Jessica Bailey has had three bouts with cancer, which caused her to lose bones in her legs. In and out of hospitals, she faces the potential of losing her legs altogether.

Yet this hasn’t stalled Jessica’s progress at South High School in Torrance USD.

Jessica is a straight A student and is on the school dance team, bearing the pain of dancing with titanium rods in her legs. With the support of school staff, she organized the student team of the American Cancer Society’s Relay for Life, Jessica also arranged a donation of food, clothing and money to underprivileged children, and arranged a similar donation to a local needy family. She is also involved in a canned food drive that collected nearly 6,000 cans of food, twice the previous year’s total.

In addition, Jessica is a youth advisor at her church, all while keeping a smile on her face.



Region 15

Jordan Baustista

Lincoln School, Whittier CSD

When Jordan Bautista was in second grade, she lost muscle control in her right hand. The condition began spreading, and by fifth grade she had lost muscle control over the entire right side of her body. She was unable to stand erect and had to walk with her head at her knees,

Initially, doctors were baffled about this condition, and labeled it psychosomatic. But Jordan never believed this, and eventually doctors were able to diagnose her condition as dystonia, a disorder that affects the part of her brain where muscle contractions are processed.

Through it all, Jordan has consistently impressed those around her. She constantly has a bright smile on her face, as she makes her way around school with the use of a walker. As a GATE student, she often gives speeches to groups despite her physical limitations. School psychologist Shauna Allen said Jordan “touches the lives of anyone she meets. Her intelligence, strength, beautiful smile, determination and a positive attitude are qualities that she exhibits on a daily basis. Her attitude sets an example for all students and adults to live by.”



Region 16

Ji Hye and In Hye Lim

Los Angeles High School, LAUSD

Ji Hye and In Hye Lim are immigrant sisters living in Los Angeles with their mother. All three moved here from Korea in 1998 when the girls’ aunt sponsored them and allowed them to live with her for three years.

When they moved here, neither mother nor daughters spoke a word of English. The only work Mrs. Lim could get was as a waitress, working 10- hour days to pay for a small apartment and food and clothing for the girls.

The girls’ father visited them in the United States and decided to stay beyond his visitor’s visa to try to find work to support his wife and daughters. But he was caught by the immigration authorities and deported back to Korea.

Despite these obstacles, the sisters have blossomed into outstanding students. In Hye took AP courses in calculus and statistics and plans to major in mathematics at California State University, Northridge. Ji Hye took AP courses in art and plans to major in at at CSU, Long Beach and become an animator after graduating.



Region 17

Alejandro Hinojosa

North Orange County ROP/Katella High, Anaheim UHSD

Alejandro Hinojosa was a student who could have easily traveled the wrong path in life. For the past 12 years his father has been in federal prison on charges of dealing drugs. When he was 8 years old, Alejandro’s mother suffered a nervous breakdown and Alejandro was bounced around in foster homes for two years.

Finally, his uncle and aunt took him in and Alejandro’s life began to improve. He resisted the strong pull of gangs and drugs when he entered junior high, determined that he would not end up in prison like his father. He decided instead to help other young people in similar situations by volunteering at a camp for at-risk kids.

He struggled though as he entered high school and had some discipline issues. With the help of his support team he got his behavior under control. He started an after school job and joined the Katella High Building Industry Technology Academy Design/Build Team, where he really began to shine. He now has been selected as captain of Katella’s BITA Design/Build Team this year, the first time a junior has been selected to lead the team.



Region 18

José Perez

Ocean Shores High School, Oceanside USD

When José Perez was younger, his family lived in Chicago and José became involved in his neighborhood’s gang. During his freshman year he was shot while standing in front of a friend’s house. The shooter is believed to have been a rival gang member.

Fortunately, the gun shot was not life threatening. José and his family moved to North Carolina where his father opened a restaurant. Although he started school while there, José soon quit to work with his father.

After a time he moved to Oceanside to live with his aunt. He went to find a job, but all he could get was working in the fields as a laborer. Realizing he needed some education, he tried re-enrolling but was turned down because, in what should have been his junior year, he only had 25 credits. He ended up enrolling in Ocean Shores High School, a small continuation school that gives students personal attention.

José has worked hard, earning 40 to 50 credits per trimester and graduating in June with 240 credits. He maintained an NB average and had almost perfect attendance, This very determined young man now plans to go to college.



Region 19

Lydia Boyorquez

Lincoln High, Riverside USD

Lydia Boyorquez grew up in an unstable home environment, with parents who used and sold drugs. Her mother was sent to prison on drug charges, and her grandmother, the one person who had offered her stability in her life, was diagnosed with cancer and passed away.

At the age of 15, her father kicked her out of the house because she didn't get along with his girlfriend, Lydia hung in there, going to live with her friend Regina and her family.

While struggling to deal with all this, Lydia demonstrated attendance and anger management issues at Lincoln High. She slowly began to overcome these issues by getting more involved in school and in the girls volleyball program. Her mother got out of prison and began to turn her life around. Lydia says, "She is a new person. She is the kind of mom I always wanted."

Now Lydia has become involved in Lincoln Leaders, where students develop school and community leadership skills. As Lydia says, "My time at Lincoln has given me that chance to develop and show my strengths, assets and successes. I will always be thankful for my high school experiences."

Region 1

John Lowry

Modoc High School, Modoc Joint Unified High School District

John Lowry, who has autism, is renowned in the Modoc Joint Unified School District for his great sense of humor and for his sense of compassion.

One way John shows this compassion is in his work at the local food bank and at the Four Corner's Market, where he stocks shelves and fills food baskets for the needy. He also recently began a job at Black Bear Restaurant as a greeter. John takes that same energetic approach to his school life. He has been in charge of delivering the bulletins to all classrooms and works with his school's Natural Resources Academy recycling program. He has also sold ads for the yearbook and has been active in sports, helping set up the gym for athletic events and serving as an assistant for the girls basketball team. In addition he joined the Modoc High School track team and learned how to throw the shot put.



Region 2

Rashelle Webb

Anna McKenney Intermediate School, Marysville Joint Union School District

Rashelle Webb, a former eighth grader in Marysville Joint Unified School District, had a difficult childhood. When she was 3-1/2, an oncoming vehicle struck the car her family was in and Rashelle's mother was killed. After the tragedy, Rashelle and her 8-year-old sister went to live with their 70-year-old great-aunt.

When she was 14, Rashelle's older sister ran away, leaving Rashelle alone. Rashelle's great-aunt then gave Rashelle up to foster care, where she bounced around between foster shelters and families. She never found a permanent placement, due in part to the defiant attitude she had developed.

Finally, Rashelle's 21-year-old cousin took her in and gave Rashelle a stable environment. Her schoolwork improved and she became a starter on her school's volleyball and basketball teams. She began to participate in a peer tutoring and conflict resolution program. She has volunteered to help decorate for school dances and helps out in the front office. A defiant young woman who could have easily taken the path to anger and bitterness instead became a shining ray of light at her school and a person who evokes the best in those around her.



Region 3

Julian Brooks

Rio Linda High School, Grant Joint Union High School District

Julian Brooks, a senior at Rio Linda High School in Grant Joint Union High School District, has accepted the challenging circumstances of his life and has gone far in exceeding expectations.

Julian lives in his grandparents' house, a multi-generational household that also includes Julian's aunts and cousins. The family manages to get by despite living below the poverty line.

Within his school's structured environment, Julian has thrived. He has become a top-notch athlete in football, basketball and track, and Julian also excels in matters of the mind. He was ranked fourth in his class with a 4.1 grade point average, thanks to taking six Advanced Placement courses. He traveled to Oregon State University after his freshman year to participate in an engineering program. He also has taken part in the Young Scholars Program at Clarkson University and the National Teen Leadership Program at California State University, Sacramento.

In addition, Julian gave two speeches at the national conference of 100 Black Men, where he was recognized as the 2006 Mentee of the Year. He also gives back to his community through mentoring and community service opportunities.



Region 4

Devin Bryant

Jesse Bethel High School, Vallejo City Unified School District

Devin Bryant, a student at Jesse Bethel High School in Vallejo Unified School District, has managed to persevere through tough times.

When Devin's father temporarily lost his job, the family was forced to live in a homeless shelter. Although Devin didn't want anyone to fuss over his situation, his mother contacted school personnel because he needed help in getting transportation to school.

Vice Principal Carrie Wilson was able to obtain a bus pass and assist him with the school free lunch program, and Devin took it from there. A typical day found him catching a bus from the shelter at 6:30 a.m. for the 25-mile ride to school. There, he attended classes and study hall until 3:50 p.m. and then went to athletic practice until 6 p.m. He returns home most nights at 8 p.m.

Even with this schedule, Devin has performed well in school and he managed to play three sports: football, wrestling and track. He's looking to attend college and explore several careers, including possibly becoming a teacher.



Region 5

Maria Kristina Lumanog

Jefferson Union High School, Jefferson Union High School District

Maria Kristina Lumanog, a student at Jefferson High School in Jefferson Union High School District, was born in the Philippines before moving to America. Maria lives with her single mother in a small apartment. Her mother works as a crewmember at a local fast food restaurant.

Even though Maria and her mom sometimes struggle to make ends meet, Maria has found the inner drive and initiative to become a very successful student.

At her school, she is a leader and role model in many school and community activities.

Maria also serves as the student representative on the Board of Trustees, which she says has helped her learn how to work with adults and to problem solve.

With a GPA of 3.6, Maria was accepted at California State University, and she has also applied to the University of California system. She plans to major in social welfare and minor in Asian studies.



Region 6

Katelyn Braninburg

Bohannon Middle School, San Lorenzo School District

Katelyn Braninburg is a courageous girl who has overcome severe handicaps to become a student leader and an inspiration to those around her.

When Katelyn was almost 3 years old, she was hit and dragged by a car. She suffered numerous broken bones and traumatic brain injury, resulting in quadriplegic cerebral palsy. Her mother helped her relearn how to crawl and then use a walker, while she underwent several surgeries and intensive rehabilitation.

When Katelyn entered the third grade at Bay Elementary School, a school team made up of the principal, district nurse, school psychologist, physical therapist, instructional assistant and many others helped her strive toward independence in mainstream classes and even involvement in student government.

This year, in sixth grade, she continues to blossom at Bohannon Middle School. She is a proud Bohannon Bulldog cheerleader with perfect attendance and a 3.3 GPA. Despite the daunting difficulties she has overcome, Katelyn greets each day with a smile and a cheer.



Region 7

Raul Gonzalez

Lodi High School, Lodi Unified School District

After Raul Gonzalez's mother died of cancer, the family moved from Texas to Lodi, hoping for better job opportunities.

While enrolled at Lodi High, Raul also worked in a cannery to help his disabled father cover their expenses. The family lived in a garage and slept on air mattresses. They were so poor there was little to eat. Still, Raul worked toward a better future. After the cannery closed for the season, Raul was often seen at the school library until late at night when the janitors closed up. He also spent hours in the computer lab researching college opportunities. Raul knows that working hard at school is his chance to succeed, and the support team at Lodi High School helped him realize that he is not only a hard worker, but a fighter. Raul believes in perseverance, and is thankful for every opportunity given him. Although he has only spoken English for three years, he is managing life like an experienced adult.



Region 8

Anays Zavala

The Academy, Oak Grove Elementary School District

Anays Zavala lived in a home where violence was frequent, visits by the police were routine, and family members were in and out of jail. At a very young age, the severely depressed child turned to gangs. She had learned that violence was the solution to her problems at school and home, where she was living with a mother with alcohol problems and severe diabetes. Anays rarely went to school, and often accompanied her mother to medical appointments in order to translate for her.

Anays was placed at The Academy in the Oak Grove Unified School District because she needed a safe place to deal with her depression and anger. She received counseling and help developing a process for resolving family conflicts. She became a mentor for a younger student and learned how to be a role model.

Anays has left the gang and now encourages others at school to make good decisions. She is a motivated student who comes to school every day. She now knows that she has the ability to move forward, and is transitioning to a comprehensive, mainstream school.



Region 9

Veronica Cortes

Roosevelt High School, Fresno Unified School District

Veronica Cortes comes from a humble background, but displays the confidence and initiative that have made a difference at Roosevelt High School in Fresno.

When Veronica came to the United States from Mexico at age 11 she spoke little English. As her father looked for construction work around the state, Veronica moved from school to school.

After moving to Fresno, Veronica joined Advancement Via Individual Determination and started a club called Project Impact, which gives students a voice in the school and community. One of her activities involved organizing a panel of experts from local universities, the school district and community organizations to present information to parents about educational opportunities for their children. More than 300 parents attended the well-received program. She also lobbied state lawmakers to increase student access to courses that satisfy the a-g requirements.

Veronica has completed rigorous coursework while maintaining a 3.5 GPA. She plans to attend CSU Fresno so she can become an elementary school teacher.



Region 10

Laurwen Isis Silvah

Cypress Charter High School, Live Oak School District

Isis Silvah received her high school diploma on June 13, 2007. It's an event that many students take for granted, but, for Isis, that diploma represents victory over a litany of obstacles.

The earliest memories Isis has of school included struggling to keep up, and just not "getting it" the way most other kids seemed to. Her family life was always chaotic, so she never had the luxury of a quiet place to study.

After a learning disability was verified, Isis received extra tutoring, but the difficulties did not end. Isis was placed in a temporary foster home after one of her sisters was abused by a live-in landlord. The resulting investigation and the anxiety it caused only magnified her struggles with academics.

But Isis has made great strides with the help of her mother and her school team at Cypress High Charter School in Live Oak SD. She is putting the past behind her, and plans to attend Cabrillo College and pursue a career in management.



Region 11

Miguel Rodriguez

Strathmore High School, Porterville School District

Miguel Rodriguez overcame a childhood of violence, abandonment and loneliness to succeed in school, knowing it was his only chance at succeeding in life.

Born to a teenage alcoholic mother and an abusive father, Miguel suffered from extreme loneliness. His mother left the family, leaving Miguel alone with his violent, absent father, who was in and out of jail. By the time he began attending Strathmore High School in Porterville, his attendance was minimal, his grades low, and his behavior poor.

Before his senior year, Miguel attended summer school and worked picking oranges. It was then he realized if he continued on this path he would end up spending his life in the fields or in jail. He began studying hard, turning his failing grades into all A's and B's, and is now on the track to graduate. His goal is to become an art teacher, and he has been busy assembling a portfolio and applying to art school. But most importantly, he has changed his outlook on life and is determined to succeed.



Region 12

Jorge Cruz

Etiwanda High School, Chaffey Joint Union High School District

Special education students face enormous challenges in school. Such was the case for Jorge Cruz, a student at Etiwanda High School, who has overcome the odds and is now a role model for others.

Considered an at-risk student, Jorge began high school in special day classes. He slowly began improving, and the following year, he transitioned into remedial classes. Determined to succeed, he worked hard and by the time he entered 11th grade he was taking college prep courses. This just goes to show that having mental and physical barriers didn't make Jorge deficient, it just made him work harder.

Not only did Jorge struggle to re-enter mainstream classes, he has grown so much that he is now a part of the AVID program, where he is a tutor and helps other students overcome challenges to succeed. In addition, he participates in peer tutoring and peer mediation.



Region 13

Leticia Lemus

Santa Paula High School, Santa Paula Union High School District

Cultural differences and language barriers can be great obstacles for some students, but not Leticia Lemus. Having come to California from Mexico at the age of 7, she has learned to overcome her challenges to become a successful student. When she first began attending school in the U.S., Leticia was placed in a classroom where the teacher spoke no Spanish. She felt lonely and alone, which was made worse because her family lived on a ranch far from other children. With a family of seven, money was tight. Food and clothing was scarce, and the family was often dependent on donations. Leticia spent much of her childhood caring for her younger siblings and had to work two jobs to help the family financially.

Low grades and low test scores meant Leticia's dreams of attending college seemed unobtainable. But she took remedial English and math classes and summer school and enrolled in two AP classes. Now, she is well on her way to college.



Region 14

Maria Aguilar

Paramount High School, Paramount Unified School District

By 13, Maria Aguilar had been through more than most people twice her age. The year before, her family was homeless and lived in a shelter. There, she dated a boy her age and became pregnant. At the same time, her mother was put in jail for the drowning death of her toddler brother. Pregnant, homeless and without parental support, Maria was left alone to raise a child and herself.

Maria and her baby moved into a foster home and entered the California School Age Families Education program at Paramount High School, a program for pregnant and parenting teens. Although she still felt scared and alone, Maria kept a positive attitude and continued in school, where she maintained perfect attendance and a 4.0 grade point average. Maria blossomed in the Cal-SAFE program. Wanting to give back, she joined a teen panel that speaks to other teens about teen pregnancy. Every month she shares her story in the hope she can encourage other teens to make good choices and not follow in her footsteps.



Region 15

Gloria Shea Christine Herrera

Bowman High School, William S. Hart Union School District

Gloria Shea Christine Herrera struggled to defeat the overwhelming odds against her. With a paranoid schizophrenic mother, Gloria spent much of her childhood homeless, going for days without food and wearing torn, dirty clothes. She suffered severe beatings by her mother's boyfriend, who also abused her sexually.

Her mother and boyfriend were arrested for child abuse, and Gloria lived in numerous foster homes. At 16, a friend's family adopted her, but four months before her 18th birthday her adopted mother asked her to leave.

School became Gloria's escape, and she would drown her pain in reading and writing. But by the time she enrolled at Bowman High School in Santa Clarita, her remedy was drug addiction.

Overcoming the addiction and other obstacles in her life made Gloria a stronger person. She takes dance classes, plays the guitar and participates in a Teen Talk Group. She knows that through determination she will succeed and is on her way to earning her high school diploma.



Region 16

Alejandro Gasca

Fairfax Senior High, Los Angeles Unified School District

Alejandro Gasca was born with no arms. He was teased when he was small, but developed a sense of humor, even telling people a shark ate his arms.

When he entered high school, he wanted to be liked, and he wanted to be a leader. But he struggled to fit in and eventually fell in with the wrong crowd. He began drinking and smoking marijuana.

After getting caught drunk on campus, Alex knew he had to turn over a new leaf. He did not want to be like his brother, who had not graduated from high school.

Alex developed a support team that included his parents and faculty at Fairfax Senior High School in Los Angeles Unified School District. Those adults helped him overcome his anger and depression.

He made new, supportive friends and strives to be treated just like everybody else. He uses his other limbs to accomplish daily tasks and is learning to drive a car. When he graduates this year, he wants to become a video game tester.



Region 17

Garrett Stiffler-Greasby

Fulton Middle School, Fountain Valley School District

The day his mother suffered a brain aneurysm and died in April 2005, Garrett Stiffler-Greasby played in his Mustang Major Baseball game.

He played with a heavy heart, but he knew it was what his mom would have wanted. He said it was a way of saying to her “everything will be OK.”

With that same sense of perseverance, Garrett would strive for good grades, study hard, and remain thoughtful and considerate of others.

Of course he had plenty of support from faculty and staff at Tamura and Fulton schools in Fountain Valley School District as he transitioned from elementary to middle school.

Garrett misses his mom deeply, but he plans to follow her wishes and achieve his goals of playing sports to the best of his ability, finishing school and going on to college.



Region 18

Michael Moll

Montecito High School/Continuation High School, Ramona Unified School District

After years of living in foster homes, Michael Moll was glad to be going to live with his mother in Las Vegas in the spring of 2006. One month later, his mother moved out of their apartment and abandoned Michael.

Fortunately he had Montecito High School in Ramona USD to fall back on. He had always done well at the school, where the faculty is dedicated to the tenet that all students can learn, given the proper environment and much encouragement.

Michael re-enrolled, found a friend to live with and resolved to graduate from high school, which he did this year. His determination earned him a 3.22 GPA, and he has his sights set on community college.

“Michael was supported by a caring staff that understood his situation and helped at any step along the way,” said Principal Greg Tiegs. “And he never gave up!”



Region 19

Tim Legere

Martin Luther King High School, Riverside Unified School District

When Tim Legere entered Martin Luther King High School in Riverside USD, he was a foster child who had resigned himself to a life of poverty with little future.

By the time he graduated this year, his education support team had helped him achieve a 4.56 GPA, and he now plans to pursue a four-year degree at UC Riverside.

When Tim entered high school he had been bounced around from foster home to foster home, and he was behind in his schoolwork. But Tim proved to be very smart, and the faculty at King was not about to give up on him. He was encouraged to take honors courses in science and math.

Tim excelled. He would come to school early, skip lunch, stay late and spend countless hours in the library working on computers to reach his goals.

Perhaps most important to his emotional, social and academic growth was the commitment by his biology teacher, Jenny Herington, to adopt Tim. He now has a “mum” and an extended family of siblings in Mrs. Herington’s native Australia.

Region 1

Brandon Sell

Lassen High School, Lassen Union High School District

Brandon Sell recently graduated from Lassen High School, but his journey to graduation was anything but easy. At the end of his freshman year he had already fallen behind in academic credits. He was dealing with unresolved anger issues resulting in disciplinary referrals. He needed to transfer to the district's continuation high school to get back on track academically.

While at Credence Continuation High, he worked with principal Brett Mitchell on his anger issues. Brandon also moved in with a friend and his mother to gain a more supportive structure, an arrangement that continues to this day. After two years at Credence High, Brandon transferred back to Lassen High, and educators there were amazed at his transformation. The former angry young man wore a smile on his face and comported himself with a newfound sense of self-esteem and maturity. He attended a biology field trip he'd missed out on as a sophomore and threw a LAN Party for his ROP Computer Maintenance Class for his senior project presentation. Brandon said he planned to attend a tech school this fall, marking his high school journey as a rousing success.



Region 2

Naomi Scott

Nevada Union High School, Nevada Union High School District

Naomi Scott, a junior at Nevada Union High School, has been blind since she was 2 years old. Despite her loss of sight, the first comment her nominators made about her was that she "maintains a good vision of the world."

Although suffering a disability that many would consider a significant challenge, Naomi often says she doesn't understand why some people feel sorry for her. She attends a large high school managing to navigate her way around campus and carry a full academic load with an excellent grade point average. She accomplishes this even with the extra effort that comes with dealing with materials that are not always available in Braille and turning in her work in a format her teachers can read.

She is eager to reach out and make new friends, and is thoughtful and sympathetic to all around her. Naomi has become interested in modeling, and two years ago placed second in the national Miss Teen USA competition.

Currently, Naomi is successfully pursuing her dreams of modeling and continues to reach out to educate people about blindness. She often tells people they should follow their dreams despite any disabilities.



Region 3

McKayla Ferreira

Winters High School, Winters Joint Unified School District

McKayla Ferreira has become a success story worthy of note, all thanks to her power of perseverance.

McKayla recently graduated from Winters High School. Her parents divorced when she was 2 years old, and even though they share joint custody, McKayla has lived solely with her father for the last year. When she lived with her mother, who suffers from bipolar disease and manic depression, she had to handle parenting duties, looking after three younger siblings. Her stepfather's drug addiction and prison stints only added to the stressful situation.

Life isn't exactly easy street at her father's house. Again, she has to handle parenting duties for younger siblings, arranging and paying for babysitters when she is unable to be there, cleaning the entire house, grocery shopping and making dinner. Somehow she also manages to hold down a job as a restaurant hostess and landscaper on the weekends, and gives her father money to cover her expenses. She also manages to put some money away for college.

Despite a load of responsibility that would crush most of her peers, McKayla maintained a 3.91 GPA and graduated in the top 4 percent of her class, while participating in concert band, leading her youth group and being on the track team, even after two knee surgeries left doctors telling her she wouldn't be able to run again.



Region 4

Marquice Lamar

Carle High School, Konocti Unified School District

Sometimes students dealing with significant challenges can turn their lives around with a combination of a change in living environment, support from dedicated educators, and self-determination. Such is the case of Marquice Lamar, a senior at W.C. Carle Continuation High School.

Marquice grew up in a household with substance abuse problems. His parents separated when he was 2 years old, and his father was never again involved in his life. His mother's substance abuse continued, and there were times when she was in jail or the family was homeless.

These problems led to Marquice having to deal with low self-esteem, anger issues and hyperactivity. His school attendance was poor in elementary and middle school, and that continued when he was promoted to traditional high school.

Eventually he was referred to a community day school, Genesis Academy, where things began to turn around. Marquice soon reached a personal turning point when he decided he needed to change. He worked hard at school and attended regularly despite a home-life still filled with turmoil.

The situation really improved after transferring to W.C. Carle, because he started living with a woman who knew his mother and the strain he was under. Provided a safe and stable environment, Marquice had perfect attendance, achieved gold level status academically and received student of the week honors. He now participates in community service activities and has earned the respect of local community leaders.



Region 5

Susana Zavala

Hillsdale High School, San Mateo Union High School District

Susana Zavala, a recent graduate of Hillsdale High School, managed to turn around her school life thanks to the efforts and caring of a group of dedicated educators.

When Susana entered high school, her English and math skills were at the third and fourth grade levels. She had often missed school in the past and never developed good study skills, since she had to care for a younger brother and sister in a household where both parents worked to make ends meet. In addition, her little sister was diagnosed with leukemia, leading to long stretches where Susana was out of school to look after the family.

She began to see little value in school, and started acting out her anger issues. When she got to Hillsdale High, she hated school, frequently cut classes and was a disciplinary problem. It got so bad she was retained for ninth grade.

But her student advisor and teacher team refused to let her slip away. They found creative ways to get her involved and to deal with her negative attitude. As the realization dawned that these educators really cared about her, Susana began to participate more, pass her classes and make new friends. After her father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in her junior year, she continued to strive and keep up, despite having to miss more than a month of school.

Even dealing with two sick family members, Susana is determined to succeed. She plans to attend a local community college with hopes of becoming a teacher or a nurse.



Region 6

Shawn Jones

Mt. Diablo High School, Mt. Diablo Unified School District

In June 2001, Shawn Jones was attacked by three pit bulls on an elementary school playground. He suffered significant facial and upper body damage that required 20 months of hospitalization. He faces many more surgeries to restore his body.

Shawn was home schooled in grades 6 through 8. In ninth grade, he developed behavior problems. His family arranged for him to go to a New York military school, then to an anger management program in Utah.

When he entered Mt. Diablo High School in Concord in 2006, he became an inspiration to staff and students. He progressed from Special Day classes to Resource Support. He also became an excellent athlete, lettering in football, wrestling and track.

Along the way, Shawn has enjoyed the support of such school leaders as Principal Beverly Hansen, Resource Technician Arnetta Jones, coach Tony Darone and teachers Johnny Applegate, Annie Sampson and Sandy Johnson. He now plans to attend college and pursue a medical career to share the gift of life that was given to him.



Region 7

Jodi Cerney

Bear Creek High School, Lodi Unified School District

Even as a frequent runaway who lived on the streets during her ninth-grade year, Jodi Cerney always went to school. When she graduated this year from Bear Creek High School in Lodi USD, it was with honors and a 3.73 GPA. A family history of homelessness, drug addiction and abandonment threatened Jodi's chances for success, but her spirit prevailed. She won awards with the competitive speech team, took advanced placement and honors courses, and became an exceptional writer and journalist, serving on the award-winning campus newspaper, the Bruin Voice. Along the way, the Bear Creek leadership and faculty provided the opportunities and support Jodi needed to succeed. Vice Principal Sherrie Jamero said Jodi is "one of those students that deserves all of our support and encouragement." Living with an aunt and uncle who knew she was brilliant but needed guidelines also aided Jodi's success. She has become an intellectually curious student and a thoughtful influence on her peers. Now, with financial assistance, she will be able to attend a four-year university.



Region 8

Ruby Scott

Bernal Intermediate School, Oak Grove School District

When Ruby Scott started the seventh grade at Bernal Intermediate School in Oak Grove SD, she quickly gained notoriety for acts of physical and verbal aggression. Her class work consequently suffered. But when she asked for help, her school support team got to know the true Ruby and her enthusiastic determination to succeed against odds. Ruby was homeless and never had a stable life. Her father was in prison and she did not have contact with him. Between seventh and eighth grade, Ruby joined the Expect Respect Club and worked on controlling her emotions and behavior. She established relationships with teachers, counselors, secretaries and administrators. She embarked on a social and academic plan that would lead to her goal of eighth-grade graduation. She was offered the opportunity to participate in the intersession Oak Grove School District Academy, a six-week program that gave her small-group support. When she transitioned back to Bernal, she had made positive strides toward graduation and has become a role model for those she comes in contact with.



Region 9

Amy Boydston

Central High School, Central Unified School District

As a child, Amy Boydston lived on the streets with her mother, following her father's death. She found some stability while living with an aunt and uncle, taking part in the Advancement Via Individual Determination program and becoming a student leader at Central High in Central USD. When her uncle took his own life, Amy moved again and now lives with her sister and her family. Throughout these tumultuous years, Amy continued to persevere and excel, carrying a 3.87 GPA in the most rigorous classes at the school. Her amazing adult support team, including Director of Personnel Kevin Wagner, Guidance Learning Dean Whitney Godfirnon, AVID coordinator Ginny Taylor and Leadership teacher Kelly Hope have been there to help academically, socially and emotionally.

“Amy is a truly amazing person,” Godfirnon said. “She is a born leader and is one of the most dynamic and bright students I have ever come across.”

Central High and AVID have provided college prep and the support of peers that will lead Amy as she now finds her way in the adult world.



Region 10

Joey Hayes

North Monterey County High School, North Monterey County Unified School District

Joey Hayes is confined to a wheelchair, but he gets around just fine and has made a broad impact on his school. Joey is a champion for the Americans with Disabilities Act at North Monterey County Unified School District and High School. His fight for compliance and student rights will be recognized for years to come, even as he now moves on to college.

In addition to his ADA work, Joey was involved with student body government for three years. He instituted the House of Advisories in 2006, which provides a leadership voice for all students. He serves as house speaker, and last year led more than 70 representatives working on school-related issues.

He has also promoted facility changes and worked on the WASC plan. He served as student representative on the district board and as a voting member of the school Instructional Leadership Team.

Director of Student Activities Mark Dover calls Joey a role model for individuals with disabilities. “I have personally witnessed Joey participating in physical education classes in his wheelchair, and outperform the general student body,” he said.



Region 11

Francisco Gutierrez

Golden West High School, Visalia Unified School District

Persistent poverty and a congenital hip condition that required surgery might have derailed Francisco Gutierrez in his academic pursuits, but this graduate of Golden West High School in Visalia USD remains a tremendous student and a consummate optimist.

Francisco came to the United States at 2 years old with his mother and eight siblings. His father, who was already employed here, died shortly after from a brain tumor. The family moved to the small, largely Spanish-speaking agricultural community of Ivanhoe, where Francisco began grammar school.

The opportunity to be bused to more affluent schools by the middle grades allowed him to broaden his learning experiences.

At Golden West, Francisco enrolled in advanced placement and honors classes. He was elected student body president and became a community leader in gang prevention. He has served as a muscular dystrophy camp counselor and tutors children at the Ivanhoe Youth Center.

He said it is important to now do well in college and to continue to provide assistance to his family, who did not have an opportunity to pursue a higher education.



Region 12

Rizwan Jattala

Alta Loma High School, Chaffey Joint Union High School District

A staph infection when he was 2 months old stunted the growth of one of Rizwan Jattala’s legs. As a student at Alta Loma High School in Chaffey Joint Union HSD, Rizwan endured several surgeries to equalize both legs, requiring extended recovery periods.

Even while enrolled in home school under a 504 accommodation, Rizwan stayed in constant contact with his regular teachers. He had to drop honors and advanced placement courses due to limited offerings in home schooling, but he maintained a high level of performance and never lost his status as an exceptional student.

School leaders say even his 3.95 GPA and ranking as eighth in his class are not true indicators of his abilities. Guidance counselor Myrna Welsh was moved to tears in January when she saw Rizwan out of his wheelchair, with two legs of the same length. The creative solutions of his academic support team and his own determination allowed Rizwan to graduate on time. He is now devoted to being a successful college student and plans to be a doctor.



Region 13

Senaida Melendez

Ocean View Junior High School, Ocean View School District

As an eighth-grader last year at Ocean View Junior High School, Senaida M. reached academic excellence, maintaining a 3.7 grade point average while tutoring other students in language arts and participating in the Straight Up drama program. No one would suspect this articulate, good-natured young woman had lived in shelters, group homes and foster care for 10 years.

When Senaida arrived at Ocean View, it was apparent she was gifted. Her support team, which included Associate Superintendent Craig Helmstedter, counselors Stef Sisman and Laurel Neilan, and teachers Jennifer Reveles and Rosa Dominguez, provided Senaida with a challenging academic schedule.

She is particularly strong in language arts, leading to her being asked to tutor in a sixth grade class. In addition, she served as an aide in the summer school office. In the drama program, she helps educate parents on their children's experiences in school.

Senaida plans to attend college and pursue an interest in dramatic arts. She has been an inspiration for all students through her resilience and perseverance in the face of obstacles.



Region 14

Megan Turner

Mayfair High School, Bellflower Unified School District

Megan Turner's brilliant future at Mayflower High School in Bellflower USD has been marred by chronic illness that includes the widespread pain of fibromyalgia and auto-immune system impairment.

Despite curtailing her two-sport athletic pursuits, Megan has continued her quest for success with the help of a supportive family, understanding educators and caring friends.

She maintains a 4.4 grade point average and is ranked second in her class of 628 students. She maintains a full academic schedule, and participates in many extracurricular service projects with such groups as Girl Scouts and the school's Environmental Club. Her plan to pursue a career in political science and international affairs was boosted in 2007 when she joined representatives from 50 states and 200 countries at the Global Young Leaders Conference in Washington, D.C.

Megan is now a senior who has been in the Mayflower Academic Program for gifted students since her freshman year. Along the way, she has enjoyed the support of the school's leadership, including Principal Mary Lynn Bachmann, and educators Alex Fletcher, Tuong Nguyen, Michael Headley and Kim Jacobsma.



Region 15

Martha Montoya

Bassett High School, Bassett Unified School District

Martha Montoya has excelled in school, despite barriers that included homelessness, battering and sexual abuse. Martha, who was born in Mexico, entered a world of mistreatment when her single mother married a man whose alcoholism eventually destroyed the family. Her mother began to be battered. Then, Martha was beaten for such perceived indiscretions as being left-handed; she would cry herself to sleep almost every night.

When she was sexually abused, law enforcement stepped in to protect her as well as her siblings and her mother.

Having overcome her obstacles, Martha graduated from Bassett High School in June as a stellar student with a 3.59 grade point average. She was supported in her efforts by the Bassett High leadership, including Assistant Principal Gabriel Griego and educators William Baca, William Steward, Juan Castillo and Carlos Castellanos. Martha excelled in rigorous honors classes and became a member of the cross country, track and soccer teams. She also plays the violin and participates in a mariachi band. She plans to pursue a degree in biology at Mount Saint Mary's College.



Region 16

Rhiannon Telles

North Hollywood High School, Los Angeles USD

Rhiannon Telles was born prematurely, weighing only two pounds. After her lungs collapsed at birth, a hole was discovered in her heart. When Rhiannon was only a few days old, surgery was performed to reconstruct her lungs, and a staple was placed in her heart. Doctors were not sure whether she would survive. Rhiannon was soon diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a condition that continues to impair her mobility. When she was 3, Rhiannon underwent a neurosurgical procedure that severs problematic nerve roots in the spinal cord but also caused her to lose body strength. Physical rehabilitation then became a way of life for Rhiannon. Her elementary years were painful due to teasing from her peers, but during her middle and high school years, Rhiannon made lasting friendships and became more accepted. As a graduate of North Hollywood High School, Rhiannon is a student at Antelope Valley Community College, and plans to pursue a career in nutrition.



Region 17

Hugo Sanchez

La Vista High School, Fullerton Joint Union High School District

After Hugo Sanchez and his single mother were left homeless, he knew that he needed to work. Hugo decided to enroll in the North Orange County ROP class to become a dental assistant. During the day, Hugo attended La Vista High School. He then used a bus pass provided by his ROP program to attend an auto body class, immediately leaving to take another bus to the 6 p.m. dental assistant class. Despite this schedule, Hugo was so diligent in caring for his appearance and so consistent in his school attendance that teachers didn't know he was homeless until he had been sleeping in his car for two months. Hugo's support team at school offered him the respect, guidance and encouragement he needed to persevere. Concerned school personnel were so taken by this young man that they took up a collection to help Hugo out during the holidays. One instructor even let Hugo sleep in his home. With this support and his own incredible efforts, Hugo has completed his classwork early, making him eligible for employment. Hugo is an inspiration for his fellow students, and to the educators who work with him.



Region 18

Leslie Mora

Central Union High School, Central Union High School District

Not only has Leslie Mora overcome barriers that include poverty, she is also legally blind. But this hasn't stopped her from giving back to a community she feels has given her so much. Leslie volunteers for the Salvation Army, plays flute and saxophone as a member of the Central Union High School marching band, and participates in the school's competitive mock trial program. This experience has cemented her desire to become a lawyer and help people who are suffering. Leslie sets a high standard for herself and others through her perseverance. Students seek her out when they do group work and comment on how she has changed their lives. Leslie takes GATE and college-level courses and achieves excellent grades. She embodies determination, and teaches her classmates far more than they will find in any book.

For her great spirit, positive attitude and sense of possibility, and the way in which Leslie has touched the lives of those who know her, ACSA and Leslie's Region 18 support team are proud to honor her.



Region 19

Jacob Roghair

Lakeside High School, Lake Elsinore Unified School District

Jacob Roghair's support team at Lakeside High School jokes that Jake used "brute force" to overcome the obstacles he has faced and create a future for himself.

After being evicted from his home in sixth grade, he and his mother, who was drug-addicted, ended up living in a van. Jake later went to live with his father, but after the situation with his stepmother became difficult, he was kicked out of the house.

Jake was taken in by the family of a friend. But he was struggling in school. With the help of this family and his school, Jake was transferred out of regular-ed classes into IEP-directed courses. Through hard work and the help of his support team, Jake turned his grades around and has been able to focus on success in all aspects of his life.

As a member of his high school football and wrestling teams Jake excelled despite painful injuries from an accident. His optimism and confidence are inspirational, and he shows the utmost respect to everyone he is engaged with. Jake is a young man of integrity and achievement.

2009

Region 1

Israel Garcia

Credence High School, Lassen Union HSD

Israel Garcia is a model for why alternative education exists. He was overcome by adversity and headed for a life of crime before entering a group home in Susanville and attending the Community Day School in Lassen Union High School District.

With the help of a nurturing but disciplined environment provided by Charlotte Klinock at CDS, and supported by his new guardian, Israel began to realize consistent achievement. That success allowed him to transfer to Credence High, the district's continuation school, from which he graduated June 20. Only a few credits prevented him from graduating at Lassen High.

Alternative Education Principal Brett Mitchell said the team approach to keeping students involved in education led to Israel's recovery and success at CDS. That allowed him to thrive in the less invasive environment of Credence. Israel's success earned him more and more freedom, until he eventually enjoyed the absolute trust of his teachers and administrators.



Region 2

Cristina Mora

Williams High School, Williams USD

Christina Mora has never dodged a challenge. Her incredible drive took her from her migrant roots to the head of her class at Williams High School in Williams USD. As a native Spanish speaker, Christina embraced the English language, even winning speech contests conducted by local service clubs.

Christina took every significant course offered at Williams High and demonstrated a vast amount of leadership potential, serving as student body president in her senior year. She arrived early every day for zero period and was often the last student to leave campus. Christina also participated in many extracurricular activities, including girls' basketball, California Federation of Student Governments, Upward Bound, and on the county's winning Academic Decathlon team. She reached No. 1 status in her senior class. All this while taking a full schedule of Advanced Placement classes, as well as community college courses in the evenings to realize graduation in May. She plans to major in political science with a focus on economics at Stanford.



Region 3

Hiep Ma

Cordova High School, Folsom Cordova USD

Hiep Ma was born in Vietnam and abandoned by his parents as an infant. He was raised in poverty by his grandmother and haunted by the question of why his mother left him.

At 15, Hiep's mother, who had remarried, came back into his life. She took him to America, where he worked hard to learn English, get good grades, do his chores and help the family. Unfortunately his new stepfather did not want him in the home. Hiep said his dreams and hopes were broken.

Then an aunt in Sacramento offered him a place to stay and his life began to turn around at Cordova High School in Folsom-Cordova USD. He learned fluent English and earned very high grades. The school staff became like a family. Principal Jackie Levy said, "Hiep represents the promise America's public education system offers: that everyone who works hard can share in the American dream."

Hiep graduated in May and looks forward to attending American River College and earning his AA degree.



Region 4

Brian Pilat

Middletown High School, Middletown USD

Despite profound physical limitations, Brian Pilat's future is bright. He is excited to move into the world of work, following his K-12 career in the Middletown School District, from which he graduated in May.

In his kindergarten year, Brian was run over by a pickup truck backing out of a driveway. He suffered traumatic brain injuries and injuries to his legs and pelvis. In addition, his optic nerve was damaged, leaving him legally blind.

When he returned to school, Brian was included in regular classroom study, but had to learn to read and write in Braille, use an abacus and employ screen readers for his computer. His school day was extended to allow for mobility training to learn techniques to participate in activities his peers took for granted.

The team of teachers and administrators at Middletown helped him complete his requirements and become an accomplished young man. He will now attend California School for the Blind to gain additional skills for his journey in life.



Region 5

Kevin Rodriguez

Hillsdale High School, San Mateo Union HSD

Hillsdale High in San Mateo Union High School District played an important role in Kevin Rodriguez' success. But his own self-esteem and desire to succeed led him to make significant changes in his educational and life paths.

Kevin was just another face in the crowd, jumping from school to school and floating under the radar. His education was minimal until he joined the smaller learning communities at Hillsdale. He was able to really connect with teachers, advisors, counselors and other students in a way that dramatically resulted in a dedication to learning.

Soccer was also a contributing factor to Kevin's success. His position on the school team gave him a sense of community he had not experienced before. His team pride and school pride transformed his attitude.

Following a fifth-year granted by the Hillsdale administration because of Kevin's improvements in efforts and ability, Kevin graduated in May.



Region 6

Rasjeon Hines

Antioch High School, Antioch USD

Rasjeon Hines attended seven different schools before he finally planted roots at Antioch High. His transient lifestyle had led to altercations in and out of school. A budding football and track athlete, he'd been kicked off several teams for various violations.

But entering the REACH program in middle school began the long process of transformation to becoming a strong academic student, maintaining a 3.0 GPA and graduation last May. Rasjeon became an employee for REACH, working in a project called Youth for a Positive Change.

Rasjeon was a positive role model on campus, following school rules and being respectful to everyone. He worked on a video encouraging students to take the California Standards Test seriously, and he coached Antioch High's powder-puff football team. Rasjeon was accepted at several University of California schools based on academics alone, with the possibility of receiving football scholarships still in the offing. He has turned his life around and now gives back to his community.



Region 7

Ashley Ann Anderson

Sonora High School, Sonora Union HSD

Imagine having to get through high school while suffering immense back pain that numerous surgeries had not alleviated. Ashley Ann Anderson faced exactly this challenge.

Because of the pain, her attendance at Sonora High School was sporadic. Often she would leave the house in the morning, only to climb back through her bedroom window – her pain so bad, she just wanted to sleep. Ashley faced other challenges too. Her parents suffered drug and alcohol problems, from which they are recovering. Fortunately, Ashley always had her older brother and sister to help get her to doctor appointments and hospital tests. Ashley’s attendance improved greatly during her junior and senior years, but she still found herself 35 credits short of graduation. She made the commitment to return for another semester; passed all the classes she needed, while working two jobs, and ultimately passed the California High School Exit Exam. She graduated last December, and is awaiting what she hopes will be her final surgery to end the pain.



Region 8

Itsy Gomez

Gilder Elementary School, Oak Grove SD

Itzy Gomez is a humongous spirit housed in a tiny body at Glider Elementary in Oak Grove School District. She has endured surgeries to correct two clubfeet and wears braces on both legs. Surgery to remove a tumor from her lower back led to impairment of her bladder.

When she was very young, Itzy witnessed her mother’s murder, and still suffers from post-traumatic stress. Her father was incarcerated for being an accomplice to the murder, and she is being raised by her maternal grandmother.

In addition, Itzy faces English learner barriers, and is much smaller than her classmates. But none of this has squelched her unsinkable spirit. As part of her adaptive physical education, Itzy coaxed a teacher into allowing a friend to join her in zooming around campus on tricycles, which strengthened Itzy’s legs.

Her teachers are constantly amazed at the way she pushes herself beyond all physical and academic expectations. Her health care providers, the school staff and all of her fellow students love her upbeat presence, her independence and her incredibly huge smile.



Region 9

Atticus Villanueva

Shaffer Elementary School, Atwater ESD

His nominators call Atticus Villanueva a “miracle child.” In 2005, while at daycare, Atticus was run over by a truck. He spent the next few months in a hospital fighting for his life.

The accident caused severe brain damage, leaving him almost completely blind in his left eye, almost completely deaf in his left ear, and unable to walk or talk. Doctors gave him a 16 percent chance of surviving, with the very real likelihood that if he survived he would be in a permanently vegetative state.

Yet, thanks to the strong support of his parents and medical team – and a heartily perseverant spirit – Atticus has progressed from using a wheelchair, to a walker, to a harness. As an active, motivated and determined first grader at Shaffer Elementary in Atwater ESD, he earned his classmates’ love and admiration.

Atticus’ mother volunteers daily in the classroom, working with him and all of his classmates. He is visited twice daily by the school nurse who administers medication and hugs. Away from school, Atticus has twice-weekly physical therapy sessions and maintains close friendships and family ties.



Region 10

Jannet Rojas

MPUSD Transition Program at Monterey Adult School, Monterey Peninsula USD

Passing the California High School Exit Exam is stressful for any student. But it is even more stressful when you’re taking it two days before you deliver a baby.

Jannet Rojas-Rodriguez faced that situation. But she faced it with the same aplomb with which she faced her learning disability and language barrier. Her nominators say her perseverance in facing these challenges and in coming to school every day during her pregnancy led to her becoming a role model to her fellow students in the Monterey Adult School/ROP Special Education Transitions class for 18 to 22 year olds.

Jannet became pregnant at age 17 and gave birth at 18. Aside from the challenges of being a new mother, spelling and reading had always been difficult for Jannet, as English is her second language. Through the assistance she received in her Transitions Class, she was able to greatly improve her English reading and writing skills. She graduated in June, and Jannet now has her sights set on becoming a registered nurse.



Region 11

Erasto Vega

Exeter Union High School, Exeter Union HSD

Erasto Vega, a graduate of Exeter High School, is proof that with sheer determination, anything is possible. A child of immigrant farm workers, Erasto did not learn English until elementary school. In fifth grade, he was placed in a reading group where he read the simpler, less interesting books. At that point, he became determined to learn English, and over the summer read as many books in English as he could. His efforts paid off, and by the sixth grade he moved up to the higher-level reading group.

Erasto also excels at math, and his test scores placed him in the top 3 percent of his grade. He has taken on the most demanding courses, and was one of the top-ranked students in his senior class. He also played on the high school soccer team, cross-country team and is active in the California Scholarship Federation. He plans to major in chemical engineering at UCLA or CSU Long Beach.



Region 12

Adrianna Castillo

Dave Stine Chaffey West County Community Day School, San Bernardino County Supt. of Schools

A student at Dave Stine Chaffey West County Community Day School in San Bernardino County, Adrianna Castillo has turned her life around. As a pregnant minor, she didn't take school seriously. A former teacher described her as being "passive-aggressive" with her schooling, since rather than objecting to assignments, she would simply ignore them.

When the opportunity arose to leave community day school, she would not complete the work.

But over the two years she attended Dave Stine Chaffey West County CDS, Adrianna became more mature and began to take school seriously. When attending cosmetology classes, she realized she would like to own her own business. She soon became on pace to graduate. Not only did she return to her school district, but she returned ahead in credits. She worked to improve her writing skills, which helped her pass the High School Exit Exam. She has also improved her attendance, and has had perfect attendance for the last two quarters.



Region 13

Kelley Burdett

Paso Robles High School, Paso Robles Schools

School can be hard enough, but when students face serious trauma in their lives, it can seem nearly impossible to succeed. Kelley Burdett, a graduate of Paso Robles High School, overcame her childhood tragedies to not only succeed, but excel in school.

When Kelley was three months old, her father, an Air Force helicopter pilot, died in a helicopter crash. Then, in 2002, her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Three years later, despite numerous surgeries, medication and chemo, her mother died.

But Kelley didn't let the tragedies dissuade her from achieving. Rather, she turned the hardships into positive energy. She became involved in sports and other school activities. She played volleyball, track and field, was vice president of her class, and a member of the California Scholarship Federation, as well as a girls' Christian club, the surfing club and the student athletic trainers – all while maintaining a 4.25 grade point average. She completed an internship at the local hospital and plans to pursue a career in the medical field.



Region 14

Ritesh Desai

Cerritos High School, ABC Unified School District

Ritesh Desai, a June graduate of Cerritos High School in the ABC Unified School District, has proven that any student can succeed, despite physical handicaps that may, at first glance, hold them back.

Ritesh entered high school with a stuttering problem. When faced with the need to communicate orally, he reacted with avoidance and excuses. But during the course of his freshman year, his shell gradually began to break away, revealing an intelligent and confident young man and a skilled communicator. Recently, he stood and delivered a flawless wedding toast in honor of his culture.

His transformation began with participation in the Model United Nations Program. Through encouragement and tutoring, he excelled not only in academics, but in athletics and extracurricular activities. He maintained three Advanced Placement classes, participated in track and field, and became involved in community volunteering. He also worked as a math and science tutor and hopes to pursue a career in mechanical engineering and civil and environmental engineering.



Region 15

Brittany Zahnle

Rio Norte Jr. High, William S. Hart SD

Brittany Zahnle, a seventh grader at Rio Norte Junior High School in the William S. Hart School District, has faced many physical struggles over the course of her life.

When she was a toddler, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor that caused her to lose sight in her right eye. Radiation and chemotherapy caused her pituitary gland to malfunction, leaving her body unable to regulate itself. In fifth grade, she slipped into a coma for several weeks.

As a special day class student at Bridgeport Elementary, Brittany was fearful of school and did not associate with other students. Her parents attended class with her every day and assisted her with her assignments. But she soon turned herself around to become a flourishing middle school student who enjoys conversing with others and attends class on her own. She was later placed in a general education setting, and has shown that perseverance and hard work can lead to success despite any challenge.



Region 16

Victor Kwon

Los Angeles High, Los Angeles USD

Victor Kwon was born in Argentina. But when he was 7 years old his family moved to Korea, and Victor had to learn to read and write a new language. Eight years later the family moved to Mexico, and then to Los Angeles, where Victor enrolled in Los Angeles High School.

He was fluent enough in English to enroll in ESL-3 in his first year as an 11th grade student. He has been a very ambitious student, enrolling in the required A-G core curriculum and several Advanced Placement courses.

Victor realizes that it takes more than coursework to make a successful student. He joined the varsity swim team and water polo team, and started an after-school math tutoring program for struggling ESL students.

Victor is a generous student who realizes it is important for all students to succeed, regardless of their primary language. He has put in the time and taken on the responsibility of organizing the peer tutoring program, modeling success and achievement for all students. He is an inspiration to everyone at Los Angeles High School.



Region 17

Kizzie Knowles

Warner Middle School, Westminster SD

Kizzie Knowles has known many personal losses, but has never lost sight of her goals. As an infant, Kizzie was placed in a foster home with a stable, loving family that became her own. She visited her biological mom every other weekend, but sadly, her mom died when Kizzie was in fifth grade. Then, in November 2008 Kizzie’s foster dad, whom she considered her best friend, passed away after an illness.

Despite being identified with a learning disability, Kizzie tried her best in school. Recognized by her teachers at Warner Middle School in Westminster School District as being a hard-working, dedicated student, Kizzie now excels at softball, playing catcher and alternate pitcher. Kizzie participates in a weekly community program called “GirlPower,” and was recognized by the Boys and Girls Club for her leadership skills as a camp counselor.

In spite of the challenges Kizzie has faced, she dreams of attending Arizona State University, continuing with softball and eventually obtaining a medical degree.



Region 18

Madina Hakimzada

Foster Elementary School, San Diego USD

Madina Hakimzada was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, where her father was killed by the Taliban when she was just 1 1/2 years old. Madina’s mother and siblings came to the United States with the help of the International Rescue Community and settled in El Cajon.

Madina’s support team at Foster Elementary School in San Diego USD has seen her self confidence and independence grow under their guidance. She has become an articulate student who works cooperatively with staff and fellow students.

Madina has taken on many leadership roles at school and in the community. She reads as a “book buddy” to kindergarten kids, is a member of the school’s safety patrol team and is a games leader during recess. She was elected student body president in 2008, mayor of BizTown for Junior Achievement and honored by the Kiwanis Club with the Principal’s Award.

Madina’s wonderful sense of humor makes her a delight to be around. Watching her interact with her peers offers her support team hope for the youth of tomorrow.



Region 19

Frankie Quintana

Ramona High School, Riverside USD

When Frankie Quintana started at Ramona High School in Riverside USD, he was involved in gangs and had a negative attitude about school. But he soon decided he wanted to become a serious student and responsible community member. Frankie’s life turned around when he applied for the Health and Bioscience Academy and the ROTC programs and was accepted at each.

Frankie cut his gang ties, even though it meant telling loved ones who were involved in gang activities that he no longer wanted to participate.

Frankie has risen through the ranks to become commanding officer of his ROTC unit, where he serves as a role model and mentor to all cadets. He exhibits natural leadership abilities and organizational skills and has become an effective and inspirational leader. Frankie has also served as treasurer and vice president of the Health and Bioscience Academy, and participated in job shadowing opportunities at the local hospital.

2010

Region 2

Carlos Galvan

Markham Middle School, Placerville Union School District

Carlos Galvan was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor that left him with growth hormone deficiency, bilateral hearing problems and neurocognitive delays. But don't tell him he can't face any challenge.

In addition to maintaining a 3.8 GPA at Markham Middle School in Placerville, Carlos is a cross country racer, a member of the school's leadership class and a Special Olympian. He is present every year to run a 24-hour relay race to help find a cure for cancer.

Carlos' family insisted he always have access to the Least Restrictive Environment. He is in special education classes for academics, but whenever possible, Carlos attends general education classes, where he is supported to be successful.

All of those who work with Carlos and his family know he is not "normal," but extraordinary. He teaches everyone that, no matter what your circumstances, how you decide to face life and deal with its challenges is up to you.

ACSA is proud to honor Carlos Galvan and his educational support team in Region 2.



Region 3

Huyen Vo

West Campus High School, Sacramento City Unified School District

Huyen "Kiki" Vo came to America for medical care in 2000 after her family home in Vietnam burned, killing her mother and severely injuring her and her siblings. Kiki endured burns over 85 percent of her body, requiring 25 surgeries to date. Her father worked hard to maintain the family, but as the oldest child, Kiki took over the care of the household. When her father was diagnosed with cancer, the workload increased. Sadly, her father died in November 2009.

Despite those challenges, Kiki has maintained excellent grades at West Campus High in Sacramento. She is also a contributing member of her community, serving as a spokesperson for Citizens for Fire Safety and motivating other burn survivors to stay strong in the face of adversity. She has volunteered at Shriner's Hospital and was honored by the Sacramento City Council as a Youth of the Month.

Kiki now intends to fulfill her father's dream for her to go to college.



Region 4

Jose Zepeda

Terra Linda High School, San Rafael City Schools

Despite daily challenges, Jose Zepeda had a strong drive to succeed in his four years at Terra Linda High School. He took the most challenging AP classes while maintaining a 3.5 GPA or better. He was an active participant in AVID, served as a peer tutor and mentor, and worked with the Nicaragua Service Club.

Jose grew up in an area of San Rafael called "The Canal," where low-income housing is plentiful and gang activity thrives. Raised by a single mother, Jose managed to avoid gang entanglements and set his sights on success after high school.

His work with the after-school tutoring program helps under-achieving Latino male students find the right track to their own academic success. He has taken an interest in mechanics through the school's auto program and completed a summer internship at Firestone. His outreach through the service club helped pre-school through third-graders in the poorest neighborhood of Managua.

Jose is an exceptional young man who is to be admired for his perseverance and educational achievements.



Region 5

Elisha St. Denis

Hillsdale High School, San Mateo Union High School District

Kind, intelligent and strong are words that describe Elisha St. Denis. Even though her school years were often chaotic, Elisha has a clear idea of what she wants to achieve and the drive to get there.

Elisha spent her elementary years often homeless with a mother prone to mental frailty. She attended a small Christian school in the middle years, but her mother decided public high schools were full of demons and refused to enroll her. Elisha called upon her father to rescue her. While he enrolled her at Hillsdale High in San Mateo, he quickly returned to a life of travel, leaving Elisha with friends.

No matter where she found herself, Elisha took the bus to Hillsdale, where the Smaller Learning Community concept provided personalization to help students succeed academically, socially and emotionally.

Elisha's intelligence, maturity and independence were keys to her success, particularly in her crucial role as a member of the student-run newspaper, the Hillsdale Scroll. She has turned her disadvantages into advantages and is now pursuing her goal to attend a university.



Region 6

Valeria Navarrete

Mt. Diablo High School, Mt. Diablo Unified School District

When Valeria Navarrete's biology teacher suggested she apply for a summer internship at John Muir Hospital, he probably didn't realize that her life would change. For the first time Valeria was actively participating in her education, and her confidence soared. She started speaking up in class, no longer afraid of embarrassing herself.

This was a big transformation for the formerly shy girl, who has to do the household cleaning, laundry, cooking and homework duty for a younger brother and sister. Her single mother's illness prevents her from assuming these duties, and she is often unable to work at her factory job. Valeria was able to work full time at the hospital over the summer, and was the only intern asked to continue on during the school year. But because she has to help out at home, Valeria had to say no.

Despite challenges her speech therapist and IEP caseworker are addressing, Valeria is striving to be the best person possible, and hopes to pursue a medical career.



Region 7

Sean Ritter

Summerville High School, Summerville Union High School District

A few years after Sean Ritter's father passed away, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her treatment was going well and she was expected to recover when her condition suddenly worsened. When Sean was in ninth grade his mother passed away, and Sean had to move in with a friend, since his brother was away at college.

Sean's attendance at Summerville High School was excellent, and he was enrolled in college prep classes. Then, the mother of his new family was stricken with cancer and passed away. Sean was forced to move out of state to live with relatives.

Finally, at the start of his senior year, Sean was reunited with his brother and moved back to Summerville, where he had become a confident and mature young man. At the urging of a teacher, Sean joined Future Business Leaders of America and participated in regional and state competitions. He plans to eventually attend Columbia College and study business.



Region 8

Jessica Ybarra

Foothill High School, East Side Union High School District

Pregnant at the age of 15, Jessica Ybarra knew her life would never again be her own. Then she learned she would be having twins. In 2008, after the premature babies left ICU, Jessica became a student at Foothill High. She joined the school's Family Learning Center, where teen parents can get support.

Jessica has accepted the responsibility of raising her two children. During breaks and lunch periods Jessica makes sure the babies are changed and fed, then she gets to class on time. She has learned how to organize her day to ensure she is a great student and committed parent, thanks to help from Foothill's counseling team and its Student Success Center. Jessica also has a part-time job and often takes care of her younger sister because their mother lives out of state. Still, she stayed on track to graduate. Her goal is to become a nurse or study psychology, and eventually attend San Jose State University.



Region 9

Joseph Blancas

Sunnyside High School, Fresno Unified School District

Joseph Blancas is a young man with a strong sense of what it takes to make his way through the obstacles life can bring. When he was three his drug-addicted mother left the family. Joseph grew up in a neighborhood where gangs were recruiting young people every day, yet he resisted.

Joseph applied for Sunnyside High School's AVID Program and was the top candidate. He was devastated when his father, his most devoted advocate and his best friend, died of a heart attack. His grandparents took him in, but because they were not able to navigate the school system, Joseph has been self-reliant. He ranked No. 1 in his class, took Advanced Placement classes, and served as senior class president.

He is enthusiastic, creative, and has an unbeatable work ethic. Joseph says he wants to continue to make his dad proud of him. Sunnyside High School staff and students are moved by the way Joseph contributed to a positive school culture.



Region 10

David Moreno

Everett Alvarez High School, Salinas Union High School District

Despite a severe speech impediment and cognitive challenges, David Moreno is eager to learn as much as possible and communicate with others. He has excellent rapport with staff at Everett Alvarez High School, where he always exhibits a positive and respectful attitude.

David works hard to complete his school assignments, taking home what he can't complete in class. David's parents instilled in him a drive to succeed, and he understands that earning good grades is the key that will open many doors of opportunity. Always willing to help, David volunteers at school and even helped out during the ACSA Special Education Symposium in Monterey last January.

David has a contagious sense of humor and a willingness to help newcomers to the school. The high school football player also coaches a campus Powder Puff team. One of his favorite teachers says, "David has taught me to laugh more at myself. By watching his tolerance with others, I have learned to be more patient."



Region 11

Tyler Soria

Golden West High School, Visalia Unified School District

Despite the challenges he faced in his home life, Tyler Soria recently graduated as a top student from Golden West High School in Visalia.

Tyler wasn't always a top student. Growing up, his mother struggled with addiction and eventually lost her job. In and out of rehab, his mother couldn't care for him and he went to live with his aunt and uncle. During this time, he missed a lot of school, had very low grades and began hanging around with the wrong crowd.

Living with his aunt and uncle, Ty viewed his new life as a second chance. Determination and a positive attitude eventually took over, and he began to turn his life around. He got involved with the drama program, allowing him to feel more connected to school.

He soon realized he could be successful if he set his mind to it, and enrolled in classes at the community college to further his education. He is extremely self-motivated and was able to maintain a 3.67 grade point average in high school.



Region 12

Sarai Napp

San Bernardino High School, San Bernardino County Supt. of Schools

At the age of 15, Sarai Napp moved to California with her siblings with nothing more than a few bags of clothes. Staying in a shelter, she was grateful just to have a roof over her head. She soon moved to a studio apartment, sharing the small space with 15 family members. She had to sit in the hallway of the apartment building just to study.

She moved frequently throughout high school, and after her grandfather died, she sank into depression. Her grades slipped and she missed much of her sophomore year. When the time came to take the High School Exit Exam, she failed twice.

Sarai realized in order to succeed in life, she had to turn things around. She started taking her studies at San Bernardino High School seriously. She enrolled in summer school and after-school tutoring. She became more focused, even volunteering and helping her disabled mother. She was able to keep her grade point average at 3.0, and was selected to visit the University of New Mexico and stay on campus for two weeks.



Region 13

Christian Tirado

Ansgar Larsen Elementary, Hueneme Elementary School District

Born in Mexico, Christian Tirado came to the United States after his mother left the family and his father was jailed. Never having attended school, Christian was ill-prepared and undisciplined when he came to Larsen Elementary School in the Hueneme Elementary School District halfway through second grade. He would hit other students and was physically and verbally defiant with authority figures. Even at 7 years old, he knew no letters, numbers or basic kindergarten concepts.

His teachers were patient with him, building not only his academic knowledge but also his self-esteem. It took months, but his demeanor changed and his behavior problems stopped. He became motivated and is a quick learner.

Christian has made friends and is respectful and happy. He speaks English well and is well on his way to reading and writing it fluently. Being a non-reader only two years ago, he was reading almost at grade level by the fourth grade. His teachers have even referred him to the GATE program.



Region 14

Raul Tinoco

Jordan High School, Long Beach Unified School District

In the sixth grade, Raul Tinoco was a troubled middle school student. With an absentee father and his mother working long hours to support the family, he was drawn into the gang life. He spent his days smoking, drinking and engaging in gang activities. His life was on the path to self-destruction.

When he was 14, he was walking down the street with a fellow gang member when a car pulled up and shots rang out. His friend was hit and died in Raul's arms.

It was then that Raul decided to turn things around. It took several years, but with the support of his teachers in Long Beach USD, he learned to work hard at his academics and improve his behavior. He got involved in Jordan High School's Male Academy, which provides one-on-one counselors who help coordinate support services and monitor grades and attendance for at-risk boys.

Raul's grades improved and he hopes to join the military and pursue a career in law enforcement, with the ultimate goal of helping kids like him who need support.



Region 15

Briana Ferron

La Serna High School, Whittier Union High School District

Rarely do students make as dramatic a turnaround in their grades as Briana Ferron, a recent graduate of La Serna High School in Whittier. At the end of her freshman year, Briana had a .69 grade point average. By her senior year, she raised it to 3.8.

Briana's major challenge in academic success was due to something many students face: fear of failure and apathy. Because she didn't believe she could succeed, she became disconnected from school and found safety in failure. Due to her poor grades, she was placed in La Serna's Organized Academic Support in School program. She drew strength from her assigned mentor, a senior who encouraged her to take risks and believe in herself. She began to develop a more positive self-image and her grades steadily began to improve. Her hard work and determination extended beyond the classroom. She was a member of the tennis and swim teams, and later was selected as student representative to the Associated Student Body. She even returned to the OASIS program as an academic mentor to help other struggling students.



Region 16

Aina Mulleda

Mulholland Middle School, Los Angeles Unified School District

When Aina Mulleda was 5-years-old, her mother left her in the Philippines to go to the United States and earn enough money to give her hearing-impaired daughter an opportunity for success. But sadly, Aina's mother died before she could see her daughter again.

Aina was then adopted by her uncle who encouraged her in her studies. She now has the attitude that she wants to work hard in school, so "when I finally get to where I want to be, I can look back and say that I have worked hard enough to earn all the things that I have."

Despite being deaf, Aina was mainstreamed into regular classes in middle school. She has many deaf and non-deaf friends at school. Her hearing friends asked Aina's sign language interpreter to teach them some signs so they could communicate with her that way. Her ultimate goal after she finishes school is to open a restaurant with an all-deaf staff. This is a girl who is certain to keep on inspiring others as she goes on to find success in school and in life.



Region 17

Sarah Brazer

Costa Mesa High School, Newport-Mesa Unified School District

Born legally blind, Sara Brazer hasn't allowed her lack of sight to slow her down one bit. In her first three years of high school, Sarah had a fulltime instructional aide to assist her in navigating the campus and accessing the curriculum through adaptive devices and Braille.

But entering her senior year, Sarah decided she wanted to become totally independent. Although her IEP team tried to talk her into some transitional services, Sarah refused, saying she wanted to be ready for college and the world at large. She learned how to use a guide dog and studied her textbooks in the summer to get a jump-start on the year. She insisted on all mainstream classes, including an AP English class.

To say she was successful is an understatement. She no longer requires an instructional aide; she completed all her classes with a 3.3 GPA and passed the High School Exit Exam. She even found time to participate in choir and a school drama production. She has given talks in classes about her experiences, and her dog, Forman, became the unofficial second school mascot.



Region 18

Matt Abrams

Patrick Henry High School, San Diego Unified School District

Matt Abrams personifies the Every Student Succeeding program. His mother passed away when Matt was only 11. His father distanced himself as a way of coping with the loss, so Matt took on a great deal of responsibility for his autistic twin sister.

Matt didn't let hardships drag him down. Instead, he has shined through the struggles. He was a senior honors student at Patrick Henry High School, graduating with a 4.83 GPA in all honors and AP classes. He was the valedictorian in his class of 500 students.

Through all this he helped his sister cope with her autism by never giving up on her. His work with her has given him a great passion to help others less fortunate than he. This makes his career goal of becoming a surgeon very fitting. He earned early admission to Stanford University to help him on the way.

Matt's story is one of overcoming challenges through hard work and determination, while maintaining a strongly optimistic outlook on life.



Region 19

Nayeli Osuna-Alvarez

Amistad High School, Desert Sands Unified School District

When Nayeli Osuna-Alvarez arrived at Amistad High School she was behind in credits, although admittedly by her own lack of effort. Catching up became very challenging when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and Nayeli, as the eldest of six children, had to care for her younger siblings, among them a 1-year-old.

A few months after her mother's diagnosis, her uncle who had been living with the family, passed away from a diabetic stroke. Meanwhile Nayeli also had to help look after her father, also a diabetic. After Nayeli's junior year, her mother passed away.

Nayeli saw how hard her father worked everyday, and how his lack of education hindered his employment options, so she vowed to finish high school and go on to college to become a registered nurse.

Even though during her senior year her father was hospitalized with a serious unknown condition before finally recovering, Nayeli kept at her schoolwork, maintaining a grade point average of nearly 3.9. She graduated from Amistad High and is now attending the College of the Desert.

2011

Region 1

Shayla Petit

Freshwater Charter Middle School, Freshwater School District

Shayla Petit's amazing work ethic will take her far in life. Since second grade in Freshwater School District, the Resource Specialist Program and Title 1 support Shayla received have helped her shine despite struggles with reading and writing. She plans ahead and devotes extra time to complete multiple drafts of her work, and can now produce very polished essays.

Shayla thrives under the emotional safety at the smaller Six Rivers High, where she enjoys the nurturing support of school leaders, teachers and staff. She has benefited from program modifications and is not afraid to seek knowledge from others. Last year, as a ninth-grader, she managed to get almost straight A's.

In addition, she has shown a remarkable poise and capacity to manage even the toughest situations, including the death of her mother in the summer of 2010. Her ability to advocate for herself and take the initiative at school has helped her rise above circumstances to become an excellent partner in her own learning.



Region 2

Diego Valdivia

Colusa High School, Colusa Unified School District

Diego Valdivia is a young man destined for success. At the beginning of his junior year of high school, Diego stepped back, looked deep inside and told himself he could do better. He got involved with the Colusa High School soccer team and caught the eye of Activity Director Bobby Kirkman, who recognized Diego's emerging leadership skills.

Diego was recruited to become part of the school's Leadership Class, facilitating student activities, being a leader on the soccer team, and encouraging students to stay away from gangs. His 3.0 GPA is testament to his perseverance and the good choices he's made in life.

A former gang member himself, Diego has not only become a school leader and good student, he has greatly assisted with his family and his mother, who was paralyzed in a car accident seven years ago. Rather than sinking into a world of bleak prospects, Diego has become a promising young man and a leader of tomorrow.



Region 3

Jahari Kirkendoll

Sutterville Elementary School, Sacramento City Unified

When Jahari Kirkendoll came to Sutterville Elementary School in third grade, it was immediately apparent his charisma, charm and spirit would take him far. He was an inspiration to school staff as they worked to provide care and the best possible education.

Responding to that attention, Jahari has thrived. He enjoys the pride and joy that come from learning. Despite uncertain circumstances that have included living at the Sacramento Children's Home, he has learned to apply himself academically and actively seeks out solutions to problems. He has also been motivated by his mother's courage as she enrolled in college to pursue new career goals.

Jahari has found a place on the football team, which allows him to focus his physicality in positive ways. School has become a safe place where he can grow. Principal Lori Aoun says she knows she can count on Jahari to be a leader and a positive role model for other students.



Region 4

Katherine Manning

Willits High School, Willits Unified School District

Katherine Manning's sociable personality made it easy for staff at Willits High School to support her. Kat is an exceptionally mature young woman who stayed highly involved in school activities and empathetic to her classmates. She served as a peer counselor, participated in swim team and art activities, and worked part-time to save money for college, all while maintaining a high GPA. In fact, Kat graduated this year with almost a full year of college completed. Throughout years of struggle, Kat has learned that persistent effort, a positive attitude and kindness toward others result in triumph. Rather than play it safe, Kat challenges herself to the point where her limits are tested. Watching Kat's tenacity in action was inspiring to school staff.

No matter how long the journey or how many setbacks, she simply grits her teeth and never gives up. ACSA commends Katherine Manning's work ethic, superior coping skills and resiliency.



Region 5

Eduardo Deras

Community School Central, San Mateo County Office of Education

Eduardo Deras is a young man whose determination gives him the strength to overcome any challenge. By setting his mind to it, he worked hard to earn the credits he needed to graduate from Community School Central in San Mateo County.

With the support of school staff, Eduardo has received the academic foundation and life skills he needs to succeed. He also found success in his work with the community. He is involved in the Boys and Girls Club, where he works as the bilingual front desk assistant, and helps feed needy families during the holidays.

He has also found an outlet for his passion for music through the Adobe Foundation and the Black Eyed Peas' Peapod Academy, where he produces music and videos. He co-produced the video "Stand Up For Haiti," to send a message of hope following that country's devastating earthquake.



Region 6

Nancy Nguyen

California High School, San Ramon Valley Unified School District

With the help of her school community at California High School in San Ramon, Nancy Nguyen has found the inner strength and courage to succeed academically and socially.

Now in her senior year, Nancy experienced horrific tragedy as a grade-schooler when she lost her mother to murder and her father was convicted of the crime. Nancy and her two sisters lived with relatives until economic circumstances split them up, and Nancy found herself without a home in the 10th grade.

But Cal High faculty stepped up and quickly devoted the extra time to ensure Nancy got back on track. A school counselor serves as her guardian, and teachers have worked very hard to provide the necessary academic accommodations to help Nancy succeed.

She now has a great GPA and is positively involved in school activities. She takes life one day at a time, with her head held high.



Region 7

Steufon Mackey

Weston Ranch High School, Manteca Unified School District

Steufon Mackey recently graduated from Weston Ranch High in Manteca USD. His outstanding attitude, great heart and tenacity have helped him come a long way in the past couple of years.

In March 2009, he was hit by a stray bullet that remains lodged in his head; although doctors say it is located in a non-lethal spot. The initial prognosis was grim, but Steufon's family refused to give up on him. They found a neurosurgeon who ensured Steufon would make it. Throughout serious surgeries, a permanent shunt in his brain, and a grueling rehab process to relearn how to walk, talk, read, write, eat and regain his memory, Steufon has amazed everyone with his perseverance.

He still struggles a little with his speech, but his mind is sharp. An honors student before the shooting, he made up his Advanced Placement coursework and continues on a track toward college and a goal of someday owning his own line of clothing and retail stores.



Region 8

Chi Diem Hang

Willow Glenn Middle School, Santa Clara County Office of Education

Chi Diem Hang came to Willow Glen Middle School as a sixth grader with infectious enthusiasm, an insatiable desire to learn and a can-do attitude. This was despite the fact that she had no formal schooling in her home country of Vietnam, no use of her arms or hands, and was mostly non-verbal.

But it was clear to school staff that Chi was quite a phenomenon. She retained everything she learned, and would often go beyond what was expected from a lesson. When the school discovered gaps in her education, staff developed an educational plan that allowed her to experience school sequentially and ultimately succeed. Chi learned to understand and speak English using an alternative communication device, resulting in her growing and learning even more. The fact that Chi has tested proficient in both math and language arts is a testament to her hard work. Chi represents what is possible when the district, school, parents and student come together with the singular purpose of the best possible education.



Region 9

Patricia Rodriguez

Kerman High School, Kerman Unified School District

Patricia Rodriguez is proof that with a positive attitude, anything is possible. She consciously decided to overcome the anger that was holding her back and play an active role in her own success. She is now well on her way to achieving her goals of attending college and becoming a psychologist.

With help from staff at Kerman High School, Patty earned high grades and regained credits she needed to graduate. She eagerly participated in the school's counseling and a tutoring program through California State University, Fresno, and attended summer and Saturday school. She also took several classes at the adult school, due to responsibilities at home. She spent most of her breaks and lunch in the counseling office seeking further knowledge.

Patty's achievement improved day by day. By her senior year she was earning all A's and B's and was active in school clubs. She also took and passed both sections of the California High School Exit Exam.



Region 10

Samantha Gruys

Cypress Charter High School, Live Oak Elementary School District

The Resource Support Program at Cypress Charter High School has helped Samantha Gruys clarify her understanding of what it takes to tackle life's bigger issues. Supported by school staff and her grandmother, and possessing remarkable resilience and perseverance, Sam will attend Cabrillo College in the fall.

Cypress founding Principal Les Forster takes pride in Sam's growth over her four years at the school. Despite challenges that include the death of her father in her sophomore year, Sam is successfully maneuvering the maze of academic, social and life changes with a strong outlook and tempered spirit.

She has worked through an impressive array of assignments and special projects in all core subjects and even passed the California High School Exit Exam on her first attempt. Samantha Gruys stands tall in her future pursuits.



Region 11

Tiffany Jeanes

Strathmore High School, Porterville Unified School District

Tiffany Jeanes is on the fast track to success in life. This young woman has become a high achieving student with top-notch leadership skills. She blossomed once she entered Strathmore High School in Porterville. With the support system in place there, she did well in honors English during her sophomore year and took AP English in her junior year. This is remarkable considering she had never before found school easy. Due to family difficulties she entered foster care when she was 10 years old. But when she finally came to a home in Strathmore she was offered a stable environment and began to flourish.

At Strathmore High, Tiffany was ranked in the top five of her senior class. She represented the school at the Camp Royal Leadership Conference and also started the Brave Heart Women’s Club to assist young women with self-esteem, goal setting and problem solving skills.

She plans to attend the University of California, Santa Barbara and hopes to one day become a criminal profiler.



Region 12

De Antonio Harris

San Bernardino High School, San Bernardino Unified School District

Basketball was the hook that caught De Antonio Harris’ interest at San Bernardino High School. To play on the team, he needed good grades. That opened him up to the help offered by his coach and other school staff. He has since achieved a 4.0 GPA, up from a 2.3 his freshman year.

De Antonio says he cherishes this accomplishment, and the good grades he continues to earn, because he has had to overcome so many obstacles. He admits to making some bad choices and suffering the consequences, and appreciates the positive influences the school presented him.

Now, instead of fighting, De Antonio uses basketball as an outlet for his anger. Even after graduating in June, he is always willing to help others and listens to those offering him help. Hard work and having the right people in his life has paid off, he says. He is now on a path that will lead him to college and eventually law school.



Region 13

Hailee Lawheed

E.O. Green Junior High School, Hueneme Elementary School District

Even at her young age, Hailee Lawheed has an adult-like resolve and strength. She embodies resiliency, integrity and intelligence, and is known as a champion who can do it, no matter what “it” is. Despite a troubled family life early in childhood, Hailee keeps a positive attitude and always has a smile on her face.

She is determined and self-motivated, while relying on her support team at E.O. Green Junior High in Oxnard. She is active in the after-school program, a component of Green’s Response to Intervention initiative. Hailee works hard to obtain the advanced level in mathematics and highly proficient in English language arts. To reach these goals, she stays after school daily for tutoring.

She is actively involved in extracurricular activities, such as the school volleyball team, junior lifeguard program, fundraising and new student orientation. She is admired by fellow students and teachers alike for her eagerness to help others and her refusal to be a victim.



Region 14

Yunhee Choi

Bellflower High School, Bellflower Unified School District

Yunhee Choi graduated this year from Bellflower High School as a happy, tenacious, popular student. She plans to attend Cerritos College and eventually transfer to a four-year university to pursue a career in writing. What makes this former homecoming queen so special is that she was born with cerebral palsy. She gets around with the assistance of a power chair and speaks through computer assistance.

Yunhee emigrated from Korea as a child with her family. By the age of 7 she was placed in a group home, where she was the only resident who was not severely developmentally delayed.

Her Bellflower peers learned to look beyond her physical impairments and get to know her sharp intellect and keen sense of humor. Throughout her life, Yunhee has advocated for independence and her civil right to be treated as an equal in society. She has inspired her fellow students to become more accepting, more tolerant and more aware.



Region 15

Carla Vance

Ganesha High School, Pomona Unified School District

Carla Vance is one of those high achieving students who delights educators. Faculty at Ganesha High in Pomona uniformly remark on Carla's outstanding work ethic in her AP classes, always arriving prepared to engage in lessons. But Carla has had to deal with more challenges than the average student.

Her father passed away before she was born, and her mother has been in and out of hospitals her entire life. Living with a maternal uncle offered a place to call home. But in 2010 Carla developed a lump on her neck. When a teacher suggested she have it looked at, Carla was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. She was moved to a foster home during treatments.

She entered a Home and Hospital Program so she could keep current in her classes. But she longed to return to school and ultimately made it back during her senior year. She has maintained a positive attitude and applied to Cal Poly Pomona. Even though she is still dealing with cancer and chemo, she has high hopes for the future.



Region 16

Darrel Justo

North Hollywood Highly Gifted Magnet School, Los Angeles Unified School District

Motivation and a commitment to excellence drove Darrel Justo to the top of his class at North Hollywood Highly Gifted Magnet School. He is a diligent and conscientious student, who friends say encourages others to do their best when they are in his presence.

That strength of character was evident at an early age. When Darrel was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia at 8 years old, he worked to beat the cancer in three years. Throughout the pain of treatment and side effects of chemotherapy, he managed to stay engaged in school, and even surpassed classmates, staying consistently on the honor roll.

When he entered the Highly Gifted Magnet at North Hollywood High School, where an IQ of 145-plus is required, he rose to the challenge and the top 10 percent of his senior class. In addition, he is an avid runner, pianist and volunteer in the community.



Region 17

Jacob Wayne

Rancho Santa Margarita Intermediate School, Saddleback Valley Unified School District

Jacob Wayne has played baseball, topped the honor roll and served on student council at Rancho Santa Margarita Intermediate School in Saddleback Valley USD. Nothing out of the ordinary for a student with goals, until you take into consideration he is a cancer survivor. At the end of his seventh grade year, Jacob was diagnosed with a blood cancer that affects the nerves and vital organs.

Over the past year Jacob has been in and out of the hospital, through surgery and five phases of chemotherapy. Because schools can harbor germs, he must study at home. While most students in this situation would distract themselves with videogames or TV, Jacob not only keeps up with his honors-level curriculum, he has also created a video blog that chronicles his life.

His teachers and school leaders help Jacob keep up and stay fully engaged in the rigorous curriculum, noting how he faces cancer with poise, resiliency and optimism. When Jacob's Region 17 support team thinks of Every Student Succeeding, they think of him.



Region 18

Sara Klapka

Abraxas High School, Poway Unified School District

Sara Klapka is a student who has shown one size does not fit all when it comes to academics. A bright, creative and talented artist, her personal resolve allowed her to catch up on missed credits and graduate from Abraxas High School in Poway USD in September 2010.

Sara suffered from an anxiety disorder that kept her from attending school. Eventually she returned, but had trouble focusing on her work. But with a flexible schedule, she soon began to blossom. She transitioned from part-time on campus to full-time. She spent her free time at a local horse stable, where she rode and cared for the animals. This served as a healing process and allowed her to relax.

When she was very close to completing the classes she needed for graduation, she kicked it into high gear. She had good attendance and got solid grades, soon earning the credits she needed to graduate.



Region 19

Madison Battles

Shadow Hills High School, Desert Sands Unified School District

Madison Battles has a real "can do" attitude. A good scholastic achiever and an avid piano player, she also participates in Shadow Hills High School's Color Guard and Marching Band. Her teachers and classmates love her contagious joy of life. Her last name of Battles is highly appropriate, because Madison has accomplished most of her success after suffering a brain injury in an auto accident when she was 8 years old. Her injuries left her in a coma for seven weeks and in the hospital for three months. Since then she has had to go through painful physical therapy, which continues to this day. Yet she has thrived in school, even with the physical demands of the Color Guard and Marching Band, because of her tenacity and the high standards her teachers have set for her. With the help of her educators and a loving family, Madison refuses to set limits on what she can achieve in life.

2012

Region 1

Roy Aaron

Red Bluff High, Red Bluff JUHSD

Roy Aaron is a young man with a strong determination to succeed in life. Despite the obstacles he faced in his younger years, he made a conscious decision to rise above negativity and graduate from Red Bluff High School, going on to the metal fabrication and welding program at the College of Siskiyous.

Early in his high school career, Roy set out to improve himself. He cut off ties with peers who were a bad influence, essentially giving up his entire social network in exchange for a healthy life. He tried out for – and made – the football team. He got a part-time job at a local restaurant, riding his bike 15 miles round trip to get to work on time. And although he was hired to do maintenance and cleaning, he was soon promoted to line cook. He even pursued the goal of obtaining a scuba diving certification. In essence, he has created for himself a healthy, happy and positive life.



Region 2

Angela Standley

Greenville Elementary, Plumas Unified

When Angela Standley came to Greenville Elementary School in Plumas USD, she had been assigned an IQ of 42 and was labeled severely mentally disabled.

But the education team at Greenville could see her cognitive skills were far superior to that diagnosis; she simply had not acquired language skills. When they pursued audiology testing and found she was deaf, the school was able to get Angela hearing aids and an interpreter to teach her sign language.

Now in the fourth grade, she has blossomed into an amazing, inspiring student. She is learning the everyday vocabulary and sign language needed to communicate, and is reading and writing up a storm. Her horizons have been further widened by working with other deaf students in her community.

Her team at Greenville hopes she will go on to attend the California School for Deaf. The sky is the limit for this heartwarming young student.



Region 3

Erin Newby

Elinor Lincoln Hickey, Sacramento COE

Erin Newby made great strides in her final years at Elinor Lincoln Hickey School in Sacramento. At one point, she was deficient in credits and had low reading and math scores. But with tireless effort, she improved her scores, made up the credits, and passed the California High School Exit Exam. Erin managed to attain her goals of on-time graduation, attending college, and most importantly, making her mother proud.

Erin wasn't even sidetracked when she had to go on the Independent Studies Program during her senior year, to help care for her siblings when her mother became ill. She kept a positive attitude, never missing an assignment or an ISP appointment.

Sadly, Erin's mother succumbed to complications from Type 1 diabetes, passing away in the spring of Erin's senior year. But those who know Erin were amazed by her resilience and grace during this time of personal tragedy.

Erin's fortitude and determination to achieve her goals served as an inspiration to her friends, teachers and school leaders.



Region 4

Cearra Henn

Napa High School, Napa Valley USD

Cearra Henn faces each day with optimism and a focus on achievement, service and hard work. As a young woman who loves helping others, Cearra serves as a student tutor, a very talented member of the jazz dance program, a club officer and a volunteer at a local program for foster youth. She won the hearts of the audience as a contestant in Napa Valley's Distinguished Young Woman Program in 2011, where she displayed both her courage and her sweetness. Having grown up in at least five different foster homes, surviving a childhood of neglect and living with a medical condition that means she will face life-changing surgery, Cearra knows that life can be unfair. But she is a rare human being, filled with hope, strength and positive energy in spite of the hardships that were not of her own making.



Region 5
Karla Avina
Aragon High School, San Mateo Union HSD

Karla Avina has never given up or let anything stop her from pursuing her goal of becoming the first in her family to attend a four-year university. She grew both socially and academically at Aragon High School in San Mateo, advancing through a rigorous curriculum and working as hard as anyone her education team had ever met. That wasn't always so: In her sophomore year, she struggled with math concepts and was associating with gang-affiliated friends. With encouragement from school leaders, Karla enrolled in an AVID class and began to learn how skills in reading, writing, inquiry and collaboration are necessary to be successful in college. She devoted extra time and attention to overcoming her weaknesses in math, and became a class leader who enjoys sharing her knowledge with others. Her determination not only made her a stronger high school student, but will propel her into the future.



Region 6
Rickeya Gill-Kellum
James Logan High School, New Haven USD

Rickeya Gill-Kellum saw all of the possibilities that could be her future when she attended the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Recruitment Fair in Oakland. That led this amazing young woman to a rigorous course load and a 3.0 grade point average. Her education team at James Logan High School encouraged her to retake the SAT and helped her study for the test on weekends and afterschool. They also helped her with applications and scholarships. Being appointed varsity basketball manager elevated her leadership skills. Despite losing her father and having only sporadic contact with her mother, Rickeya persevered with her education. Even while being shuttled between the homes of relatives and taking care of her much younger sister, she pursued admission at both Spellman and Howard universities. The future is bright for Rickeya Gill-Kellum thanks in part to her public education support team.



Region 7
Juvenal Lechuga
Sierra High School, Manteca Unified School District

Juvenal Lechuga is the kind of student who does his educators and school proud. He graduated with a 3.33 GPA, including recognition for achieving a 4.0 or higher in his sophomore and junior years. He served as an officer in the Sierra High School MECHA Club, and as the varsity soccer team manager, as well as being nominated for homecoming king.

Although this all sounds like a normal high-achieving student, Juvenal was diagnosed with osteosarcoma when he was in eighth grade. He had his knee and a portion of his femur removed and replaced with titanium, and spent the subsequent four years in and out of hospitals. In his junior year his knee became infected and Juvenal had emergency surgery to save his leg from amputation. The latter part of his junior year he had to come to school with an antibiotic bag on his arm that dispensed medication directly to his heart.

But, through all this, Juvenal kept a positive outlook. Even though he could no longer play his beloved soccer, he supported his teammates as team manager. They in turn unanimously voted to give him a Character Counts – Victory with Honor Award after his senior season.



Region 8

Robert Salas

Snell Community School, Santa Clara COE

The support team at Snell School in Santa Clara County likes to talk about the “new” Robert Salas, a student who has inspired other students and staff through his goals, actions and attitude. His commitment to reaching those goals is apparent in the results: Robert has lost 80 pounds, made up the credits needed to graduate on time, and no longer hangs out with gang members or uses drugs.

Even better, Robert has modeled this behavior for his peers, who began joining in his alternative activities when they noticed the positive results of maintaining healthy eating and exercise habits and establishing new social relationships. Robert participated in the San Jose State University Collegiate Leadership Collaboration, which eases the transition to college, and is looking at a future that includes higher education. His school support team has helped Robert “visualize and realize” his career and educational goals, and offered individualized instruction that allowed him to refine his many skills.



Region 9

Apryl Cushingberry

Hoover High School, Fresno USD

Apryl Cushingberry is an example of the fact that with the proper mindset, anything is possible. As a student at Hoover High School in Fresno Unified School District, she maintained a positive attitude despite a negative home life.

Apryl has managed to consistently maintain good grades despite the difficulties life has thrown at her. She is truly driven to do well no matter what, and she knows education is the key that will unlock success throughout her life. The support of her teachers and social workers coupled with her desire to attend a four-year college have been her motivating factors to complete assignments and earn high grades. She was also very active in extra-curricular activities, playing on softball teams, golf teams and the high school dance club. These activities helped her stay focused and gave her the stability she needed to succeed in school.

Apryl’s resiliency has made her a role model to other at-risk students.



Region 10

Santiago Hernandez

San Benito High School, San Benito High School District

Santiago Hernandez changed the culture at Gabilan Hills Elementary and San Benito High schools in Hollister. Everyone knows him, and greets him as he walks by. He has been a member of the Student Council and has a passion for computer technology.

He maintains a grade point average of 3.5 or above, and he never let sclero-corneal blindness or his English language learner status become obstacles to success. That is a testament to his own drive, but also to his parents and his education support team.

Santiago received specialized services and was designated English proficient in the fourth grade. He is now a 10th grader who is fluent in Spanish and Braille as well. His future goals include attending Coleman University in San Diego and becoming the owner of a large computer-based technology company.



Region 11

Ala Tiatia

Sherman E. Burroughs High School, Sierra Sands USD

Ala Tiatia made a great turnaround in his senior year at Sherman E. Burroughs High School in Sierra Sands USD. Even though he was intelligent, he was failing many of his classes, primarily because he wasn't doing his homework. Eventually, he would go to the elementary school after his classes, and sitting in a quiet classroom to do his homework before going to work at McDonald's.

Just this simple change made a huge difference. He went from getting middling grades – except in drama and music, where he already excelled – to achieving almost all As and Bs in his senior year.

Indeed, drama is his main passion in life. He served as Drama Club president and was part of every Drama Department production since halfway through his freshman year. He has traveled to drama festivals in Lincoln, Nebraska and Edinburgh, Scotland. The latter required some heavy-duty personal fundraising by Ala.

He achieved his goal by enlisting the financial support of his elementary, middle and high school principals; his grades 2-5 teachers; the high school registrar, secretary and custodian; and many members of the school district administration, including the superintendent.

Ala now plans to move to New York City and pursue a degree in musical theater at the American Music and Dramatics Academy.



Region 12

David Livingston

Green Valley High School, Yucaipa-Calimesa Joint USD

As one of six boys, all raised by a single mother, the challenges David Livingston has faced could have caused him to give up. In fact, there came a point where it seemed impossible that David would ever be able to graduate. But he and his mother knew something needed to change, and he transferred to Green Valley High School.

The support and compassion offered by staff of this small school in Yucaipa enabled David to get back on track personally and academically. The personalized learning experience and one-on-one support at Green Valley meant David could not only thrive, but serve as a role model for other students. Plus, this ambitious young man has held down a job for 30 hours a week at a local restaurant.

David's hope and confidence grew to the point that he was on track not only to graduate, but to enroll in college and pursue his dreams.



Region 13

Saul Landeros

Blanche Reynolds Elementary, Ventura Unified School District

Despite his young age, Saul Landeros is truly an inspiration. With courage and resolve, he keeps up with his schoolwork, even after being diagnosed with cancer.

As a fifth-grader at Blanche Reynolds Elementary School in the Ventura Unified School District, Saul was eager to learn and refused to let cancer in his brain and spinal cord take control. With a support team of teachers, family and the community, he developed a strong focus on his goals and ambitions. One day, the bus forgot to pick him up, so he rode his scooter to school nearly a mile away.

A special day class and home teacher helped him overcome his learning obstacles, and cheering on from the community gave him the emotional support he needed to persevere. Through the Make-a-Wish Foundation, Saul became an honorary Ventura County deputy sheriff. He received a uniform and a badge, went on patrols, and even got to ride in the search and rescue helicopter.



Region 14

Paul Wooten

Norwalk High, Norwalk-La Mirada USD

Paul Wooten is a resilient and phenomenal young man – a survivor who has maintained a steadfast focus on academic achievement.

Following the death of his father in 2009, he and his mother became homeless by 2011. He worried about his mother’s diabetes and high blood pressure, but Paul knew he had to keep up with his schoolwork at Norwalk High, no matter how hard that was.

Despite often long commutes from motels or shelters or the home of a relative. Paul had the self-determination to succeed. He often began his day at 5 a.m. and would not complete it until midnight, when his homework was done. Along the way, he has been supported by his education team in Norwalk-La Mirada USD, which understands his situation and motivates him to thrive. Now in 12th grade, Paul’s resilience has been inspirational. He says he has come too far and worked too hard to fail.



Region 15

German Hernandez

West Ranch High School, Wm. S. Hart Union High School District

German Hernandez has been a shining star at West Ranch High School. He grew to become a leader, being elected ASB president in his senior year, and using the position to reach out to struggling students and get them involved in school activities.

He has made remarkable improvement, having grown up as a Spanish speaker in Mexico until he was in the second grade. When he came to this country, he was beaten up and harassed by other kids because of his poor English skills, but he never gave up. Eventually he became fluent in English and began to dream of going to college.

His father worked long hours in food service and his mother worked six days a week as a housekeeper, so German had to help out with the responsibilities of raising younger siblings, as well as the increased academic load as he moved to high school. But German persevered, studying hard and dreaming of college.

He now has set a goal of achieving a college degree in economics. He has no idea how he will pay for it, but that won’t stop this determined young man. As principal Bob Vincent put it in a letter of support, “From the day he walked into West Ranch, he has made positive personal and scholastic progress toward his goal of graduating high school and going to a top notch university.”



Region 16

Fernanda Velazco

Granada Hills Charter High School, Los Angeles USD

Fernanda Velazco has a cumulative GPA of 4.0 and has received a five – the top score – on almost every Advanced Placement exam she has taken. While successfully focusing on her academics, Fernanda has also reached out to her community, serving as a volunteer for a physician who treats migrant farmworkers in the central valley.

What makes this achievement so impressive is that family hardships meant Fernanda was often left wondering where she would live and how she would eat. After her father left the family, Fernanda, her sister and their mother lost their home and car and were left destitute. The social worker at Granada Hills Charter High rallied the school community to help the family out until Fernanda’s mom could fully support the family.

Fernanda has taken full advantage of all the support services the school offers, including help with college applications, and is looking forward to a very successful future.



Region 17

Ruth Hernandez

Yorba Middle School, Orange Unified School District

Ruth Hernandez has a deep inner resolve that allows her to overcome any obstacle, whether academic or physical. Injured by a drunk driver, Ruth fought to regain her health and continue her education.

As an eighth grade student at Yorba Middle School in the Orange Unified School District, Ruth had the strength to return to school and thrive academically and emotionally. With the support of her family and school staff, she continued her studies with a modified schedule and earned a 3.5 GPA.

A music lover, she routinely spends lunch periods in the music room to get extra help so her parts will be just right for upcoming school concerts. She worked as an office aid, greeting visitors and creating a positive environment. Ruth is seen as a model of a strong work ethic and often assists other students on their assignments. Her injury did not define her, but it did make her the young woman she is today.



Region 18

Mirza Hernandez

Mt. Carmel High School, Poway USD

Mirza Hernandez made tremendous progress in her last two years in high school. Her English teacher encouraged her to take AP English her junior year, which required a leap of faith from Mirza since she had failed regular English in grade 10. But she really blossomed in AP English. As she worked to help raise her 9-year-old brother, she turned herself around from being an unmotivated student to passing all her classes and starting to think about going to college.

But her prior lack of motivation had left her deficient in credits. That didn't stop this determined girl. She transferred to a different school in her senior year so she could take advantage of their trimester system. That wasn't enough though, so she took night classes too, all this while working at the local Jack in the Box.

Through her hard work, she finished all her A-G classes and now looks toward her goal of graduating college and becoming a social worker.



Region 19

Alfreda "Sugar" Vargas

Amistad Continuation High School, Desert Sands USD

Due to unending determination, Alfreda "Sugar" Vargas got on track to complete her high school diploma, in what her support team calls the "most heart-warming, turn-around success story" they have seen.

Sugar had dropped out at the age of 17 and had a baby at 18. A year later she decided she was ready to return to school, but as a 19-year-old high school freshman with no credits at all, it was difficult to find the right school.

Time passed as district personnel tried to figure out the best placement for Sugar, and she made sure she hadn't been forgotten by calling frequently. Sugar tried out several educational options, patiently navigating the system while holding her head high. Finally, a sympathetic continuation high school principal accepted Sugar at his school, where she gained credits at an accelerated rate.

After that, nothing could stand in her way of getting that hard-earned diploma.

2013

Adult Ed

Cindy Perez

Whittier Adult School, Whittier Union High School District

Cindy Perez excelled in every course she took at Whittier Adult School, always putting forth 100 percent effort. Embarrassed by a learning disability early in school, learning did not come easy for Cindy. Bad choices in junior high landed her in a juvenile correction facility. By 10th grade her self-esteem had plummeted, she had joined a gang and was addicted to methamphetamine.

Even so, her principal at Shurr High School in Montebello saw something special in Cindy and helped her keep up with schoolwork and earn a diploma. Unfortunately, after graduation, addiction took over her life, and she was living on the streets. Cindy got pregnant and stayed clean for a while, giving birth to healthy girl. But she relapsed, and was at-risk of losing her daughter to the foster care system.

Cindy was given the opportunity to enter rehab, and she got clean. The opportunities at Whittier Adult School earned her a thriving new life with her daughter, her own apartment and a full time job.



Region 1

Evelyn Bruen

Modoc High School, Modoc Joint USD

Evelyn Bruen is a bright, hard-working, assertive young woman determined to succeed at school and in life. The difference between Evelyn and her classmates is that she has autism. But she hasn't let that stop her from achieving her goals.

When she came to Modoc High School, she was shy and seldom spoke in class or asked for assistance. Backed up by Modoc County SELPA, educators made sure Evelyn received the support she needed in job preparation, leadership and goal setting. While tasks may take longer for her to complete, Evelyn never complains or expects modification. As a sophomore, she was voted vice-president of a fundraising venture and become active in public relations. She spoke before the school board and Rotary Club to garner support for the enterprise. She also got a job in the school cafeteria, and was soon promoted to a student supervisor. She now hopes to pursue a career in the culinary industry.



Region 2

Lota Veimau

Nevada Union High School, Nevada Joint Union HSD

When Lota Veimau had to leave behind her friends and connections in the Bay Area to move to rural Nevada County, she found it hard to adjust.

Her family is Tongan and experienced some cultural anxiety in the predominantly white community. Lota was frustrated and frequently absent. She was not working up to her potential at Nevada Union High School, earning just a 1.5 GPA at the end of her freshman year.

Fortunately, educators recognized Lota could be a shining star. Administrators set up a Partnership Academy, to which Lota was accepted. She immediately began to thrive in an environment with smaller class sizes, access to technology and a career and college focus. By her junior year, Lota was earning a 3.3 GPA and working as a peer tutor. Today she has her eyes set on becoming a teacher.



Region 3

Sarah Sax

Douglass Middle School, Woodland JUSD

After growing up in a very unstable family situation that included her mother's death by overdose and her father's suicide, Sarah Sax and her brother finally found a home with their aunt and uncle.

After struggling for a few years, Sarah showed resilience at Douglass Middle School as well. She made the choice to work hard, be positive and succeed. Indeed, today she is cited for her infectious positive energy and leadership among her peers.

One reason for the turnaround was Sarah's love of the drama club, which she says allows her to escape and become someone else, if only for a little while. She works hard in all her classes and is on the honor roll. She is highly active in her leadership class and works to match students with others on campus who might need academic help or just someone to talk to.



Region 4

Katie Lee Rose

Vanden High School, Travis USD

Katie Lee Rose didn't start school until age 9 because of health issues due to untreated Type 1 diabetes and malnutrition. Complicating matters were several foster care and licensed institutional placements. She started receiving special education supports at school to deal with radical mood swings.

Katie was eventually placed in a stable family environment, and received an insulin pump to help control her diabetes. She now stays focused in class at Vanden High School, carries a 3.33 GPA, and no longer needs many of the special education supports she previously required. Half of her school time is spent in general education classes, and that was expected to rise this year. She has made many friends, and participated for two years in the ROTC program.

Katie now plans to attend college and work toward a career in arts and communications.



Region 5

Demian Williams

Access SFUSD: The Arc, San Francisco USD

With determination, and finding his inner talents through school opportunities, Demian Williams has shown how Autism Spectrum Disorder is not a hindrance to shining as a student.

Demian was once known as a quiet, reserved student who always had his head down. But working in a transition program with an emphasis on the arts helped bring out the person he really is. It began when he was asked to be a student aide, helping those with significant communication disabilities. A growing confidence helped him branch out and try new experiences.

He hosted a sing-along and wrote a play that was performed in front of 200 patrons of the arts. Demian served as the first youth advocate on the Muni Accessibility Advisory Committee and was asked to emcee the ribbon-cutting ceremony for his school, AccessSFUSD at The Arc. He is proud to represent the disability community and to make a difference in people's lives.



Region 6

Raena Lacy

Arroyo High School, San Lorenzo SD

Rae'na Lacy started the Web & Graphic Design course at Eden Area ROP in Hayward like most other students in the class, undisciplined and unruly with little interest in obtaining the skills to prepare them for work in a robust industry. She often contributed to classroom chaos, speaking out of turn and disrespecting authority. But caring educators wouldn't give up on Rae'na. They discovered her behavior was the result of losing her brother to gun violence, and began encouraging her to share her feelings. Eventually Rae'na gained trust and began to seize the opportunity to acquire new skills, and even to help others succeed.

The change in her posture, class participation and interaction with others was remarkable. At the close of the semester, Rae’na had earned an A- and made a commitment to complete the course. Her school leaders now say she is well on her way to becoming a successful adult leader.



Region 7

Summer Wooldridge

Calaveras High School, Calaveras USD

In third grade, tragedy struck Summer Wooldridge when her best friend was killed in an auto accident. She became so distracted at school, she was held back that year, and her life continued to unravel. Her family lost its home and had to stay with friends or live in their car – the four of them.

Eventually, Summer had to move in with others when her parents could not get back on their feet. She progressed through the grades and excelled at Calaveras High School. But, a knee injury derailed her dreams of earning a volleyball scholarship. In 10th grade her mother was hospitalized in a coma, and Summer took care of her and helped her father through the difficult time.

For the last five years, she has lived with her older sister, where she has learned respect and responsibility. And she enrolled in ROP Medical Science with the goal of becoming a nurse.



Region 8

Robert Zeppa

Renaissance at Mathson, Alum Rock Union SD

Born with Down Syndrome, Robert Zeppa has overcome physical and emotional challenges to serve as an exceptional example of what a young man can achieve with the support of family, school and community.

Robert attends Renaissance Academy, which offers a vision to equip students to achieve their potential and make the world a better place. He has made great strides with his behavior, social interactions and academics throughout the years, with the help of educators who have encouraged him to become independent and active in all of his mainstreaming environments.

Robert has also been provided instruction rich in multimodal activities, leading to success that has motivated him to try new things and explore the world around him. The school’s team has taken a small child who used aggression to express feelings, and helped him become a popular student who engages in academic and social activities in a variety of settings.



Region 9

Gabriela Morales

Roosevelt High School, Fresno USD

Homelessness, chronic illness, foster care – all are setbacks that would make it difficult to finish school. But Gabriela Morales has met these challenges and persevered, saying that if not for the educators in her life, she would have given up. Instead, she aimed to graduate with a 4.0 GPA.

A team approach to providing support has meant that Gabriela was able to earn the credits she needed after having fallen behind. Her school teams closely monitored her academic progress, and her vice principal developed a plan to complete missed work when illness made it difficult to attend school. Other adults at school offered guidance when life became overwhelming.

Gabriela’s resilience, and a support network that agreed it was not acceptable for her to fail, have allowed this positive, hard-working and respectful young woman to flourish. Gabriela plans to become a Spanish teacher and help others like herself to succeed.



Region 10

Quintyn Moller

Cypress High School, Live Oak Elementary

Quintyn Moller has been pushed and pulled into various life circumstances that would have toppled a less resilient person. But with the help of a school support team that works to establish a sense of stability, checks in with him regularly to ensure he is on track, and works together to support him in all aspects of his life, Quintyn focuses on the positive.

He serves on the Cypress High School Governance Council, participates in several school sports, volunteers with the Red Cross, and maintains consistent attendance and strong academic performance.

These accomplishments are impressive, considering the challenges Quintyn has faced over the years. He has moved to a number of different schools, and suffered personal illness as well as his mother's devastating health conditions, which now include cancer. Through it all, Quintyn is as dedicated to succeed in school as his educators are to boost his success.



Region 11

William Gantz

North High School, Kern HSD

In his sophomore year, Will Gantz lost his mother and then three months later his father. He subsequently bounced around, living first with older siblings and then family friends. All the while, education leaders at North High in Kern HSD provided a grief group that helped Will work through his feelings and recommit to his Advanced Placement and Honors level class schedule.

He found particular success in chemistry during his junior year and began looking forward to becoming a doctor. He even helped others who were struggling with the subject.

In his senior year, Will turned 18 and was kicked out of his last temporary home. His assistant principal secured funding for the school supplies he needed to complete the year, and his chemistry teacher helped secure housing and other basic necessities. William has since graduated successfully with an eye toward attending the University of Santa Cruz.



Region 12

Jonathan Leon

David Stine Chaffey West CDS, San Bernardino COE

When Jonathan Leon entered David Stine Chaffey West Community Day School he was an angry young man looking for trouble. What he found was a school filled with adults who cared. They could see the rebellious student really wanted to change and to overcome his unstable living conditions, so they started by nurturing Jonathan's leadership skills.

He joined the School Site Council and was soon elected chair. Jonathan took advantage of classes to help with anger management and drug and alcohol abuse, and joined Toastmasters. He became involved with student government, and was elected as class representative. Jonathan also volunteers to help out with a number of school projects.

These triumphs led to academic success as well, and with the encouragement of his school team, Jonathan is poised to pursue college and a career involving math and science. His biggest dream of all remains creating a more stable life for his family.



Region 13

Cheyenne Timmerman

Pacific High School, Ventura USD

Angry about having to attend school on a daily basis and suffering from social anxiety, Cheyenne Timmerman was teetering on the edge of failure when education leaders in Ventura USD reached out with the help she needed.

Cheyenne was credit deficient in the 10th grade and had a hard time engaging with peers. She was arrested at school for being under the influence of methamphetamine and continued to slide academically until the 11th grade when she was placed in the Recovery Classroom at Pacific High.

Guided by caring educators and reporting to a probation officer and therapist, Cheyenne pulled herself up, recovered every credit possible and even graduated early. She is now off probation and leading a clean and sober life. Her Pacific High support team helped her enroll in college classes, where she is studying child development.



Region 14

Shicari Quavon Ransom

Mount San Antonio College, Covina Valley SD

Shicari Quavon is visually impaired. His success has been found through an L.A. County Office of Education special day transition class, and taking classes at Mount San Antonio Community College.

His school team helped Shicari learn to navigate campus independently, take public transportation, and practice his Community Based Instruction at home. Shicari has learned how to fill out work applications, and he is working on campus as a receptionist in a paid position. His facility with several languages serves him well in the job.

Shicari was selected by school staff and his classmates to be a representative on the Shared Decision Making Committee, a role that has brought him closer to his peers. In fact, he has inspired many other students to seek participation in this process. The educators who serve Shicari say they are proud to be part of his journey toward independence.



Region 15

Melissa Ortega

Covina High School, Covina USD

No other Every Student Succeeding honoree has had a more daunting psychological challenge than Melissa Ortega. She witnessed her mother, father and seven other family members murdered in a matter of minutes by a vengeful ex-husband on Christmas Eve 2008.

Her school support teams were determined to do whatever was needed after the tragedy to make sure Melissa and her remaining siblings had every opportunity available to succeed in school. The principal personally worked with Melissa and her sister to ensure the path to college was open. Teaching teams stepped up with support above and beyond the call of duty.

And Melissa has shown outstanding academic and citizenship achievement at Covina High School. She and her family are still unable to bring themselves to celebrate Christmas, and the scars will remain for a lifetime. But Melissa also serves as a shining example of resiliency in the face of the worst life can throw at a child.



Region 16

Victoria Sandoval

Downtown Magnets High School, Los Angeles USD

Victoria Sandoval is a student who has proven that anything is possible, even when it seemed all the cards were stacked against her. Born in Mexico, she came to the United States knowing only Spanish, but was fluent in English by elementary school.

In the 10th grade, she became pregnant. Once a high-performing student, her grades began to drop. Noticing this, staff at Downtown Magnets High School worked with her to keep her in school and improve her academic progress. School staff allowed her extra time to complete the semester's work, scheduling due dates and exam schedules around the birth of her baby.

She joined a new mother's group at school to bond with and gain support of teachers who were also new mothers. Her grades improved, her positive outlook returned, and she is now on track for college, hoping to become a civil engineer or computer programmer.



Region 17

Savannah Miller

Laguna Beach High School, Laguna Beach USD

Savannah Miller is a student who truly embodies determination, overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds to succeed in school. Living in poverty, she was a victim of verbal and physical abuse to the extent that she obtained a restraining order against her mother. She moved from parent to parent, hoping their empty promises would be fulfilled, only to have her heart broken each time. Inconsistency was the only consistency for most of her life.

At last, Savannah had the courage to run, and she did not stop until she reached safety at the home of a friend. But she did not let hardships define her.

School has always been her sanctuary, and with the support of her principal and teachers at Laguna Beach High School, she maintained a grade point average of 3.85 while taking the most rigorous courses, even earning an AP Scholar distinction and several awards for her writing.



Region 18

Eduardo Arredondo

Vista High School, Vista USD

Eduardo Arredondo is a student who could have easily fallen through the cracks. In middle school, his grade point average was 1.93, and by eighth grade, he had eight failing grades. By the time he entered Vista High School, he had 28 absences and 38 tardies. He was brought before the School Attendance Review Board, which found he was in dire need of intervention and counseling services.

His principal brought together a student study team, and developed an individual education plan to help him reach his academic and behavioral goals. His principal would call him early in the morning to make sure he was up for school. Weekly counseling sessions from his therapist helped him gain the confidence to stay the course.

By his senior year, Eduardo earned a 3.67 grade point average and the previously unattainable goal of attending college.



Region 19

Zahra “Zadee” Rajab

John F. Kennedy Middle College High School, Corona-Norco USD

From central office leaders in student services to principals and assistant principals, the positive relationships between education leaders in Corona-Norco USD resulted in the support Zadee Rajab needed after she experienced a violent attack and suffered post-traumatic stress disorder.

Zadee found it difficult to return to school and was enrolled in the Home and Hospital program for the second semester of 10th grade. She kept her grades up and continued to follow her passion for singing. She found her niche at Kennedy Middle College High School on campus at Norco College.

School administrators truly personalized the learning environment to meet Zadee’s educational needs.

She rebounded at Kennedy and is on her way to a professional career in opera. While touring the nation for auditions and coaching, Zadee completed independent study and online classes to fulfill graduation while pursuing her dream.

2014

Adult Ed

Grely Mazariegos

Tamalpais Adult School, Graduating Class of 2012 (GED)

Grely Mazariegos is a hard-working single parent who came to the United States from Guatemala. As a young mother, she began her studies at Tamalpais Adult School in 2010 to earn a GED certificate of completion. Mazariegos made significant strides in both her language acquisition and academics and passed the GED exam in May 2012. After caring for a beloved relative who was disabled, Mazariegos was inspired to study medicine. She now attends College of Marin and intends to transfer to the University of California as a pre-med major.



Adult Ed

Saul Godinez

Tamalpais Adult School, Class of 2014

Completing his GED had been a long-term goal for Godinez. In addition to teacher-directed instruction, Godinez studied online five to 10 hours per week from home. As a full-time employee, a father of four children, and a student at Tamalpais Adult School, using the online resources from home proved to be a great benefit. In December 2013, he passed the GED exam. His commitment to his family, lifelong learning, and his community are evident. As a program coordinator at a community organization, Godinez now works with immigrants who designate learning English and earning a living wage as primary goals.



Region 1

Louie Lingard

Catherine L. Zane Middle School, Eureka City Schools

Zane Middle School Principal Jan Schmidt learned how bright and capable Louie Lingard is in 2009, when he was a fourth-grader at Lafayette Elementary School. Schmidt was his principal then, as she is now. Louie was born with many health issues, including congenital myopathy, thoracic scoliosis and bilateral club feet. He walks with braces on both legs and pulls his backpack behind him. He recently had tendon transfers in both hands to prevent his fingers from curling under. Louie could have easily become the target of bullying, but instead his fellow students rally around him. He is flourishing in middle school, making new friends and even serving as an assistant to the seventh grade girls basketball team. He strives to do his best in school, earning As and Bs and a place on the honor roll.

“Louie is a delightful human being with a smile that lights up not only the room, but the entire universe,” Schmidt said.



Region 2

Dominic McMinn

Bangor Elementary School, Bangor Union Elementary School District

Dominic McMinn’s self-esteem improved with his involvement in athletics at Bangor Union Elementary. Academically, he went from a virtual non-reader to a participant in the Accelerated Reader program. The success of his first few years in school is remarkable. When he was born at less than five pounds, doctors warned Dominic would endure many physical difficulties and might not ever walk or even survive. His speech and cognitive functions were delayed. He was nonverbal until the age of three, and was eventually diagnosed with Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, which causes him chronic pain, arthritis symptoms and headaches.

But despite what doctors said, Dominic not only learned to walk, he learned to run. He joined the cross country team, and while it was hard for him, he finished every race and refused to quit. The caring and committed staff at Bangor ensures Dominic has the support services he needs to succeed, and his classmates cheer him on.



Region 3

Lukas Novak

Folsom High School, Folsom Cordova Unified School District

Throughout the difficulties in his life, Lukas Novak clung to his education as “a lifeboat in a storm of circumstances.” A tumultuous and inconsistent home life, marred by periods of extreme poverty, adult misconduct and abuse, took its toll on Lukas and his siblings. Drugs and alcohol robbed the lives around him, he said, causing violence, crime and fear. He struggled with too much responsibility

for himself and a younger brother. But Folsom High School presented a positive environment, full of the caring, empathetic and passionate support providers he needed to survive.

He found people he could trust, and the influence of those educators was profound. They nurtured his curiosity and intellectual expansion. They treated him with respect and as a valuable person, which supported his emotional growth.

A testament to the Folsom team he said saved his life is the scholarship he received to attend Princeton University.



Region 4

Sophia Ayala

Analy High School, West Sonoma County Union High School District

The dedication and can-do attitude Sophia Ayala exhibited at Analy High School concealed her stressful and impoverished home life. In spite of these challenges, Sophia was determined to

persevere in school, inspired by the difficulties facing her older siblings not to repeat their mistakes. She worked hard at Analy and strived to complete all assignments. As an English learner she struggled

with reading and writing, but her educators say she possesses the smarts and pluck to succeed in college.

Her outgoing personality, daily hellos and smiles in the hallway earned Sophia a place in student government. She took on an additional role as Safe School ambassador. As Vice Principal Lindsey Apkarian said, “Her concern for others and desire to help is evident in her willingness to volunteer and share her one abundant resource—her heart.” Her entire

school team worked each day to support, inspire and push Sophia forward with kind words, advice and a consistent presence.



Region 5

Jesus M. Aguilar

San Mateo High School, San Mateo Union High School District

Every student has a subject in which they excel, and a subject in which they struggle. For Jesus Aguilar, his toughest subject has always been math. When he entered San Mateo High School, he had extremely low math skills. But he did not let that hold him back. From day one, he sought the help of his math teachers at every opportunity.

There have been times when he thinks, sleeps and talks math. Not only does he recognize his need for help and seek it out, he also mentors other students. In fact, it is not uncommon to overhear him explain a mathematical concept to classmates in a way they can understand.

This is not only true in his academic ventures, but in athletics as well. A talented soccer player, Jesus is devoted to practice, and encourages fellow students to follow in his footsteps on the soccer field.



Region 6

Cindy Kanga

California High School, San Ramon Valley Unified School District

Cindy Kanga is a student who seemed to have everything working against her. Born in Angola, her father passed away when she was young. Fleeing from persecution, her mother escaped to America with her five children. But the move was tough, and her mother's mental health deteriorated. She later became hospitalized.

During this time, Cindy found school to be her refuge. Despite her troubled personal life, she worked hard to maintain good grades. School was an escape for her, and one of the only stable, safe forces in her life. Cindy immersed herself in school, becoming involved in many clubs, including the Gay Straight Alliance and Spanish Club. She took a rigorous course load, including AP Calculus, AP English, AP Spanish and AP History. She did this all while managing to volunteer for Service for Seniors 10 hours a week, making a positive difference off campus as well as on.



Region 7

Brittany Cody

Riverbank High School, Riverbank Unified School District

Brittany Cody is a student who exemplifies incredible resilience in the face of tragedy. When she was eight years old, her mother passed away unexpectedly.

Five years later, her stepmother also passed away suddenly. Then, when she was 16, her father died of cancer.

But all these losses couldn't stop Brittany from her goal of succeeding in school. Her main focus was always her future, and she worked hard to do well. She continued to play softball, and got involved in school, making new friends and keeping busy with campus activities. She was an active member of the Leadership Class, and worked with youth at softball clinics in

the community. Her teachers and coaches, as well as her family, supported her throughout her journey. Moving forward to create a better life for herself is one way she can help honor her father.



Region 8

Alexis Balco

Gilder Elementary, Oak Grove Unified School District

Alexa Balco has been through more in her young life than most adults. Yet she has managed to remain strong. In fifth grade, she was diagnosed with Lupus. While hospitalized, she developed Type 2 diabetes. Then, her left lung collapsed, putting her in intensive care. Struggling to breathe on her own, she spent most of her fifth grade year in the hospital, but she was determined to return to school.

She has three days of dialysis a week, as well as physical therapy and numerous medications, but she has won the hearts of every adult she comes in contact with. Keeping up in class is still a challenge, but she is a fighter, and her academic performance is steadily increasing. Receiving home hospital services and classroom modification while at school, Alexa is improving day by day, and her spirit and drive make her an increasingly successful student.



Region 9

Corey Miracle

Hoover High School, Fresno Unified School District

Corey Miracle is a student who truly lives up to his name. Born with a physical condition that causes a sunken chest, he was often bullied and made fun of as a child. Though his parents worked hard to support him in overcoming his physical and emotional challenges, they didn't always know how.

But with the help of the education community at Hoover High School, he soon began to flourish. His teacher told him through hard work and the right exercises, Corey could be strong and fit. He worked toward this goal, and became one of the top wrestlers at his school. He stepped up as student representative to the school board, and took a leadership role in the Kindness Campaign. He is known as a student who always helps his classmates, and even serves as a mentor to Special Olympians. We congratulate Corey on his remarkable success



Region 10

Creighton Lee

Pacific Grove High School, Pacific Grove Unified School District

Creighton Lee was diagnosed with autism as a toddler. That hasn't stopped this young man as he moves through school, making many friends. He is known for being a meticulous dresser, his love of dancing and making short-form Vine videos.

Creighton makes the most of his opportunities, playing basketball and football, surfing and spending time at the youth center with his friends. He certainly applies himself to his studies, making the academic honor roll the last three years running. He was also selected student of the month three times. He swims for the Special Olympics, and over the past seven years has won 15 gold and 6 silver medals. He found time to volunteer 392 hours of community service while he was at Pacific Grove Middle School, where he was a featured commencement speaker. For that speech he earned a standing ovation, and ACSA joins in celebrating Creighton's accomplishments.



Region 11

Zackery Michaelson

Redwood High School, Visalia Unified School District

Zackery Michaelson has overcome much in his young life. When he was six, his grandparents—the primary financial support for the family—both passed away in the same year. Zackery's mother lost her job, and the family lost its home. His mother moved the family of five to Las Vegas in hopes of finding stability and employment, but they continued to struggle. It was so bad for a while they had to live in shelters and even their van. Because of this instability Zackery attended six different elementary schools. But from his first day at Redwood High School, he had a support team that cared and wanted the best for him. Although the family still struggles to get by, they will have been in their current home for more than a year, a good start on the road to stability. Through this all, Zackery has maintained a love for life, and family is his top priority.



Region 12

Gabrielle Lizares

Magnolia Junior High School, Chino Valley Unified School District

At 13 months old, Gabrielle "Gabbi" Lizares was speaking in complete sentences; at 15 months she was following three-point instructions. She was reading on her own by two. It took until the age of seven for doctors to diagnose her with Ullrich Congenital Muscular Dystrophy, a rare and incurable form of the disease. But Gabbi never slowed for a moment. She loves school and the GATE program for which her favorite teacher recommended her. The Magnolia staff helped Gabbi find routes that could accommodate her wheelchair and ensured her successes in school. Gabbi also plays in the school band and has found a real passion for music. Gabbi never feels sorry for herself, and has participated annually in the Muscular Dystrophy Association's fundraising walks. She helps her classmates understand the effects of muscular dystrophy and is a true rock star and inspiration to all around her.



Region 13

Lucas Brown-Boujan

Ventura High School, Ventura Unified School District

Lucas Brown-Boujan is a real-world example of not judging a book by the cover. He may look rough and tumble on the outside, but those who look beyond first impressions notice the book in his hand—and backpack full of them—to go along with his ready smile.

Lucas and his siblings were separated in foster care. He had trouble dealing with his life situation and drifted toward the streets, doing drugs and tagging walls. A fight landed him in alternative education and the court system. He immersed himself in the world of books, taking on such authors as Kerouac, Whitman and Gibran. Gradually this led to more success in school, and he began building connections to peers and staff.

He served as co-editor of Banner Bold, the Ventura High student literary publication, and helped lead the school's participation in Friday Night Live. Even with his living situation remaining shaky, Lucas has maintained his resiliency.



Region 14

DaWon Smith

Long Beach Polytechnic High School, Long Beach Unified School District

DaWon Smith seems like a typical college-bound young man. He's a three-year varsity swimmer, participant in several school clubs and a certified lifeguard with a good GPA who plans to become a nurse. But his exterior doesn't reveal how much he has survived to get to this point. When he was in ninth grade, a gang of 15 men attacked DaWon and left him with a broken jaw and multiple injuries. This

led to a big loss in his self-esteem and, combined with adjudication of the incident, sapped his study time and emotional reserves. Eventually his family moved from the high desert to Long Beach, and DaWon discovered an affinity for swimming.

Through the process he began to rebuild his life. He now knows that for every cruel person, there is one willing to lend a helping hand. As the first in his family to go to college, DaWon is on track for a good life.



Region 15

Andrew Penarubia

Glendora High School, Glendora Unified School District

When Andrew was a young boy, he suffered a devastating aneurysm and was given a 50-50 chance of living. Medical intervention was successful, and now Andrew wears a brace on his arm and his leg that limits his mobility. That didn't stop him from being a vital part of the Glendora High School community.

As a member of the marching band, Andrew made sure to always pull his weight. He participated in the annual athletic competition between classes and was always a crowd favorite. One year, his fellow students crowned him Homecoming King.

Andrew's attitude is always 100 percent positive, and he never uses his disability as an excuse or believes that any door is closed for him. In fact, he is a great example of how to live life to the fullest. When you speak with Andrew, your day becomes brighter.



Region 16

Jaquelinne Cortez

Diego Rivera Performing Arts Community School, Los Angeles Unified School District

While 17-year-old Jaquelinne Cortez attended Diego Rivera Performing Arts Community School, she was also taking adult classes in order to meet A-G requirements before the end of the school year.

What makes her busy schedule remarkable is the fact that she is a teen mother. After having a child her junior year of high school, Jaquelinne doubted she would make it to her senior year. Her mother is an immigrant from Mexico with no formal education and was a teen mother herself. However, her mom knew that education would be the key to success for Jaquelinne, and that she could be a good role model for her baby and her younger siblings if she persevered.

With the help of school counselors and the entire school support team, Jaquelinne has been inspired to become an exemplary student, finish high school and attend college.



Region 17

Adan Rosales

Esperanza High School, Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District

When Adan’s family was vacationing in Northern California in 2011 they experienced a tire blowout on the freeway, resulting in a crash that took the life of his younger brother and sister. His grief was agonizing, and it became a daily struggle for Adan to be motivated enough to attend school. His GPA dropped to 0.67. One day he shared with his SERVE class (Social, Emotional, Recreational, Vocational Education) what had happened to his family, and told the class how thankful he was for his SERVE family. The outpouring of compassion Adan received from his school community marked a new beginning. His grades soared, and he now serves as a role model for others, who appreciate his generous spirit. SERVE offered Adan a safe environment in which to heal, and gave him the academic and emotional support he needed to get back on path toward graduation.



Region 18

Alannamae Charfauros

Daniel Boone Elementary School, San Diego Unified School District

During the 2012-13 school year, Alannamae endured a major tragedy and was sent to live with her extended family. The English language learner had already proven herself to be tenacious and talented enough to become classified as a GATE student. Her resolve only continued to grow. Alannamae maintains excellent grades and is a model school citizen despite hardships she faces in her home situation. Alannamae’s circumstances would weigh so heavily on the average student that the pressure would keep them from functioning. Alannamae, however, found the warm environment of Boone school to be a nurturing place where she could thrive and make school success a priority. Alannamae is an excellent example of how Boone Elementary School staff surrounded and supported one of its own; school is a safe haven where she can blossom and grow.



Region 19

Darrel Wilson

Amistad High School, Desert Sands Unified School District

Darrel Wilson has overcome significant obstacles to her education. She came to Amistad High School in 2012-13 after not attending school since 2011. Growing up in an emotionally abusive household, Darrel was placed in several different foster care homes. In an effort to restart her future, she moved in with her aunt in La Quinta. Darrel received special education services due to genetic hearing and vision deficiencies, and educators at Amistad, an alternative school, were able to fast-track her placement into a program where she thrived. She took on leadership roles on campus, including manager at the student store. She was also a member of the basketball team. Not only did Darrel work hard at school, she also held down two jobs. Her school support team says that Darrel’s optimism, cheerfulness and continued commitment to her future are unwavering.

2015

Adult Ed

Ruben Chacon

Baldwin Park Adult and Community Education

Ruben Chacon attended the Baldwin Park Adult and Community Education Program to raise his reading and writing level. He has severe cerebral palsy and communicates with a voice simulator. Even though he has a disability, he hasn't let that stop him. Ruben has earned two AA degrees in Business Management and Real Estate, as well as doing income tax preparation, owning a candy business, and being a docent for the Los Angeles Fair in the Fine Arts Museum. His greatest gift has been getting the adult education students to accept severely handicapped individuals.



Adult Ed

Crystal Montero

Berkeley Adult School

Growing up in a poor family, Crystal never had the opportunity to go to school. As a transgender child she was physically, emotionally, and sexually abused. After becoming a monk she came to the United States in 1981 in search of better opportunities, a better life, and freedom. With her dedication and hard work she completed a Business Communications and Job Preparation course at the Berkeley Adult School. ESL classes helped improve her English speaking, reading, and writing skills. These attributes will serve her well as she pursues a college education and being a voice for the LGBTQ communities.



Region 1

John Carrillo

Pioneer High School, Shasta Union High School District

John Carrillo is a student who has made great strides in just a few years. Coming to Pioneer High from an unsettled family situation, John has gone from being an angry and rebellious young man to an ambitious campus leader. John's family of five struggled with finding a place to live, and even had to live out of a car when transitioning between homes. In spite of challenges and hardship, John's intelligence and determination came through, and by his junior year he had already aced the California High School Exit Exam. He opted to stay in school, completed a Teen Leadership class and ultimately became seen as a leader on campus, growing both academically and socially. Now he plans to attend Shasta College and earn certification in welding. He has also expressed an interest in teaching. From an unsettled situation, this young man is headed toward stability, independence, and a solid future.



Region 2

Samantha Green

Antelope High School, Roseville Joint Unified School District

Samantha Green is a young woman with a bright future. That future was in question just a few years ago as she worked through many issues surrounding a broken family. Samantha was only in second grade when family troubles led to a long struggle against hardship. Her complex emotional state evidenced itself in behavior at school that impacted teachers and other students. Eventually she found herself behind in school credits, and continued behavior problems only served to make her unhappier. Fortunately, she found a PE teacher, Matt Ray, who provided her with mentoring and motivation. Samantha began to work harder at school, and the results showed in a 3.0 GPA. She began thinking about college, and now hopes to attend California State University, Humboldt and study Environmental Science. She is grateful for her mother, who was committed to holding the family together, and for the teachers who were able to look beyond the anger to see her potential.



Region 3

Danielle Dugan

Walnutwood High School, Folsom Cordova Unified School District

Danielle Dugan has not let a physical ailment stop her from succeeding. She’s a smiling survivor of the curveball life threw at her.

An avid equestrian and captain of the JV high school softball team in her sophomore year, she suddenly found it difficult to sit in a chair for more than 30 minutes, making school and extracurricular activities impossible. Ultimately, doctors determined she had a double level spinal fusion and would need spinal surgery, as the disks in her lower spine had almost degenerated into non-existence. In addition, a second condition caused bulging disks and misshapen vertebrae, all making daily life difficult.

But Danielle did not let the lengthy recovery from surgery get her down. She managed to stay current with her schoolwork and earned a 3.84 GPA, graduating a semester early. She is now in college and attended the Congress of Future Medical Leaders in Washington, D.C., where she was inducted into the Torch and Laurel Honor Society.



Region 4

Walter Jones, Jr.

Vallejo High School, Vallejo City Unified School District

Walter Jones is exactly the kind of student the Every Student Succeeding Award was designed to highlight. His family broke apart when he was only two months old, and Walter had to learn to grow up faster than most children. The stresses in his life led to disruptive behaviors at school. Fortunately, he was able to connect with educators who earned his trust and helped him to change course, find his passions, and reach for success.

In his junior year, he joined the Vallejo City USD Gospel Choir and participated in the Fighting Back Partnership, where he completed 40 hours of community service. He also volunteered at the Hospitality Academy and was honored for donating the most volunteer hours in 2013-14. His hard work led to his current position as Lead Organizer-Intern for the Fighting Back Partnership. Walter has been accepted into California State University, East Bay, where he plans to major in Business Administration with a minor in Sociology. He would like to someday start his own non-profit to provide youth with resources such as mentoring, counseling, tutoring and scholarships.



Region 5

Christian Barnes

Lowell Alternative High School, San Francisco Unified School District

Christian Barnes proves that, indeed, sometimes a student in a very difficult situation can shine through it all and exemplify everything the Every Student Succeeding Award is about.

Christian has lived an unsettled life the past three years. Living in transition—without a home to call your own—can do that. Yet that has hardly slowed down this indomitable young man. In spite of a living situation anyone would find challenging, through a combination of hard work and determination Christian has succeeded in school. He maintains a GPA of 3.72, along with excellent marks in citizenship. His teachers note that he is an excellent student and always willing to go the extra mile to help others. Christian also works in the administrative offices as a main office student aide, answering phone calls, greeting and assisting visitors, and delivering packages to staff all throughout the campus. His assistance and willingness to serve is noted by all in the office.



Region 6

Alexander Large

Floyd I Marchus School, Contra Costa County Office of Education

Alexander Large entered the Floyd I. Marchus School Counseling and Education program in the sixth grade. Marchus School is a program operating out of the county office of education that offers a structured and safe environment for special education students with social or behavioral issues. Alexander began the program with a lack of motivation toward his schoolwork, and he struggled with interactions with both peers and adults. As he progressed in the program, he began to improve in these areas, developing more positive relationships with those around him. His self-confidence grew, and he took an increased interest in schoolwork and advocating for himself.

As he started high school, he transitioned to a Marchus satellite class and continued to grow in confidence and resourcefulness. He became a leader in his PE classes and would encourage classmates on to higher achievements. He started attending the Los Medanos College transition class and worked on his transition plan for post-high school life.



Region 7

Itzel Villalobos

Stanislaus Military Academy, Stanislaus County Office of Education

Stanislaus County Superintendent Tom Changnon had a vision to create a learning experience for students with different needs, students like Itzel Villalobos who thrived in his Stanislaus Military Academy. Itzel ended her senior year at SMA as a gunnery sergeant. Only two students have attained a higher rank. By the time she was 13, Itzel was selling drugs and robbing people to feed her own addiction. At 14, she gave her life to her religious beliefs, and began to reach out with projects that help youth and the community.

When she entered the SMA, she found more positive reinforcement. The military discipline resonated with Itzel, and she learned traits such as honor and courage. The rigorous academic structure pushed her forward. According to SMA Principal Daniel Vannest, “The character instilled in her and her own determination to make a worthwhile life for herself have brought her from a sad beginning to a future full of dreams and potential.”



Region 8

Nathan Smith

Herman Intermediate School, Oak Grove Unified School District

Nathan Smith taught the Herman Intermediate School community in San Jose’s Oak Grove School District the importance of having a positive attitude and outlook on life, no matter what the obstacles.

Nathan demonstrated unbelievable resiliency, flexibility and adaptability when he lost five family members in a plane crash during the Thanksgiving holiday. Despite the tragedy, Nathan missed only one day of school. Principal Laura Meusel said his perseverance, strong academic progress and exemplary behavior are remarkable. He continues to be involved in band, performing in concerts with the school, and he earned spots on the Principal’s List and Honor Roll. He was selected this year to perform in the California Music Educators Association Junior High Honor Band. Nathan is considered a role model with a can-do spirit and a willingness to never give up.



Region 9

Donoven Smith

Ballico School (Buhach Colony High School), Balico-Cressey School District

When Donoven Smith came to the Ballico-Cressey School District in the eighth grade, he was failing classes and fighting all the time. He was raised and educated in Virginia, but his mother sent him to live with his father in California, when she could no longer handle his behavior. Donoven didn’t want to be in school at all, but with the help of teachers in Ballico-Cressey and the support of his father and stepmother, Donoven began to lose the chip on his shoulder and started to love school.

“Ballico made learning fun,” he said. And when he did well, he felt good because people were proud of him. His grades began to rise and he found sports. In his third trimester, Donoven made the “A” honor role with a 3.8 grade point average and no discipline issues.



Region 10

Mario Juarez

Pajaro Valley High School, Pajaro Valley USD

The Pajaro Valley High School administration is proud to have served Mario Juarez as he overcame the obstacles faced as an undocumented student, English learner and unaccompanied minor.

From the age of 12, Mario held agricultural jobs to pay rent and bills for himself and his sister. Despite living on his own and facing pressures such as gangs and violence, Mario made a commitment to do the work necessary to graduate from high school. The school's language specialist, counseling team and Dream Club helped him along the way. Learning English wasn't easy, since he had to reach a level of proficiency to pass the state exit exam. As a senior last year, he did just that after being in the country for less than six years. He also met A-G requirements. He is the first in his family to earn a high school diploma, and he desires to go to college.



Region 11

Eduardo Cardenas

Porterville High School, Porterville Unified School District

In the 10th grade, Eddie Cardenas was burned over 65 percent of his upper body in a barbecue explosion. At the Fresno Community Hospital Burn Unit, he underwent two days of debris removal. On the third day he surprised everyone and got up and walked. But he remained in the hospital for more than seven months and endured 25 surgeries. His mother and father were there every day, and he became an inspiration to other burn patients.

Throughout his ordeal, Eddie managed to keep up with his school work through the Fresno USD Home and Hospital Program. When he returned to Porterville High School in his junior year, he stayed on the A-G track and applied to Fresno State, Fullerton, Monterey and Northridge universities. He plans to pursue a career in physical therapy or a related field where he can help others. Eddie is now healthy and strong, physically and mentally.



Region 12

Kendra Smith

Options for Youth Charter School, Victor Valley High School District

Kendra Smith was student body president and winter formal queen, and she helped publish her school's first yearbook—all while living in a car with her mother and two younger siblings. The family would park in a shopping center, showered at a local storage business and collected cans to earn money for food. One day her mother saw Options for Youth Charter School in Victor Valley High School District and urged Kendra to complete her education.

Kendra found hope and support at Options for Youth that led her out of despair and into a world of reachable dreams. She was welcomed and nurtured by teachers and school leaders and became a big part of the school. Respected for her courage and strength of character, Kendra now lives in the Ontario area and attends Chaffey Community College.



Region 13

JR Hamson

Hope Elementary School, Hope School District

It is apropos that James Robert "J.R." Hamson found his success at Hope Elementary School. Having faced so many challenges so early in life, hope is exactly what he needed. When he came to Hope Elementary in the fourth grade, J.R. had been removed from his parents' home and placed in the custody of his older sister. He had been in and out of school, missing months at a time. Coupled with a learning disability, he struggled to keep up with his classmates and was placed in a special day class.

But the school provided J.R. with counseling and specialized academic instruction. His confidence on the rise, his behavior improved, he made friends and was returned to a general education setting. His reading and math skills jumped significantly, and he was selected as a peer tutor with a younger student. His peers love and admire him, and he is known as caring, courteous, helpful and cooperative. As he graduated sixth grade, he stated, "This is my best year yet." All he needed was a little Hope.



Region 14

Claire Wineland

Redondo Union High School, Redondo Beach Unified School District

Claire Wineland is a student who is an inspiration to everyone around her. When she was in seventh grade, complications from a routine surgery related to Cystic Fibrosis landed her in a medically induced coma and on full life support for 16 days, with a 1 percent chance of survival. She pulled through, but missed an entire school year to recover. Returning as a home hospital student, she worked year round to recover credits. Her disability affects her energy level and stamina, and requires periodic hospitalizations. But despite her struggles, Claire has maintained a positive attitude. She takes her disability in stride, and has a "no excuses" approach to education and hard work. Her senior year at Redondo Union High School, she took AP courses and participated in a rigorous physical fitness program. She shares her story with others around the world, bringing hope and inspiration to those living with CF. She also founded the Claire's Place Foundation to help other families affected by the disease.



Region 15

Jason Ortiz

Charter Oak High School, Charter Oak Unified School District

Jason Ortiz is a student whose life could have easily turned out much differently. He grew up in a gang-infested neighborhood, joining a local gang when he was 12. In 2011, he was attacked by rival gang members, suffering from a cracked skull and broken wrist. Once healed, he sought revenge, sending rival gang members to the hospital. He was arrested for the crime, and while in jail discovered his father had died. Mourning the loss of his father, Jason decided to turn his life around. When released, he knew he would have difficulty escaping the gang lifestyle in his neighborhood, so he went to live with his oldest brother in Charter Oak. His brother had only one requirement: that Jason get involved with extra-curricular activities. He began playing football, and with the support of his coaches and teachers, began making progress academically. He was chosen as team captain, and his team is a surrogate family. He still struggles, but is on an upward trajectory toward his goals and dreams.



Region 17

Andrew Godinez

Anaheim High School, Anaheim Union High School District

Andrew Godinez has been through more in his short life than most adults twice his age. He is essentially a self-raised young man, caring for himself and his younger siblings in a neighborhood filled with gangs and drugs. With no father figure and a mother who was in jail, he learned self-reliance at a young age, forced to work to put food on the table. Loneliness and stress are a regular part of his life, and he has been tempted to drop out of high school many times. But despite this, Andrew has kept a positive attitude. He was captain of the varsity baseball team, a member of the National Honor Society and AVID, and involved in community service. Even when he was kicked out of the house, he saw it as an opportunity to "shine." His determination to succeed despite what life threw at him is so remarkable that one of his coaches named his son after Andrew because of what he represents: strength, resiliency and optimism.



Region 18

Kamil Robinson

Hoover High School, San Diego Unified School District

Determination and grit are what best describe Kamil Robinson, a recent graduate of Hoover High School in the San Diego Unified School District. In September of 2014, Kamil's mother suffered a heart attack. Although she survived, he and his siblings were going to be placed in foster care. Luckily, his grandmother was able to care for the children. However, his mother and grandparents decided it would be best for the family to move out of state, a decision that Kamil feared would derail his plans to finish high school and attend college in California.

The day before the family's scheduled departure, his mother agreed that Kamil could live with his teacher in order to remain on track for graduation. Since that time, Kamil raised his grade point average, competed in Hoover High's first-ever divisional championship football game, and received letters of acceptance to several colleges. He intends to pursue a degree in political science and criminology, so he can take on a career in law to help others through social change.



Region 19

Albert Harmon

Amistad High School, Desert Sands Unified School District

Albert Harmon is a young man who has proven that success is possible despite any hurdles that may arise. When he began at Amistad High School as a junior, he had only 50 credits. Diagnosed with ADHD, he had difficulty focusing and staying on task, especially reading and writing. Amistad's special education services, coupled with its flexible, self-paced program, has made it possible for Albert to obtain the credits he needs. In 2013, he and his fiancée had a daughter who was born with disabilities, requiring occupational and physical therapy to address her challenges. Because of difficulties with his living situation, Albert and his family moved into his older sister's home in another city. Yet every day for several months, Albert rode the public bus more than 15 miles each way just to make it to class, showing his tenacious dedication to completing high school, no matter how long it takes.

Adult Ed

Patty López

North Valley Occupational Center

Originally from Michoacán, Mexico, Assemblywoman Patty López came to the U.S. at 12 and grew up in Pacoima. While raising her own family, she started studying at the North Valley Occupational Center. As a mother of four, she knew educating herself was the best way to provide a better future for her daughters. She took basic ESL and high school classes, GED preparation, vocational and college courses.

Patty became active in a local parent group that worked with the Los Angeles Unified School District to help failing schools. She gradually expanded her political and community organizing roles, and was especially concerned by the elimination of adult education funding at the height of the state's financial crisis.

The desire to help her community led to a decision to run for the State Assembly in 2014. In a surprising upset, she won the election and took office as a political novice. She has since introduced legislation in key areas of concern to her and her constituents. Four of her bills have been signed by the Governor.

Locally, she has hosted dozens of free workshops on housing, education, small businesses, immigration and other issues. She has been a champion for the people in countless ways.

Now, Patty is fighting hard to rebuild the adult education system in California. In 2016, she introduced a bill to restore funding to pre-recession levels.

Whether from within the legislature or elsewhere, Patty's plan is to continue working hard to improve our communities, and she is deeply committed to helping people understand our system of government.

Patty overcame difficulties in her life by educating herself and taking the time to learn something new each day. Having access to adult education programs helped her achieve her goals and it is one of the reasons she wants to ensure that other adults have that same opportunity.



Adult Ed

Jeffery George

Sonoma County Library's Adult Literacy Program

Born in Trinidad and Tobago, Jeffrey George left school before learning to read and write in order to support his brothers and sisters. For years, Jeffrey used his innate intelligence and positive demeanor to mask his inability to read. Faced with a seemingly simple task of ordering from a restaurant menu, Jeffrey would request more time to decide, let his companion order first, and then order that as well because it sounded delicious.

Jeffrey shares that his biggest challenge as an adult was overcoming his own embarrassment about his lack of education and opening up in order to ask for help. In August 2014, Jeffrey George walked into the Sonoma County Library's Adult Literacy Program to sign up for weekly tutoring. His recorded goals were learning the alphabet, reading, writing, and spelling in order to help his children, interact with their teachers, get his driver's license, and apply for a business license. His volunteer tutor Laura Owens shares, "Jeffrey was a pleasure to coach; he was motivated, always receptive, grateful, and in very good spirits, even though he was working several jobs as well as being tutored, and being a dad and husband."

By May 2015, Jeffrey had met and exceeded all of his original goals. He was able to read to his children, had obtained his driver's license, and was applying for full-time work. Jeffrey now runs his own business, George Family Landscaping, and is able to financially support his wife and four children. He has a future goal of purchasing his own home.

After facing his fears, Jeffrey describes his experience with adult education as one that opened him up to the possibilities and attainment of his life and education goals, but also opened him to spiritual growth and expansion in many other areas of his life.

Jeffrey George is now a successful business owner, a proud father and family provider, a community member who helps when needed, and a positive, encouraging presence to those fortunate enough to interact with him.



Region 1

Bobbie Purify

Eureka High School, Eureka City School

For as long as she can remember, Bobbie Purify has paved her own path in life.

“Everything was based on my choices and my decisions,” she said. “I had to figure out right from wrong. I had to be more mature about things. And more responsible.”

ACSA’s Region 1 ESS recipient grew up in a house where her mom was not always there, and her father was out of the picture. The pain of not having her father around still lingers.

“It was always interesting on Father’s Day in elementary school, how we’d always make these Father Day cards,” Bobbie said. “And I was just kind of one of the few who was like, ‘I have no one to make these for’ and I was always a little bummed. There’s not much I could have done.”

With an unstable home life, Bobbie sought security at Eureka High School. She quickly gravitated to educators like teacher Kristie Christiansen and Associate Principal Kathleen Honsal, where she found support.

“She lightens up my room,” Honsal said. “She lightens up the day. She is the student that I can’t believe that she’s been in my life as long as she has. She brings hope. Hope for the future.”

Bobbie not only excelled in the classroom. She dominated the athletic scene. She was named first-team, all-district in basketball in 2014 and 2015. She also found success in track and field in the long jump, with a personal record of 18-feet, 3.75 inches. She earned an athletic scholarship to the Oregon Institute of Technology, where she plans to major in radiology.

“I tell her, ‘We’re sending our light up to Oregon’ because she definitely lights up the room, and she is just a wonderful ambassador,” Honsal said. “She’s an ambassador for people of all race and socio-economic groups. She’s just a great student and a great human being, and she’s going to go a long, long way.”

But perhaps Bobbie’s greatest feat is her devotion to her younger brother, Jay’Cile.

“He has autism,” Bobbie said. “He’s very shy. He doesn’t talk much, and can’t communicate very well. But he’s understandable, which is good – and easier on my part. He’s so funny. I love that guy. It’s like it’s me. But it’s not me because he’s so different. But he’s so much of me, just in different ways. And that’s why I enjoy being around him.”

While Bobbie will be leaving her brother and her Eureka High family for Oregon in the fall, she knows the community is behind her as she continues to pursue her goals.

“She makes me smile a lot,” Christiansen said. “She fills my heart, and she’s brought me a lot of tears too to realize it’s really hard as a teacher to see what some of our students have gone through. But the way Bobbie has chosen to overcome those, she’s just bulldozed through everything and been a role model and example, not only for her peers but for us, as well as what you can do as an individual.”



Region 2

Maria Adriana Lopez

Antelope High School, Roseville Joint Union High School District

Maria Lopez loves to smile. But you can also make the argument that her smile is a defense mechanism. It is a way to hide the pain.

“I guarantee you they have no clue what I’ve been through,” Maria said. “And it’s hard for me to sometimes hide it. There were some points when I was really sad and just depressed. I had my moments where I would cry for no reason. But it was because I would think about the things that happened to me.”

Maria dealt with abuse and neglect throughout her childhood. In some ways, she says she had to raise herself.

“There were points where I was like, ‘You know what?’” Maria said. “‘I need the love and affection of a mother which I have not had my whole life.’ When I was young, it was all about courts. It was all about visits. It was all about this and that. And it’s like I never had the love of my parents. I never got their support.”

Maria was placed in the foster care system after an altercation between her mother and stepfather in which police were called to the family’s home. But foster care only made things more difficult. Maria says there were times where she considered ending her life.

“I had to realize that it wasn’t the end of the world,” Maria said. “There were times where I would have some tough moments. Why throw everything away when you have so much? When there’s more for people to give you. When there’s more to receive. I can’t just throw everything away.”

But Maria still needed help. Thankfully, she found it at Antelope High with counselors Erica Joseph and Brian Hewitt.

“I have a high belief in people’s internal fortitude,” Hewitt said. “I think we can accomplish things. I think we can. Even folks who have been through really traumatic situations. I believe in all my students, but I will tell you that this young lady has persevered as much as if not more than any of them. And that’s probably why this story is happening.”

Maria says she does not know where she would be without their constant support.

“They were just always there for me,” Maria said. “And the love that I have for them and the trust that I have with them is because they earned it. And all of their love and support that they’ve given to me.”

Despite her trials and tribulations, Maria persevered and graduated from Antelope High in June. Her dream is to join the Air Force. But for now, she wants to share her story with others.

“I can’t really complain about it because of the things that happened to me in my past. If that would not have happened, I wouldn’t be here,” Maria said. “I wouldn’t be the person I am right now. I’m very happy with who I am. I love myself for who I am. I’ve been through so much, but I’m standing up.”



Region 3

Cristina Angel Manuel

Walnutwood High School, Folsom Cordova Unified School District

Imagine a life as a teenage mother raising a child, while at the same time chasing your educational goals. For Cristina Angel Manuel, that is her reality with her 3-year-old daughter Rosa Linda.

“Part of being an adolescent, a normal adolescent is not putting other people’s needs ahead of your own,” said Jenny Harmon, a teacher at Walnutwood High School in Rancho Cordova. “When you have a kid, that’s hard. We often see kids struggling with that. The necessity to set aside regular teenage life or whatever they would have been doing to raise their kids. Cristina has understood that and been able to do that from the very beginning.”

In many ways, her daughter, Rosa Linda, is the reason behind Cristina’s success.

“She brings me a lot of happiness, a lot of motivation,” Cristina said. “I look at her and say, ‘You’re my motivation to keep on going. For me to succeed for us. For me to be an example for you, so as you get older, you can see and keep on going through whatever we go through and stay together.’”

Born and raised in Michoacán, Mexico in the small town of San Lorenzo, Cristina was the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of a neighbor when she was just 7 years old.

“When that happened, I had no idea it was something bad,” she said. “I had no idea it was a sexual assault. To me it was, ‘this is how you play.’ Sadly, where I’m from, people don’t know as much.”

Cristina’s family later moved to the United States; though it would be years before she disclosed the assault to her parents.

“I felt like something in me was trapped,” she said. “And as soon as I told my parents, I was feeling more relieved. If you’ve ever been sexually assaulted, I would say speak up. Don’t be afraid. The help you get is very very big. Don’t be scared.”

By the age of 15, Cristina was a student at Cordova High School just outside of Sacramento. One night, she ended up in the emergency room with what she thought was food poisoning. Little did Cristina know, she was pregnant.

“We went, and the doctors told me, ‘Oh, you’re having a daughter,’” Cristina said. “It was hard. I thought to myself, ‘Oh, no I’m not having a baby. They just want to get rid of a baby and they’re giving it to me. Or this is not right.’”

Cristina enrolled at Walnutwood High, an alternative independent study school that provided daycare and an adolescent parent program. The school gave Cristina the opportunity to make an easier transition to motherhood, while chasing her educational goals.

And her goals do not stop with a high school diploma. Cristina is pursuing a career as a social worker or psychologist. She says it’s her calling – “anything that has do with helping others to overcome a difficult situation,” she said.

“To provide lots of help for others, and to help others deal with the experience I’ve had,” Cristina said, “and to be a part of their growth – I really just want to do that. I really believe that’s what I have to do in life.”



Region 4

Gabriela Jauregui

Lower Lake High School, Konocti Unified School District

Gabriela Jauregui never wanted the life her parents chose for her.

“In my house, there’s an expectation that women are supposed to stay home,” Jauregui said. “Even though I was young, that expectation was for me. I didn’t want to be part of just being a housewife. I knew I wanted to go against what I was being taught, the traditional views.”

And so, in an attempt to defy her parents’ wishes, Gabriela rebelled by dressing like her brothers.

“My mom would always try to make me be lady-like,” Jauregui said. “Try to wear dresses. Do my hair. And I never liked that. I wanted to be like my brothers. I started wearing a beanie. I would take their shorts or their shirts so I could mimic their lifestyle because maybe if I was a boy, I would be treated like they were and have more freedom, instead of being closed in the walls of my own house.”

At Lower Lake High School in ACSA Region 4, Gabriela found a place where she could excel and chase her dreams of going to college. The school offered a college and university preparatory program called Upward Bound. It’s where Gabriela met teacher Michael McMurtrey.

“It’s completely changed me,” Jauregui said. “I came in there and said, ‘I just want to go to college. I don’t know what I want to do. I just want to go to college. I don’t want to be what my parents set out for me to be.’”

McMurtrey also noticed Gabriela’s new sense of self-confidence as she competed in soccer, basketball and track.

“All these barriers that were in front of her slowly start going away,” McMurtrey said. “And she’s able to understand that, yes, she can play sports. Yes, she can go to college. Yes, she can make this impact at the school.”

Gabriela exceeded even her own expectations, and in the fall, she will become a first-generation college student at University of California, Berkeley.

“It’s emotional,” Jauregui said. “They don’t expect it of me. Even though I’ve told them, I’ve shown them through all the activities, my grades, trying to be the best person I can be. I’m not sure they still think I can be who I want to be, so they’re still iffy about me being able to overcome obstacles that essentially they’re bringing for me.”

Gabriela’s tremendous success is not lost on the faculty at Lower Lake High School, least of all her principal, Jessica Taliaferro.

“I’m so proud of her,” Taliaferro said. “And I know she’s going to do huge things in this world because she’d had to work for everything that she’s had so far, that work ethic will pay off in the long run.”

As for Gabriela, her mission is to change the culture for those who follow.

“I want to set the bar pretty much to show them that if I did this you can do so much more,” Jauregui said. “Even if it seems impossible, there’s always going to be a way.”



Region 5

Rosalie Reibel

Clarendon Elementary School, San Francisco Unified School District

If you ask Rosalie Reibel to tell you her favorite class at Clarendon Elementary in San Francisco, she will quickly answer, “Art.” While Rosalie is a fan of art, it turns out, her art teacher is a bigger fan of Rosalie.

“She’s just wonderful,” art specialist Ellen Weinstein said. “Rosie has brought so much joy. It’s always amazing when you get to have a student for 6 years and then you look back on all they’ve achieved. And it’s so touching.”

Rosalie’s achievements are all the more impressive when you learn her story. She was born on August 18, 2004 in what her mother, Carolyn, described as a normal delivery.

“Everything was just the way it was supposed to be according to the pediatrician,” Carolyn Reibel said. “I was just so excited to start my life as a mother.”

But when Rosalie was 18 months old, her parents began to notice a lack of coordination and balance in their daughter. Three months later, doctors diagnosed her with medulloblastoma, a cancerous pediatric brain tumor.

“I kind of can’t believe we even went through this because it was so hellish,” Reibel said. “It wasn’t just the fact that she might die. To hear a doctor say that ‘we can extend her life but she might not make it to kindergarten’ is just the scariest, most God-awful thing anyone can ever tell you.”

The tumor, located in the fourth ventricle of the brain underneath the cerebellum, explained Rosalie's balance issues. Doctors performed surgery to remove the tumor but the treatment that followed was 18 months of chemotherapy and radiation.

"You're so totally encapsulated in the moment of every single hour of this child's life," Reibel said. "She's facing challenges that you yourself have never seen. You just have to take care of your child in that moment."

Rosalie's tumor recurred in her spine in June of 2008. But after more chemotherapy and radiation sessions, she is now cancer free. Rosalie still uses a walker to help her with coordination and balance. But she has navigated the campus with unwavering confidence despite a few obstacles.

"It's hard because sometimes in the after school child care, there's backpacks in the way and I have to get over them using my walker," Rosalie said. "And also, it's really hard to get into school in the tight spaces."

Rosalie graduated from Clarendon Elementary in the spring and is now attending Presidio Middle School. The road map to her future is not entirely clear. But what is known is Rosalie's kindness and determination will continue to help her persevere through life's toughest challenges.

"I think Rosalie has helped gain more empathy for all students who may have learning challenges or physical differences," said Peter Van Court, principal at Clarendon Elementary. "And it's been a big part of the school. Learning that we live in a world where you really want to understand that there are challenges. But the people who have challenges and are able to overcome those challenges actually have much more to offer than you would imagine if you would just take the time to get to know them. And Rosalie is definitely an example of that."



Region 6

Kassan Ortiz Farrakhan

Martin Luther King, Jr. Junior High School, Pittsburg Unified School District

Kassan Ortiz Farrakhan went from being a troubled student to a model student, working through issues of anger and alienation from a young age.

"Kassan is a true model of every student succeeding and pushing through many obstacles that were placed in the way of his achievement," Jeff Varner, principal of Parkside Elementary, said.

When Varner met Kassan, he was a kindergartener who had been removed from school for attacking his teacher. From the start, Kassan had disciplinary issues, but the counseling and administrative team at Pittsburg Unified School District began to work with Kassan, his family and the team at Parkside.

"Kassan's family struggled thinking that nobody cared about them," Varner said.

Kassan was placed in Pittsburg USD's Counseling Enrichment Program, which provides small classes supported by behaviorists and psychologists. The focus is to work with students that are a danger to themselves or others in a mainstream classroom, providing tools to work through high-stimulation situations when around others. With resources to understand his own behavior, respect others and make different choices, Kassan was returned to mainstream classes in his second grade year.

Varner credits Parkside's commitment to Restorative Justice for helping students like Kassan. "[We use] Restorative Justice techniques in all of our behaviors," he said. "The main point of discipline is to change a behavior. We believe in giving a child a voice and listening to why a choice was made, whether it was [a] positive or a negative choice.

"We need to find the underlying reason why the choice was made, address it and give the child alternatives if they find themselves in that situation again," he continued.

From an elementary career involving more than 12 pages of disciplinary action, including attacks on teachers and other students, Kassan has transitioned to junior high without any incidents.

"He's doing well academically with absolute zero discipline or behavior issues," Varner said, and describes Kassan as having his "eye on success."

Now in middle school at Martin Luther King, Jr. Junior High, Kassan has participated in the school's anti-bullying task force and other community service activities. No longer a "problem student," acting out of frustration and anger, Kassan has transformed into an engaged and ambitious young man.



Region 7

Dante Del Prete

Sierra High School, Manteca Unified School District

Dante Del Prete is a young man who exudes positivity.

“A lot of people look at everything that’s wrong in their life and how things aren’t going their way,” said Greg Leland, assistant principal at Sierra High in Manteca – ACSA Region 7. “Here’s a guy who’s had so many things that haven’t gone his way. And yet whenever you talk to him, he’s positive, he’s upbeat.”

But what makes Dante’s story all the more remarkable is the journey he took to get to this point in his life. Born prematurely at 28 weeks, Dante suffered a stroke after birth and developed hydrocephalus, a buildup of too much cerebrospinal fluid in the brain. Doctors told Dante’s parents he might never walk or talk.

“As a father, it’s just having to have faith,” Rick Del Prete said. “We’re powerless. There’s nothing we can do. When the news came down, and we’re in the neo-natal care, it’s a lot of fear and not knowing what the diagnosis was.”

Doctors also diagnosed Dante with a mild form of cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder that affects muscle tone, movement and motor skills. Dante underwent intense speech therapy, and by the age of 2 ½, he was speaking full sentences. His physical limitations still lingered, but that did not stop him from developing a love of sports. Dante participated in both Little League baseball and basketball.

“In my heart, I knew that his fine motor skills were not going to allow him to play the way he wanted – to play, the way I played,” Rick Del Prete said. “But he always tried, and he loved it. He always loved sports because I did.”

In fourth grade, Dante faced yet another obstacle, a tumor in his shoulder.

“He had fallen down and he didn’t complain,” said Zoe Del Prete, Dante’s mother. “But I took him to the doctor. And they discovered he had a tumor between his humerus and his shoulder bone. Because he was premature, the humerus and the shoulder bone did not fuse together, so a tumor was growing in its place.”

The tumor was benign, but doctors inserted two titanium rods in Dante’s left arm, limiting his range of motion and ending his dreams of playing competitive sports.

“At first, I didn’t want to believe it,” Dante said. “I thought that honestly I’d have a chance to compete again. But I couldn’t, and that was that. I just rolled with the punches.”

Dante still wanted to stay connected to sports, so he joined the Sierra High football team as a manager and later assisted the basketball team as a videographer.

“Obviously, we have a tight knit group with our basketball team, and he was a part of that,” said Scott Thomason, Sierra High head basketball coach. “We always considered him a family member with our basketball team. For him to be around it, unable to play but to be around it with the football team and the basketball team, it was pretty special for him.”

Despite the constant challenges and struggles, Dante’s commitment to persevering is what those who know him find compelling.

“When you’re in education, you’re dealing with 14 or 15 hundred kids a year,” Leland said. “Dante is one of the kids I’ll never forget because of everything that he’s gone through in his life.”



Region 8

Laila Raymond

Fischer Middle School, Alum Rock Union Elementary School District

Bullying has an impact on most students at one time or another. For some, it’s a daily struggle that leaves them feeling insecure, isolated and afraid.

Laila Raymond was one of those students.

For most of Laila’s early years in elementary school, she was repeatedly and relentlessly bullied. By the time she entered Lyssa Perry’s fourth grade class, she was so overwhelmed and intimidated at school she had nearly missed half a year.

“[She] was extremely far behind,” Perry said, “and it was evident in all of her work and her test scores. Laila was scoring below grade level in math and language arts on the state tests as well.”

This was in spite of the fact that Perry knew Laila to be an intelligent student who loved education.

“I knew my focus had to be on not only providing a place where she could feel safe, but more importantly, building her confidence in her academic abilities and self again,” Perry said.

With Perry’s help, Laila began attending after school intervention classes and working with her teacher one-on-one and in small group settings to help fill the holes in her math skills.

“As Laila worked her way through fourth grade, it definitely was not easy,” Perry said. “However, I never saw her give up. She always kept going.”

As her confidence slowly grew, Perry watched Laila blossom in sports, speak up in class discussions, make friends, work collaboratively with other students and persevere during difficult tasks, none of which she felt comfortable doing the year before.

Laila would “get out there and play with the best of them,” Perry said. “I saw a spark ignite in Laila that had, for so long, been dim.”

By the end of fourth grade, Laila was performing proficiently in both language arts and math. She no longer missed school, became a role model in the classroom, and ultimately “began to see in herself everything her teachers had seen all along.”

Perry kept an eye on Laila through fifth grade, where she continued to thrive and develop into a high-level critical thinker. After Laila moved into middle school, Perry’s career took her to the same school as an assistant principal. Laila transferred to Fischer Middle School after the year had already started, which concerned her former teacher.

“I was worried at how she would acclimate, especially knowing her past. However, all my fears were quickly put at ease. It was evident those fears were only mine, as she dove fearlessly into all of her classes.”

Laila’s academic success is a clear measure of how far she has come. She is enrolled in a Math, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) class, participating in activities and competitions including oral presentations. Once far behind in math and science, Laila is now motivated to achieve her goals and confident about her abilities, with the dream to attend Stanford and become a pediatrician.

She has also found her confidence in the social issues which once kept her from attending school. Not long after her seventh grade year began, she was bullied by two young boys, along with other students. However, Laila remained unfazed. She stood up for herself and her fellow students, then calmly brought the behavior to the teacher’s attention, allowing the situation to be effectively handled by the staff.

“Laila is a beautiful girl inside and out,” Perry said, “and instead of becoming a victim of her circumstances and allowing people to break her down, she stood up and became her own champion.”



Region 9

Isaac Daugherty

Phoenix Secondary, Fresno Unified School District

Isaac Daugherty is a young man who exemplifies transformative change and courage. For most of his life, he was forced to live by his own wits and skill, without a stable family or parents to depend on. He survived, but it was survival without hope for the future.

When presented with the opportunity to create a better life for himself, Isaac chose to do the hard work, both internally and externally, that changing his path required.

His early years were full of upheaval and rejection, his mother and stepfather both challenged by addiction. When Isaac was barely in kindergarten, he and his stepbrother and stepsister were placed in foster care, the first placement lasting only two weeks. All three siblings were eventually placed back with Isaac’s stepfather who lived with his own mother. Unfortunately, she did not like or accept Isaac, who was afraid of her.

At the age of 9, Isaac ran away from home. He would be homeless, living on the streets, for the next three years.

“I slept in the city park or the skate park. If I was lucky I could sleep in the restroom in the park. Sometimes I could sleep at a friend’s house, although I really didn’t have many friends because I was not attending school.

“On really cold or rainy nights,” Isaac remembers, “I would sneak into my grandma’s house through the window and leave before anyone got up. I never got caught doing this.” He spent his time hanging out with gang members, looking at his life like an adventure and enjoying his freedom—though it came at a cost.

“It felt good, but it was also very hard, there were many times I did not eat for two days and it was hard sleeping on the cement restroom floor. I was proud of myself if I got a meal. I would say to myself, “Thank you very much, self.””

School became somewhere to go only “if I was really bored,” he stated. “I was embarrassed to go to school because I smelled and was dirty. I would count ants on the ground so I could get better at math.”

With his poor attendance, Isaac was expelled from two elementary schools and one middle school. At 11, he was caught in gang-related activities and placed in a group home in Fresno. However, he found it hard to adjust to the new environment, especially with enforced rules, and ran away multiple times.

Isaac was placed in three more foster homes and was enrolled at Ahwahnee Middle School.

“During this time I was using marijuana regularly and stealing,” he said. “I used drugs, coke, pills, alcohol and weed.” Ultimately he was expelled from Ahwahnee for stealing a cell phone. “I wanted to do good but there was no point. I had a red flag on me. I really didn’t stand a chance at any school.”

In eighth grade, Isaac started at Phoenix Secondary. His maternal grandmother, who had been homeless, was given a Section 8 house, and Isaac and his uncle moved in with her. This provided the first stable home he had had in ten years. And for the first time, Isaac was given the chance he had hoped for.

The school psychologist, Julia Picher, found Isaac to be “a very angry, closed off young man,” according to his nominating team. She worked with him in individual and group counseling sessions that focused on providing him with emotional tools and strategies to help deal with his frustrations. Isaac committed to working hard, and soon began to build positive relationships with his peers, the faculty and staff and to fully engage with his learning. Principal Brian Radtke saw strong leadership skills in Isaac, and began to use him as a mentor to new students at the school.

“As Isaac grew in this role he began to take the initiative to mediate conflicts between students,” his team said.

As his readmission to mainstream classes approached, Isaac told Radtke, “I know what I have to do when I go back to that regular school, and I don’t want to be that person anymore. Why can’t I stay?” Moved by this plea, Radtke presented the idea of expanding the Phoenix Secondary program to allow students like Isaac to complete



Region 10

Maria de Los Angeles Mendez

Central Coast High School, Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

Her life has been one of intense struggle. But Maria Mendez is a resilient young woman.

“She just has wonderful perseverance,” said Ginger Russo, secretary at Central Coast High in Monterey. “She knows she’s going to do it. Whatever obstacles have come her way, she’s not afraid to figure out that pathway for her to get to what it is that what she wants to do.”

For her fearless resiliency against all odds, Maria has been chosen as the Region 10 2016 Every Student Succeeding winner.

Maria was born in Mexico and arrived in the United States when she was six years old.

“It was a struggle for me that my first language was Spanish,” Maria said. “It was hard. It was tough because you’re the child who doesn’t know English, who doesn’t understand anything. But I learned.”

She is known for her shy personality. But seeing that as a weakness would be a mistake. In fact, educators at Central Coast High rave about Maria as a student.

“Her personality is just very sweet. She does all her work and is really polite,” said Dawn Dufresne, a teacher at Central Coast High. “She’s the student every teacher dreams about having in their class.”

At the age of 16, Maria learned she was pregnant. She considered dropping out of Seaside High after the birth of her daughter, Ashley, but a counselor recommended a change in scenery. Central Coast High is an alternative school that provides a flexible educational setting to students with unique needs and challenges.

“At first, I was like ‘How am I going to do this?’” Maria said. “‘How am I going to raise my child?’ But then, I just started going back to school.”

Maria graduated from Central Coast High in June and will attend college this fall. In fact, Maria is the first person in her family to achieve the title of high school graduate.

“I come from a family where my parents didn’t graduate,” Maria said. “They didn’t finish high school. So I’m going to be the first one to graduate high school which I’m proud of. And I’m going to continue going to college.”

It is quite clear where Maria finds her motivation. She is a doting mom to her three-year-old, Ashley. And Maria’s mission is to give Ashley the things she never had.

“Sometimes, yeah, it’s hard,” Maria said. “Sometimes you feel like giving up and then I’m like, ‘No I can’t because of her.’ I just want her to have a better life so she won’t say, ‘My mom dropped out of high school. She didn’t make it.’ And it’s just me. I’m a single mom raising her by myself. It’s kind of hard. But I have made it.”



Region 11

Gabriela Santillan

Mt. Whitney High School, Visalia Unified School District

There is nothing more powerful than the love a mother has for her child.

“When my son was born, the first thing I told him was ‘I’m going to struggle for you,’” Gaby Santillan said. “‘I’m going to keep trying for you. I love you.’”

Gaby Santillan is a devoted teenage mom to her three-year-old son, Michael.

“She is an amazing parent,” said Adriana Cervantes-Gonzalez, a counselor at Mt. Whitney High in Visalia, part of ACSA Region 11. “I can truly say that. Such a young person herself, but very mature. She’s driven by Michael. He has become her purpose in life. He is who she wants to make proud.”

But part of Gaby’s motivation is giving Michael the life she never had. The fourth of ten children in her own family, Gaby was born to a life of abuse.

“My mom was really stressed about because of all the kids she had,” Gaby said. “And she would abuse us really bad. It was horrible. “She made sure we wouldn’t tell my dad. ‘Don’t be telling your dad about this. If you do, I’m going to hit you harder next time.’”

Gaby’s mother was the least of her fears. In sixth grade, Gaby was the victim of sexual abuse by her brother-in-law.

“I went to get my clothes for school and he came up behind me and started touching me,” Gaby said. “And I was like, ‘What are you doing? You’re with my sister. You can’t be doing this.’ And he’s like, ‘If you tell your sister, I’m going to kill you.’”

After a few months, Gaby finally told her family. The brother-in-law was kicked out the house and left the country, but was never charged with a crime.

“It was difficult to hear her disclose about some of the things that had gone on,” Cervantes-Gonzalez said. “I could see that it was still difficult for her, the pain. It’s hard to grasp but it happens and I know that it happens all too often. I’m just glad that Gabby worked up the courage to tell somebody.”

As a way to channel her pain from the abuse, Gaby joined the wrestling team her freshman year of high school.

“When I first started wrestling, I thought this was something where I could take my anger out and not get in trouble for it,” Gaby said.

But Gaby’s wrestling dreams were put on hold when she found out she was pregnant with Michael.

“I was like, ‘What is this?’” Gaby said. “‘I feel a ball in my stomach.’ I was like, ‘No. I’m barely 13. I cannot be pregnant.’ I felt it and it hurt when I pushed it in and then later on I started gaining weight.”

These days, Gaby is back to wrestling at Mt. Whitney High. But if you attend a practice, you will also find Michael cheering on his mom. It is a testament to Gaby’s commitment to education and her desire to graduate from high school.

“There are many kids who have similar stories, you don’t know them because they fall off,” said Larry Buenafe, assistant principal at Mt. Whitney High. “You don’t continue to see them because of the stuff that’s happened in their life. The thing that really stands out about her is she didn’t fall off. And not only did she not fall off. She has really solid tangible goals that are achievable for her for the future.”

A teenager raising a child is no easy task. But Michael has also been a blessing in Gaby’s life. In fact, she credits her son for a renewed relationship with her own mother.

“She’s changed a lot,” Gaby said. “She’s not the person she was before. We had a serious talk and I was like, ‘Mom why’d you treat me that way?’ And she hugged me. And she’s like, ‘I’m so sorry. I never showed you love when you were younger. It’s the way I was raised. My mom didn’t show me love.’ And I said, ‘You could have changed that. That’s what I’m doing with my son. I’m changing it.’”



Region 12

Alexander Mattison

San Bernardino High School, San Bernardino City Unified School District

There is Alex Mattison, the football player. And then there is Alex Mattison, the man. On the field, Alex is unstoppable. He rushed for 2,057 yards and 22 touchdowns his senior season at San Bernardino High.

“Alex is probably a one in a million for me to coach,” said San Bernardino football head coach Jeff Imbriani. “He glides through what he wants to do. We got so carried away when he got the ball, we’re looking down the field. It’s like, ‘Alright where’s he at already?’ You get spoiled with it.”

Off the field, Region 12's Every Student Succeeding recipient is a young man who enjoys helping underprivileged students succeed in life.

"I probably give someone a talk every day," Alex said. "There's a lot of kids around campus that probably don't see it in them. And you have to let them know it's OK. That's really what I pride myself in doing is helping people see the light in themselves and helping people find a better way to deal with situations."

Alex was born and raised in San Bernardino, a city that boasts one of the highest crime rates in the country. At San Bernardino High School, 97 percent of the students live at or below the poverty line.

"We didn't always grow up in the best situations," Alex said. "We moved a lot growing up. From here to there. It came to a time when we were in a 2-bedroom home, with me, my two older brothers and my mom and dad. Also came a time when we were homeless and had to stay with my aunt."

But with every obstacle he has faced, Alex has persevered. He carries a 4.7 GPA, and thanks to a dual immersion program, he is fluent in Spanish.

"They take science in Spanish, math in Spanish and then the Spanish language arts," said Idali Lopez, dual immersion program coordinator. "So imagine learning trig in Spanish. Not only is the content hard but he's learning it all in Spanish. Imagine learning chemistry in Spanish."

While it was his parents' decision to place him in the program starting in first grade, Alex has embraced the opportunity to be both bilingual and biliterate.

"It's become so competitive now that you need something that sets you apart," Alex said. "And I noticed growing up, ... people acknowledging me for being an African American and speaking Spanish. Coming from San Bernardino, it gets competitive out there in the real world. You need something that says, 'You're different.'"

One of the top running back recruits in the state of California, Alex signed with Boise State, where he will play this fall. But he is quick to admit that his heart will never leave San Bernardino.

"I don't want to leave this city and come back and it's worse," Alex said. "I'd rather it be better. If I can be that hope and that model that it can be better, that's a blessing, not just me but to the city in general that we can all rise up and become a better city."



Region 13

Michael Moffatt

Buena High School, Ventura Unified School District

The journey has been far from easy. The hatred has, at times, been overwhelming. But at his core, Michael Moffatt knows that love conquers all.

"I'm happier than I've ever been" said Michael, a recent graduate of Buena High in Ventura, located in ACSA's Region 13. "I am living and surrounded by people who I love and accept me. And I think that's the most important out of everything."

Michael is a proud, gay student. He says he knew he was gay from a very early age.

"I think I always knew to some extent," Michael said. "I think it hit during puberty as it does with most people. Before that, you don't really know much about yourself in general. But once you're 10 or 11 and it starts hitting, it really starts hitting hard."

While Michael is now comfortable with his sexuality, he waited until high school to tell his family and friends.

"It's like when you throw up," Michael said. "It's like at first it feels awful and you know there's a pain in your throat. But after you feel a lot better. But there's still consequences to it. You still have to clean up the mess."

Due to unrest with certain friends and family members, Michael opted for a new living situation, bouncing from house in search of stability and support.

"It's a little weird picking up your whole life and moving it across town or down the street," Michael said. "I needed some consistency. Each time that you move, it doesn't necessarily get any easier. It's an interesting dynamic having to rearrange your life every couple of months and introduce yourself to a new atmosphere."

Teachers and administrators at Buena High helped Michael find a new place to call home. Eva Harris, a teacher at Buena High, introduced Michael to her friends Blake Mashburn and Sean Rawlins, a married couple in Ventura, who converted their garage into an extra bedroom.

"I approached them and I said, 'Hey, remember how I always said you'd make good parents?'" Harris said. "'Have I got the boy for you!' And they're a lovely couple I've known for probably 20 years. They kind of fell in love when they met him. They said, 'This is perfect.' So it's a nice little family unit now."

Michael was a vocal leader for the LGBTQ community at Buena High. He served as president of Spectrum, formerly known as Gay-Straight Alliance. But in the fall, Michael will attend college at UCLA, where he hopes to become a voice for the voiceless.

"I would tell someone who's going through what I went through, 'Find people who do support you,'" Michael said. "'Find people who do love you and accept you for who you are. Don't lose hope. Find hope elsewhere.' And that's what saved me."



Region 14

Edith Obeso

Richard Gahr High School, ABC Unified School District

Edith Obeso is the perfect poster child for arts education. A drummer at Gahr High School in Cerritos, Edith may not be where she is today without the band.

"It's the family, the vibe," Edith said. "When we perform, we perform together. It's not just one individual. We're here for each other. And I think that's what got me into it because my band mates won't ever let anyone down."

It is a sentiment echoed by her band director, Darren Loney, who credits the band for helping Edith find stability.

"She's been here from my first year of the three years I've been here," Loney said. "It's hard to imagine this program without her, and it's hard to imagine her without the program. It really is. I can't picture what she'd be doing if she were not here."

Life was not always easy for Edith Obeso, ACSA Region 14 Every Student Succeeding Award recipient. The youngest of five kids, she faced the temptations of gang life at an early age.

"I do have some friends that were my childhood friends who are in the gang right now," Edith said. "I was going to go to that path. Thank God that I didn't because my fourth grade year was when I wanted to play the flute. Once I started playing the flute, I loved it. I loved band and I knew that if I would have stayed in the streets with my friends and hung out with them... I'm not about to lose my life over this, and something that I loved doing (happened), which was playing the flute."

But Edith's life changed once again when she learned of her father's history of substance abuse.

"I was daddy's little girl," she said. "I had so much faith in him that when I found out, 'What else have you been lying about?' I didn't know what to do. In a way, I kind of wanted to kill myself because it was so hard to take in to what I found out."

Once again, band proved to be an outlet for Edith as she worked through her struggles. But that was in danger of being taken away from her prior to her senior year at Gahr High.

"We had a long talk, and Edith shared with me that her parents were planning to move, and she wouldn't be able to continue attending school here," said Gahr High counselor Alana Cooper. "She wouldn't be able to complete her senior year with the band which was heartbreaking for her."

Those fears went away thanks to band boosters Jeff and Dee Dee Varney, who had an extra bedroom in their house.

Edith completed her senior year and graduated from Gahr High in June. And while she is moving on to college in the fall, she knows the friendships she formed with fellow bandmates will never waver.

"Edith definitely has a unique story," Loney said. "But I've seen many times where it's the opposite of what's happened with Edith, where it can be easy to go the other way and give up. The fact that Edith has pushed through what she has and excelled as a musician, as a student and is college-bound is really incredible."



Region 15

Jurnee Jacobs

Antelope Valley High School, Antelope Valley Union High School District

People have never really understood what my life has been like," the letter reads. "But that's okay because it isn't their story. It's mine."

The letter was written by Journee Jacobs. It is a declaration to anyone who reads it that Journee's life, while difficult, is far from over. In fact, it's only just beginning.

"I am worth it," Journee writes. "I am more than enough. And I am beautiful."

Journee was just seven years old when her father destroyed her innocence.

"He took off my clothes and he touched me," Journee said. "I was scared. I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know if this was supposed to happen because it's never happened before. We never did anything like this. I felt abused. Kind of violated. I didn't know why this was happening."

James Ernest Jenkins, Journee's father, is a convicted sex offender. Though Journee never reported the incident to the police, Jenkins is behind bars. In 2010, he pled guilty to 17 counts of child molestation of a different child. Jenkins is serving a sentence of 850 years to life in prison.

"When my mom talked to me, she said, 'Just know it's not your fault,'" Journee said. "'And thank you for telling me. Your dad wasn't supposed to do that.' She told me he was supposed to protect me. I felt like a father should protect his daughter. But at that point, it was like, that was no protection there."

Journee's mother put her in the foster care system. It's something Journee says she still does not understand.

"Maybe she thought she couldn't protect us I guess," Journee said. "So she thought being in foster care would be better than her taking care of us. Of course I was abused sexually and she wasn't there to protect me so maybe she felt that guilt I guess."

After two years of abuse in the foster care system, Journee met the woman she would soon call 'Mom', Johnnie Jacobs.

"I got adopted when I was age 9," Journee said. "She cried. She talked to me about it. And she said, 'Do you want to be here forever?' And I said, 'Yeah I don't want to go anywhere.' And she was like, 'I'm going to adopt you. And adopting you means you'll stay in my family. You won't go anywhere. If I pass away, you still have family who can take care of you.'"

Johnnie Jacobs said it was an easy decision to adopt Journee.

"She showed that she was a little kid who wanted to be helped and wanted to be rescued," Jacobs said. "She needed someone badly. And I'm just so glad that I was there to do that."

Journee graduated from Antelope Valley High in Lancaster in June. She plans to pursue a career in law enforcement in hopes of helping others who cannot help themselves.

"For all of those who have been silenced by their abusers, I will be their voice," Journee wrote in her letter. "My life has afforded me the chance to change them, because I was able to change me. And I will use my life as a stepping stone for them to stand tall too."



Region 16

Christopher Leon

Verdugo Hills High School, Los Angeles Unified School District

You would never know by looking at the artwork. You would never know the artist, himself, spends most of his days confined to a bed. But perhaps that is the beauty of Christopher Leon.

"If you just look at his work in isolation, and you don't know him at all, you would say, 'Wow. This is a great artist,'" said Ed Trimis, former principal at Verdugo Hills High. "And then you hear the backstory about where he's come from and what he's done, it's even more incredible."

Region 16 ESS recipient Christopher Leon's passion for drawing can be traced back to his childhood.

"I just felt like I wanted to do that," Leon said. "It seemed really fun to me. I read comic books and then I'd say, 'I want to do that when I grow up. I want to draw superheroes in stories.'"

But to understand Chris' story we have to go back to the beginning. Born May 19, 1994, Chris entered the world as a healthy baby boy. But he struggled to gain mobility and after months of testing, doctors diagnosed him with spinal muscular atrophy.

"They told me you better enjoy your son," said Julio Leon, Chris' father. "They said he would only live six months to a year and a half. I couldn't speak no more. I had to go home. It was probably the hardest day of my life."

"When everything happened, I just started to cry," said Brenda Palma, Chris' mother. "I was very scared but the doctor said he's very brave. We're going to come out of this. And he's going to come out of this."

Spinal muscular atrophy is a genetic disease that affects voluntary muscle movement. The loss of motor neurons leads to weakness and wasting of the muscles. It is the No. 1 genetic cause of death for infants. Doctors told Chris' parents he would not live to see his second birthday.

"There were times that we would hesitate and say, 'Where is God?' But we know that he is there," Julio Leon said. "So we kept on fighting and fighting."

By the age of 10, Chris' muscles used for breathing and swallowing had weakened to the point he needed a tracheotomy, a surgical procedure that opens the windpipe.

"It seemed like there are doors that are closing," Julio Leon said. "But even him or somebody else opens another one. He doesn't give up."

Now 22 years old, Chris has been home bound since first grade and requires around-the-clock care.

"The love of a mother is very strong, and I don't think anything is difficult," Palma said. "There are days where he's struggling and he's very ill. I hardly sleep, but what satisfies me is seeing him smile."

"It's tough because people ask me at work, 'How do I do it?'" Julio Leon said. "'How do I keep laughing knowing I have what I have with a special kid at home?' But I just look at him and smile."

One thing that keeps his parents smiling is Chris' commitment to his artwork, using Microsoft Paint and Adobe Photoshop to complete his digital drawings.

"I use a touchpad with my finger to draw everything that I've done," Chris said. "I guess it takes a little longer to draw some of the drawings because I'm a little slower. But it's not so bad."

Technology has not only impacted Chris' artwork; it also changed his educational goals. Chris was one of the lucky students in Los Angeles Unified School District to participate in classes through VGo. A robotic device that allows students to attend classes from home, Christopher overcame his shy personality thanks to VGo.

"It was real science fiction," Trimis said. "I was trying to understand it and comprehend it at first. But the idea was really intriguing to me. And I think the initial idea of a robot, a kid participating in school through a robot, I thought, 'Yeah that's awesome.' I guess the constant challenge is he's not the robot. Christopher is Christopher. And so I'm excited we've seen him more and more in person. The robot is cool but really the main thing about the robot is the access to get to Christopher and Christopher to get to us."

Chris graduated from Verdugo Hills High June 9 and now plans to pursue a career in



Region 17

Abigail Rosales

Ponderosa Elementary, Anaheim City School District

Most of the time we rarely give a second thought to our internal organs. Some, like the stomach, seem to regularly be on our minds. Others less so. Take, for example, the liver.

It's not an organ we spend much time reflecting on, but it is essential to life. It filters our blood and helps detoxify chemicals we ingest. Now imagine life without a healthy liver.

That's what Abigail Rosales, a fourth grader at Ponderosa Elementary in Anaheim City School District must deal with. It's been a part of her life for as long as she can remember. As a toddler she had liver failure, and had a partial liver transplant before the age of 2. She spent nearly a year hooked up to machines in a hospital.

After that she was in and out of hospitals. She has been diagnosed as needing a complete liver transplant, and is on the donor list awaiting one. Abi has to work daily to manage her pain.

That's enough to get anyone down, but not Abi. Her mother, a committed volunteer, has instilled a strong sense of giving back to the community in Abi, and she has regularly volunteered at community events such as a Day of the Child celebration and neighborhood cleanups. Her efforts led the city to recently select Abi to lead the Pledge of Allegiance at a groundbreaking for a new park in her neighborhood.

Ponderosa School has been a tremendous help, providing the appropriate supports to assist a child who had to spend 16 of the first 60 days of the school year in a hospital. Thanks to their guidance, Abi has blossomed, winning the Altrusa Club of Anaheim's writing contest in honor of World Literacy Day with her moving story, "My Life in the Hospital."

When school staff learned that one of Abi's fondest hopes was to own an American Girl Doll, they were all set to pool their resources and provide one, but they didn't have to. The Children's Hospital Association got wind of the effort and provided Abi not only with one American Girl Doll, but a whole shipment, which she was able to then share out with children throughout the city.

Abi and her family have had the full support throughout of ACSA members Yadira Moreno and Deborah Kelly, the principal and vice principal of Ponderosa Elementary. They ensured that this brave little girl had the emotional support as well as curriculum, homework and teaching support she's needed to thrive in her learning.

"Just being at school puts Abi's health at great risk," her nominating team said, "but her passion for life, learning and her community always come first. When she is able to be at school, she is at school with a smile on her face."

With her spirit, generosity and bravery, Abi inspires and brings joy to those around her.



Region 18

Mohammed Mohammed

El Cajon Valley High School, Grossmont Union High School District

The story of Mohammed Mohammed, and his journey to overcome great odds, is one of hardship and heartbreak. Mohammed grew up in Iraq. As a successful businessman, Mohammed's father became targeted by criminal groups using kidnapping to raise money. One day his father received a threat from one of these groups that they would kidnap Mohammed if his father did not pay them a bribe. His father paid, but the threats continued.

In retaliation, the criminals tried to kidnap Mohammed three different times, but were unsuccessful. Frustrated, they kidnapped Mohammed's father instead and demanded a ransom from Mohammed's mother. She sold their house to pay the ransom, but Mohammed's father was never returned. They never saw him again.

After this horrific experience, Mohammed's mother decided to move the family away, to Syria. All they had to take with them were a couple of bags of clothing, but no money. They stayed with friends for a while, and finally got some assistance from the UN to allow them a semblance of a normal life. This went on for four years.

The civil war broke out in Syria. With inflation running wild, Mohammed had to take a job in a liquor store at the age of 12, and his school attendance became sporadic. Criminal groups started to perform kidnappings in Syria, just as they had in Iraq.

One day, someone tried to kidnap Mohammed off the street. He fought the kidnapper off and ran away. At that point his mother again appealed to the UN. Two weeks later they made the journey to the US and ultimately ended up in El Cajon.

There was Mohammed, in a brand new country halfway across the globe, with few English skills, a ninth grader with the second semester of school already starting. Mohammed was shy in this new environment, which was to be expected. Still, his natural intelligence was apparent as he managed to earn good grades in spite of the challenges he was facing. One of his teachers decided to ask Mohammed to be a Peer Tutor, as she felt this would help him socially and academically. This accelerated Mohammed's progress with learning English, and by his junior year he was taking unsupported English classes.

"I was very welcomed," Mohammed said. "The American people were very kind. I just thought they were more kind than my people."

Mohammed gives a lot of credit to two other school programs which helped him: Hope, Opportunity, Prosperity and Education (HOPE) and Perseverance, Responsibility, Independence, Dedication, and Education (PRIDE). These support programs target recent and long-term refugee students with academic supports and the basics of American culture. Mohammed said the HOPE and PRIDE summer programs helped him with his English skills, as well as increasing his social circle and leadership experience.

"His impact on campus transcends being a refugee," said El Cajon Vice Principal Jason Babineau. "It's not about being a refugee to Mohammed. It's about him impacting groups of people throughout the entire campus, including staff members, including teachers, including vice principals."

Mohammed soon began to participate in extracurricular activities such as soccer and track and field. As others grew to know him, he was urged to apply for the East County Youth of the Year Award, which he won. He went on to become the San Diego County Youth of the Year and earned a trip to Sacramento. His peers even voted him as the Homecoming King.

He says he does it all for his mother.

"She's been doing a lot of things just to keep me safe," Mohammed said. "She left Iraq. She left Syria just for me. She fought for me and did all that for me just to keep me safe. One of the things that would make her proud is my education, a way to pay her back. So I would do everything to make her happy and proud of me."

Mohammed has now graduated on time and completed the UC a-g requirements. He now wants to become a pediatrician. Mohammed is not only making his mother proud, he makes everyone who knows him proud.



Region 19

Dulce Lizeth Nance

Ramona High School, Riverside Unified School District

From the outside, you would never know the depths of pain Lizeth Nance has faced in her life.

"I just try to stay positive," Lizeth said, a recent graduate of Ramona High in Riverside, ACSA Region 19. "That's the biggest component. I just try and see the good in everything. Even if I'm having a bad day, there's something good that has to happen."

It's a mentality she adopted from an early age. In August 2000, Lizeth's mother was murdered in Memphis, Tenn. Lizeth was just 2 years old. Lizeth's father, Edgar Quintana Ramos was a suspect, but he was never charged with the crime. Quintana-Ramos and Lizeth moved to Los Angeles. But in 2007, Lizeth found her 1-year-old stepbrother dead in her father's apartment. Court records reveal Quintana-Ramos pled guilty to willful neglect of a child resulting in injury. He was deported to Mexico, and Lizeth was placed in the foster care system.

"I would spend a lot of time at court just waiting in the waiting room," Lizeth said. "I didn't know what was going on. I'd see my dad across the way and just cry because I didn't know what was going on. I knew it was bad, but I didn't know what was going on."

Lizeth suffered more neglect as she bounced from foster home to foster home. In fact, she went through seven different homes before she met Madonna Nance.

"I introduced myself to her," said Nance. "She was the cutest little kid. She said, 'I'm a really good girl. I can clean. I keep my room clean. I cleaned chicken coops and cow things.' I said, 'Honey, I want you to be a kid. I don't want you to clean my house. I don't want you to do my dishes. You come and you be a kid.'"

Nance quickly adopted Lizeth and provided the stability Lizeth longed for her entire life. She thrived at Ramona High, excelling in cheerleading, swimming and student government.

"She's the nicest, sweetest human being on the planet," teacher Karen Withey-Smith said. "I just liked her right off the bat. She's just one of those kids that you just gravitate toward and you just wish all the other kids were just like that."

Lizeth will attend Bennington College in Vermont in the fall, a long way from home. But it's also a chance for her to explore new opportunities.

"In the nine years at Ramona High School, I've never seen anyone like her who's gone through what she's gone through and is attending a four-year university with a full-ride scholarship," said Mark Lim, a counselor at Ramona High. "Talk about an amazing, resilient young lady."

Lizeth Nance has suffered, and yet, she's still standing. She says she is determined to never let her past define the woman she wants to be.

"You define who you are," she said. "And you can change your future. If you keep that goal there, you can do it. It doesn't matter where you came from. It doesn't matter where you went. You can still get through it."

Adult Ed

Jagroop Kaur

Elk Grove Adult and Community Education

Jagroop Kaur, a wife, mother, daughter, student and employee, has persevered through numerous barriers, including linguistic, cultural, and gender limitations to become a highly valued, contributing member of EGACE's adult education community.

Jag enrolled in ESL classes in 2005 at Elk Grove Adult and Community Education (EGACE). A notable quality was her determination to succeed. She needed to prove to her husband that attending school would have results quickly. She was forced to leave her children in India to be raised by her parents-in-law.

Leaving her children broke her heart, still she persevered to reach her goal. She took listening, speaking, and computer classes in her pursuit of a job. She was hired first as a babysitter, then an Instructional Assistant, before becoming a full-time office worker at EGACE. Through continued effort, she is now an ESL teacher, teaching Citizenship and ESL. She empathizes with the students, giving them encouragement and guidance. She is called "Super Jag" because she runs the ESL office section, teaches, and volunteers to substitute at any time in any class.

There is nothing she won't do for her school. She says that the people at EGACE are her family. She gives them credit for her accomplishments, but it is through her determination that she has been able to become a teacher and a US citizen who gives back enthusiastically and without reservation to her community every day. Her next goal is to become a full-time adult education teacher.



Adult Ed

Jodie Hoffman

Golden Oak Adult School

Jodie Hoffman was a first generation high school graduate, going to high school in the late 70's, at a time when students were tracked as either college or vocation.

"I recall my counselor telling me that she knew my family didn't have enough money for me to go to college so I was placed on the vocational track." Jodie shared. She was an award-winning Regional Occupational Program student, excelling at typing and shorthand.

Graduating high school with skills to land a job as a secretary in the insurance field, she began working full time the Monday following graduation. She also attempted to prove her high school counselor wrong and enrolled in a night class at the local community college.

"I tried to navigate the entire community college experience on my own. I still remember struggling to find parking and walking for what seemed like miles to stand in long lines to register. Then I had to scrape together \$90 for a book. I showed up the first night of class and was overwhelmed. I wandered around the campus looking for the classroom and became very self-conscious. I was sure I was the only person that didn't know where they were going. I had a map, but I had become so stressed it no longer made sense to me. I finally found a classroom, walked in, sat in the back, and was mortified to discover it was not the right class. No way was I going to start over and walk in late to the correct class. I took my \$90 book, threw it in the back seat of my broken down car, and didn't go back. I actually had nightmares that I had received a report card in the mail with a giant 'F' on it, but I couldn't bring myself to go back to that scary place to resolve the problem."

Jodie continued working as a secretary and was soon promoted. Stopping out to get married and have children, she quit her job, weaved together part time jobs, and pinched pennies to raise her children. After several years as a homemaker, her skills had become outdated and her confidence had plummeted. Her kids in school and her marriage over, she needed a job. She went to Golden Oak Adult School and was able to quickly upgrade her skills.

Armed with her new computer abilities, she found a part time position at the local community college in the vocational and employee training office, and it didn't take her long to realize she'd found her calling, helping others gain skills for employment.

College felt like it was beyond her reach before, but armed with the confidence gained following her success at Golden Oak Adult School, and her determination to have a bigger impact on career education, she decided to give community college another shot.

“I didn’t know how I was going to do it. As a single mom, I knew I could only complete one or two classes at a time, and it would take me forever to finish. Then one of my mentors reminded me that time passes anyway.” Her educational journey was not always consistent; Jodie knows first-hand many of the challenges adult learners face balancing work, life, family, and school.

In 2017, the 20-year anniversary of Jodie’s successful experience as a Golden Oak student, she graduated with her Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership and was appointed Principal of Golden Oak Adult School.

“I would not have achieved this level of success without the support of amazing mentors who believed in and encouraged me. My mission is to give back by providing strong educational programs that empower adult learners and benefit our community.”



Region 1

Jessica Nord

Six Rivers Charter High School, Northern Humboldt USD

Jessica Nord’s favorite time of day is choir class at Six Rivers Charter High in Arcata, where she can show off her love of singing.

“I just have always really loved singing,” Jessica said. “It’s really fun. I always like being around everybody because they have the same interests as I do.”

Singing serves as Jessica’s escape, her sense of normalcy. In part, because there was nothing normal about Jessica’s childhood. She and her twin brother were born premature at just 30 weeks. Jessica was diagnosed with periventricular leukomalacia, a brain injury that affects development.

“They said it’s like if you took a pencil and put pen points all over the brain, little pen points,” Jessica’s mother Karen Silva said. “They had no idea if she was ever going to talk. They had no idea if she would walk or be able to crawl. They had no idea what the impact was going to be on her life.”

Jessica spent years in and out of hospitals, missing copious amounts of school.

“It’s really frustrating,” Jessica said. “I got kind of depressed for awhile because of it. I would go to doctor’s visits. I would come back from a surgeon and they’d say, ‘Oh, you’re doing great.’ And then I’d come back a few weeks later and they’d say, ‘I think you need another surgery.’”

But no surgery was more daunting than in Jessica’s eighth grade year, when doctors determined she needed a spinal fusion.

“They put two rods in, about 80 screws,” Silva said. “She’s fused from between her shoulder blades all the way down to nearly her tailbone. And it was about a 10 to 12-hour surgery. We just didn’t think we were going to make it through that. She’s a fighter. She’s been a fighter since birth. She’s always a fighter. She did everything that was ever asked by a therapist or a doctor or anything she’d work extra hard to get back to what she needed to be doing.”

Through it all, Jessica stayed committed to school at Six Rivers Charter High. She never fell behind in her classes. In fact, she made the 4.0 honor roll.

“She’s not one to give up easy,” Six Rivers Charter High Principal Ron Perry said. “She’s the one who sticks around the longest to get the work done. She’s the one who is making plans and doing her work while she’s in the hospital so she can stay on track with her peers.”

Perry is not alone in that sentiment. Jessica has captured the hearts of many educators at Six Rivers Charter High, including resource specialist teacher Tara Millsap.

“From the day I met Jessica and realizing how hard she was willing to work to get what she wanted and what she needed for her education really taught me how to be a better teacher,” Millsap said. “Every day when I get to see Jessica, it’s definitely the favorite part of my day.”

Jessica hopes to one day become a physical therapist or a nurse. She says she wants to help people in the same way others helped her. It’s that type of outlook that makes her so special.

“She makes me see the world differently because of the way her attitude is about everything.” Silva said. “I want to be as strong as she is. Who wouldn’t want to be that strong? She’s an amazing child. And she’s a gift. Every day with her is a gift.”



Region 2

Viviana Patino

Roseville High School, Roseville Joint UHSD

Viviana Patino is on a tight schedule. She does not have time to socialize at lunch. Instead, you'll find her studying in the library.

"She's a very reserved young woman," Roseville High counselor Philomena Crone said. "Certainly a role model for students that hard work does pay off."

Her work ethic is unparalleled. And while Viviana is meek and mild-mannered, she is also determined to make her parents proud. She grew up in Tecoman, Colima, Mexico, but immigrated to the United States when she was just five years old.

"Getting here and not knowing English, you obviously had to start over," Viviana said. "And so meeting new people was harder. And so we were living somewhere where we didn't know anybody or anything."

Her new life in the United States brought new expectations. Viviana became an extension of her parents to her three younger siblings, Gustavo, Alejandro and Emily.

"When they brought us here, they brought us with the intention of receiving a better education than they received," Viviana said. "I wanted to make them feel proud of all their sacrifices and set the standard for my siblings."

A typical day for Viviana includes rushing home from school to help her brothers and sister with their homework. She must also assist her parents with various appointments and meetings as their translator.

"At first, I thought like, 'Why am I the one who has to be doing all this?'" Viviana said. "Because it was a lot at once. But now that I look back, it's only a small portion of what my parents had to sacrifice and so doing this for them makes me feel good. And I'm glad to be doing it."

In some ways, Viviana is giving up a part of her childhood. But her sacrifice is not lost on her parents.

"I'm very proud of her because she's a good student," Viviana's father Arnulfo Patino said. "She helps her siblings with everything. If they need something they don't know with their homework, she's the one who tells them how to do it."

Much has been asked of Viviana Patino. She grew up fast because she did not have a choice. But she accepted the added responsibility with open arms.

"I'm just so proud of her," Roseville teacher Debbie Sidler said. "I'm proud of her for not giving up when giving up was probably the first thought in her mind. She's opening that door for her family to follow in her footsteps. And I believe that they will by the example that she's set."

Viviana understands she is a role model to her younger siblings. This spring, she became the first member of her family to graduate from high school. And now she's off to college.

"I feel proud of myself for everything I've done and for, I think, the good example I'm setting for my siblings," Viviana said. "I'm showing them that no matter where we started you can always get better. And challenging yourself is a good way to prove that."



Region 3

Destiny Stallings

West Campus High School, Sacramento City USD

Destiny Stallings has a tough exterior that she often uses as a defense mechanism.

"I don't tell people a lot," Destiny said. "I don't want people to see me as weak and take advantage of me so I keep it to myself. So I act like everything is ok when really on the inside it's not."

Destiny faced loss and neglect throughout the course of her childhood. Her parents were in and out of her life. The man Destiny affectionately calls "Papa", her grandfather, stepped up and took over as her caretaker.

"He raised me since I was three and basically I looked up to him," Destiny said. "He used to build old-school cars and then sell them so he had his own shop. I used to go over there every day to help him. That was like my best friend."

Destiny's grandfather raised her as if she was his own child. The two were inseparable until a cancer diagnosis changed everything.

“He sat me down one day two weeks before he went to the hospital,” Destiny said. “I had never seen this man cry and he cried. And he said he had cancer. And I couldn’t stop crying. I got to the point where I couldn’t breathe. He said he’s going to fight through it and he wants me to graduate high school and go to college. And stay on the right track.” Mike Marshall lost his battle with cancer on April 12, 2014. With his death, Destiny struggled to make sense of the loss. “I didn’t know what to do anymore with myself,” Destiny said. “I didn’t have emotion anymore. I tried to run away from it.”

Four months later, Destiny’s uncle, Tyler Marshall, died in a motorcycle crash. Destiny says she hit rock bottom and felt like her life was no longer worth living.

“Everything was getting to me and I tried to commit suicide,” Destiny said. “And I just wanted to go. I wanted to be with them. What stopped me was the fact that I wanted to prove everyone wrong. The fact that I want to let them know I can do it.”

Destiny persevered through the grief and channeled her loss into something positive. She wanted to fulfill her grandfather’s wishes and graduate from West Campus High in Sacramento. With the help of teachers and educators at the school, Destiny found hope.

“She always was pretty tough,” West Campus High teacher Lynne Samaan said. “Handled whatever she needed to handle and moved on and went about her day.”

In June, Destiny graduated from West Campus High. She has plans of going to college. But her cry and her creed still center around Mike and Tyler Marshall and making sure she’s doing right by them.

“Hopefully they’d say they’re proud of me,” Destiny said. “Every decision I make, I’m like, ‘Ok, what would my papa say? What would my uncle say?’ So hopefully I’m making them proud because that’s what they always wanted me to graduate and go to college so I’m going to do that for them.”



Region 4

Rodrigo Portillo

Ukiah High School, Ukiah USD

Rodrigo Portillo is quick to admit he had more responsibilities than a normal teenager. And everyone took notice.

“I could tell with Rodrigo when he was in 9th grade, ‘This guy’s not cut of the same cloth of all the others,’” Ukiah High teacher Sid Bishop said. “He gets the business done.”

Rodrigo’s parents were born in Mexico but immigrated to the United States in hopes of providing a better life for their children.

“They left Mexico and came over here without knowing any English,” Rodrigo said. “They left their families. They came for us to get an education.”

Rodrigo received a quality education but he struggled to adjust to a world with two languages and two cultures.

“Growing up, going home you speak Spanish,” Rodrigo said. “And then going to school, you had to speak English. So I didn’t really have that much practice when I was at home. So, it’d be speaking Spanish. Then go to school. Speak English.”

Rodrigo flooded his schedule in an attempt to pay his parents back for their sacrifice. When he was not studying, he was practicing on the soccer fields. When he was not practicing, he was working at a local Ukiah restaurant.

“This was just something I chose to do,” Rodrigo said. “Work. Take all these courses. Just because I felt like I had to give back to my parents. Show them their hard work wasn’t for nothing.”

He says he learned his work ethic from his parents. His mother works at the same local restaurant as a dish washer. But he’s also quick to praise his father for the commitment to provide for the family.

“My dad wakes up at four in the morning and goes to work,” Rodrigo said. “Comes back at five. Does that every day. And I don’t know how he does it. All his effort that he made for me to go to school, that’s why I do so well in school. Because he motivates me to try to get him a better life.”

Rodrigo’s ability to juggle school, soccer, and work caught the attention of many educators at Ukiah High.

“To be an athlete and a student and a worker,” Bishop said. “And it’s not like your calculus teacher’s giving you a break. And it’s not like your physics teacher is giving you a break. So there’s all this stuff that’s going on.”

Yet, despite the obstacles, Rodrigo found a way to do it all. He graduated from Ukiah High in the spring. This fall, he became the first person in his family to go to college when he enrolled at Mendocino College. It’s his way to show his parents how much he appreciates their love and support.

“His situation isn’t necessarily unique to our community, to our students,” Eagle Peak Middle assistant principal Cassandra Mortier said. “But it’s exactly that. To him, there was no alternative. It’s just innate. He knows no other way than to be as exceptional as he is.”



Region 5

Adrian Madrigal

South San Francisco High School, South San Francisco USD

Adrian Madrigal may just be one of the friendliest people you will meet. He’s always smiling. He’s always saying hi. “We walk down the street and people are like, ‘Hey Adrian,’” said Leslie Mejia, Adrian’s mom. “Everywhere he goes, he always makes friends. Everybody loves him.”

When asked why he is so happy, even Adrian has a tough time explaining his joyful demeanor.

“I’m just happy all the time for no reason,” Adrian said.

But if anyone had the right to be down and depressed, it would be Adrian. As a young child, he was diagnosed with hydronephrosis, a condition characterized by excess fluid in the kidney. Adrian uses a catheter every day and is currently on the transplant list. For Adrian, that meant a lot of time spent in the hospital.

“It was just confusing,” Mejia said. “I didn’t know what to expect. We just took it day by day. He celebrated birthdays and Christmases in the hospital.”

Adrian was also born with a mental delay. His speech was severely limited until the age of eleven. Now sixteen years old, Adrian attends moderate-severe special education classes at South San Francisco High.

“I’ve taught all these years and I’ve never met a young man who’s gone through so many challenges and come out so well,” teacher Karen Nyquist said. “And he’s been the most socially aware and the one who’s grown the most maturity of any of the students I’ve seen in all this time. That’s why he stands out so much.”

The future is still murky for Adrian and his family. And while independence is the long-term goal, it’s far from a reality. But Adrian’s mother is more focused on the present and the day-to-day progress of her son.

“Every year he always achieves something else,” Mejia said. “Every single year. Adrian wouldn’t walk. Now he runs. He does stuff on his own. We can leave him alone. He can do for himself. I just hope he keeps on achieving.”

Walking the halls at South San Francisco High, it’s easy to understand why Adrian is an inspiration to everyone he meets.

“Sometimes when we’re feeling down, we just look at Adrian,” Mejia said. “And he’s been through so much. And nothing gets him down. He’s always happy. He always worries about other people.”

Even South San Francisco High principal Cynthia Rapaido, gets emotional talking about one of her star students.

“He’s like my superhero,” Rapaido said. “He’s just resilient. He doesn’t complain. He’s always happy. Not just the simple things in life. But just always grateful.”

There is no debating Adrian Madrigal’s social side. But if you look deeper, you’ll fall in love with his innocence, his warmth, and his purity.

“He’s just a good good person,” Nyquist said. “And lots of times when people have a lot of challenges, they can have some hardness. They harden their hearts or something but his heart is very tender.”



Region 6

Carnisha Martin

John Swett High School, John Swett USD

Stability was something Carnisha Martin only dreamed of after a childhood filled with loss and neglect. She bounced from house to house, family member to family member. She suffered abuse at the hands of loved ones. And she lost her mother after a battle with breast cancer when she was in sixth grade.

“I stayed away and there were times where I felt like I couldn’t express how I felt about losing my mom,” Carnisha said. And yet, somehow, Carnisha never lost her drive to succeed. Despite the upheaval and constant uncertainty, she enrolled at John Swett High in Crockett.

“There’s a lot of consistency for her here,” John Swett High attendance clerk Renee Moreno said. “And that’s probably the only place in her life that she’s felt consistency.”

Carnisha quickly found a refuge at her new school. And more importantly, she found educators who were willing to lend a hand.

“She’s just got a sparkle about her, an inner glow that just comes across when you speak with her,” John Swett High Principal Jeff Brauning said. “She’s kind of a shy, a little introverted sometimes. But once you get to know her, she’ll do anything for you. She’s got a huge heart.”

The size of the school also worked in Carnisha’s favor. A small student body allowed Carnisha to get the attention she so desperately needed.

“One unique thing about our school at John Swett is it’s relatively small,” Brauning said. “We have 570 students. So we get to know all of our students. We just have this real nurturing, caring environment for our students.”

Sitting in the back of Carnisha’s mind was a constant reminder of the failings of her older siblings. Carnisha was not only determined to graduate from John Swett High. She had her sights set on a college diploma. And she wanted to set that example for her younger siblings.

“I wanted to be the one that’s going to go to school, graduate high school and graduate college so they feel like they have to graduate college,” Carnisha said. “It’s not an option anymore. You have to do it because I did it.”

Carnisha graduated from John Swett High in June. She plans to pursue a career in law enforcement. But educators will remember her for the indelible mark she left on her school.

“So Carnisha is the definition of why we became involved in education,” Brauning said. “To make a difference in students’ lives. And there’s something truly special about a student, a young man or a young woman who wasn’t necessarily born with a golden spoon in their mouth and doesn’t have all the opportunities. And they overcome those obstacles despite not having the role models at home and despite not having all the financial advantages. My experience is those students, those young men and women, are really special people.”



Region 7

David Jasuan

Valley Charter High School, Stanislaus County Office of Education

David Jasuan is the type of person who does not take anything for granted. He’s also the type of person who never turns down the chance to learn.

“I just always look for opportunities to better myself or do better and better,” David said. “Opportunity comes up to take college credits. Why not? Take it. Opportunity to join leadership. Why not? Take it. Opportunity to run for office. Why not? Take it.”

To understand his motivation, you have to go back to his childhood. David was born in Burma, now known as Myanmar. His father was a Christian missionary who preached the Gospel. Those teachings were considered subversive as Theravada Buddhism was the religion endorsed by the government. As a result, David and his family were forced to escape the country.

“We took a boat from Burma to Thailand and from Thailand we were put in a van,” David recalled. “We were squished together with another 30 people or so. We crossed the border from Burma to Thailand and Thailand to Malaysia. And we lived in Malaysia for five years. About the first year or so, we lived in the jungle.”

David and his family immigrated to the United States with the help of the United Nations Refugee Agency when David was thirteen years old. They landed in Modesto where they found a pair of guardian angels in Jeff and Pam Scholl.

“My wife and I, we work with refugees on the Thai Burma border,” Jeff Scholl said. “And while we were over there for a length of time, we got an email from a friend who said, ‘Guess what? I work with refugees and there’s new families who have just come from Burma.’”

The Scholls not only provided resources and support to the Jasuan family. Jeff, a teacher, offered to take a year off from school in order to homeschool David.

“I don’t know how I’d be doing if I was in a big classroom setting the first year that I got here,” David said. “And he homeschooled us with two other boys who just got here too. It really helped us settle in.”

David enrolled at Valley Charter High as a freshman where he did not waste any time. He felt a responsibility to himself and his family to make the most of his opportunity to receive an education.

“He has great resilience and motivation,” Pam Scholl said. “And the gratitude for the freedom to have an education. And so because of that, he’s willing to take everything he can and run with that.”

David graduated from Valley Charter High in May with a 4.17 GPA and 39 college credits. But it was his positive outlook that captured the attention of educators. David found true joy in recognizing how far he's come after a childhood filled with challenges.

"I always see the bright side," David said. "Always see the opportunity. Capitalize on it. Staying positive. Keeping a positive attitude. Just be positive. Always look at the positive side of things."



Region 8

Jacqueline Rodriguez

Del Mar High School, Campbell Union HSD/Special Education in Santa Clara County COE

Too often, high school students obsess about how they look. Body image can become all-consuming. And yet, somehow, Del Mar High junior Jacqueline Rodriguez does not care what you think.

"When we go out in the community now, she holds her head up so high," Jacqueline's mom Evelyn Belen said. "She's just so good about feeling just like anybody else. And not worried too much about her image."

Jacqueline has known the stares and whispers her entire life. She was born with lymphatic malformations, a rare condition that formed large masses in her cheeks, tongue, and chest. She underwent multiple surgeries to remove the diseased lymph nodes, but to no avail.

"The doctors told me that with her condition, she might not live to see her first birthday," Belen said. "My whole attention or concentration was just to keep her alive and keep her safe. When she was born, I just wanted to treat her like a little porcelain doll and not worry her. Not hurt her. Just wanted to protect her."

Jacqueline defied the doctors' expectations. She is enrolled in regular classes. And despite the fact that Jacqueline is non-verbal, she found ways to communicate through her iPad.

"I learned really early on that she didn't really want to be treated different," Del Mar High teacher Anna Lucas said. "She didn't really need to be treated different because she was trying as much as she could to be a part of that class."

Jacqueline also faced physical obstacles due to mobility issues. But she still set her sights on athletics. Thanks to Bay Area Women's Sports Initiative (BAWSI) Rollers, an adaptive sports program that helps young girls with disabilities to play sports, Jacqueline had new-found confidence. When she enrolled at Del Mar High as a freshman, she made it her mission to join the tennis team.

"She came up to me out of the blue one day and said, 'I want to be on the tennis team,'" Del Mar High tennis coach Tom Heckley said. "And my first reaction was 'Heck yeah. We'll find a way to make this work.'"

Belen was overjoyed at Heckley's willingness to embrace her daughter. She also watched as Jacqueline's confidence continued to soar.

"I was thrilled that my daughter was actually going to be able to participate in a team sport," Belen said. "And participate in an after school extra curricular activity. It's something that she's wanted to do for a long time but had never really had the actual opportunity. I'm grateful that Tom was willing to allow her on the tennis team."

Jacqueline has plans of attending Stanford University and majoring in nursing. But for now, she's perfectly content being a normal teenager and continuing to achieve her goals.

"It feels good to be able to show people that you can overcome any obstacles that you may have in your life," Jacqueline said through her iPad.

As for her Belen, she says she sees her daughter as a role model for the entire community, including herself.

"What happened when she was little is just so far her history," Belen said. "And she's grown and has been an overachiever in my mind. Being able to do the things she does is just amazing. I'm just in awe in watching her grow."



Region 9

Christopher Garcia

Sierra Program/Special Education, Merced County Office of Education

It started when he was 10 or 11 years old. Chris Garcia's father left the family and Chris did not know what to do. The pressure of becoming the new man of the house while still trying to be a kid was too much to process.

“At first you want to think, ‘Oh my gosh,’” said Cindy Heaton, coordinator of the Merced County Office of Education. “This young man has so much on his shoulders. He has way too much responsibility for a young man who’s really never been able to experience what it’s like to be a teenager.”

Chris was hesitant to lash out at home. So he decided to unleash his anger at school.

“He would throw tantrums,” Sierra Program vocational trainer Katherine Gutierrez said. “He’s thrown a trash can at me. He’s thrown books at me. He’s thrown chairs, tables, desks across the classroom.”

Chris entered the Sierra Program, a place for students with behavioral issues and conduct disorders, at the end of his fifth grade year. It took years of patience, but Chris eventually learned to control and harness his aggression.

“I’m just thankful that I came here to the Sierra Program,” Chris said. “They helped me a lot. They put me where I want to be. I would have never made it this far without them.”

Educators with the Sierra Program are quick to admit it took a team effort to help Chris achieve success.

“I think Chris’ story in the program has really been a story of the idea that it takes a village to raise people because there have been so many people that have been instrumental to Chris at different parts of his journey,” Sierra Program teacher Caleb Hampton said.

As Chris has adapted to his new life thanks to the Sierra Program, he’s also more involved with his younger siblings. One could make the argument Chris has become the father he never had to his little brother and sister.

“As Chris has grown, he has had to take up more and more responsibility for his siblings and really step into a father role,” Hampton said. “And that has been especially difficult for him because he hasn’t had a father of his own to sort of model those kinds of examples and to deal with the sort of stuff that he went through.”

When asked to describe the relationship with his brother and sister, Chris was moved to tears.

“They make me happy,” Chris said. “That’s the only reason that makes me feel better. Seeing them makes me happy.”

Chris’ transformation is almost impossible to fathom. The kid who once punched a teacher out of sheer anger is now a mature young man who is confident about his future.

“If you have a student who is engaged and willing to try, then there’s just so many possibilities,” Hampton said. “Just seeing a positive story inspires me to be a better teacher and to try to replicate that success with other students and give them the same opportunities that Chris has had.”



Region 10

Maria Guadalupe Perez

Pajaro Valley High School, Pajaro Valley USD

If there is a club to join or an activity to take part in, Maria Perez is happy to sign up. She has made it her life’s mission to help those less fortunate.

“It just feels right to help,” Maria said. “I have a lot of opportunities to help in different clubs. And it just feels right.”

To understand why Maria is so eager to give back, you have to go back to the beginning. Maria was born in Salvatierra, Guanajuato, Mexico. While her father served as a migrant worker in the United States, Maria grew up in poverty with her mother and her siblings.

“The neighborhood where I grew up, there were a lot of gangs,” Maria said. “So when I was in elementary school, a lot of my friends were already getting involved in gangs. It was also hard because I know my dad was working really hard here in the United States. But we never really had all of the things that were necessary for us. I know my parents did the best they could, but sometimes just even food was a problem for us.”

Maria’s father gained permanent residency status in 2011. More importantly, he secured visas for the entire family to make the move to California. Maria struggled to adapt to the new environment and new language.

“I was a teenager so for a lot of young people, that’s the time you try to find who you are, your identity as a person,” Maria said. “And for me, I was trying to figure out growing up in Mexico. And then I just came to the United States and it was like, ‘Wow.’ Here I am, 12 years old, trying to find out who I am. And then I just find myself in this place where I feel like I don’t belong.”

Even Maria’s father initially second-guessed the decision as his daughter begged him to let the family return to Mexico. “It was something difficult for me because I didn’t know what to do with her because she saw the school where she was supposed to go and she was crying,” Eulalio Perez said through a translator. “She cried for one week and she wanted to go back.”

In time, Maria realized she had two options: hopelessly yearn for her old life in Mexico or make the most of her new life in Watsonville. She quickly chose the latter.

“If I don’t do anything to change it, it’s not going to get any better. So I just stayed after school every day and did my homework because at home, I asked my dad and my mom, ‘Can you help me do my English homework?’ They didn’t understand it.”

Maria quickly immersed herself in community service and school activities at Pajaro Valley High. She’s involved with Food What?!, the Migrant Student Association and the Project Green Challenge. But it’s her role as president of the DREAM club that fuels her drive to help others. The club is devoted to supporting undocumented students and their families through fundraising, cultural events, and free legal services.

“Every event, every possible opportunity, she has taken it upon herself to get herself involved,” said Maria Elena Valenzuela, assistant principal at Pajaro Valley High. “I am so honored to have worked with her and to know her because I think she’s very inspiring to all of us, and she’s the reason why we continue doing this work in education— because we see students like Maria be successful.”

This fall, Maria will start classes at UC Berkeley as a first-generation college student. Maria understands the gravity of her impact and hopes she’ll set the tone for future generations.

“Just being the first one to go to college, it’s scary but it’s powerful,” Maria said. “When I was growing up, I didn’t think I was going to go to college. I always had in my mind, ‘If I go to college.’ But now... I am going to college and I’m so excited about it.”



Region 11

Nathalie Uribe

California City High School, Mojave USD

The dichotomy of California City is fascinating. With an area of more than 200 square miles, it’s the third largest city in the state of California. Yet, it has a population of only 13,000 people bringing a small-town feel to the city. But natives are quick to caution against closing your eyes on the people in this sleepy old town.

“People are going to look out for each other,” California City High counselor Nicole Williford said. “The kids are tough.” And if anyone exemplifies the toughness of this city, it’s Nathalie Uribe. Her father was not always present in her life. Her mother is currently serving a four-year prison sentence for narcotics possession.

“As far as a kid who’s been through so much, so many steps in her life where it seemed like where things in her life got good, it would be bad,” California City High track coach Samuel Sherman said. “There’s no way she should be who she is.”

With both of her parents out of her life, Nathalie lived with her grandmother. But in the fall of 2015, Nathalie returned home from a football game only to find her grandmother had passed away after a battle with cancer.

“I see her laying on the floor in a huddled position,” Nathalie said. “And then it was just like I didn’t know what to do. Everything stopped for me. I kept calling her name knowing that she wasn’t alive.”

But in the wake of loss, this small town stepped up in a big way.

“I think it’s definitely helped being small town, small school where there are people who are like, ‘I see you struggling and I want to do whatever I can to help,’” Williford said.

Nathalie is quick to point out she does not know if she would have made it through the tragedy had it not been for her classmates and educators.

“Since we’re like a small community, and the high school is small, everyone is pretty much there for you,” Nathalie said.

“The staff members, they see when something is wrong with you. And they want to help you. They just all come together and make everything like a family even if you don’t feel like you have one at home.”

Despite her pain and anguish, Nathalie made it her mission to devote her senior year to her grandmother. All of her goals. All of her dreams. All for her grandmother.

“I wanted to make her proud,” Nathalie said. “My goal was to get straight A’s and have a 4.0. and just to make my senior year about her. All of my accomplishments. I worked hard. And now I do have a 4.0.”

In the fall, Nathalie will attend Taft Community College. She has hopes of pursuing a career in criminal justice. And she will have the support of 13,000 strong.

“Honestly, she shouldn’t be where she’s at,” Sherman said. “She shouldn’t be going to college. She shouldn’t be achieving straight A’s. She shouldn’t be achieving goals in sports. It’s a tragic situation. But the joy that she brings to me is that she just keeps going.”



Region 12

Victor Ramirez-Diaz

David Stine Chaffey West, San Bernardino County Office of Education

If you ask Victor Ramirez-Diaz to describe his old self, he’ll give you a blunt answer.

“I was a lazy person,” Ramirez-Diaz said. “I didn’t want to get up for school. I just didn’t feel like working. Writing a lot. Reading. I just didn’t feel like getting up. It was too much honestly.”

Victor’s lack of motivation led to his expulsion from his comprehensive school. He eventually landed at David Stine Chaffey West, a community day school that helps at-risk and behaviorally-challenged students. It’s not uncommon to arrive at the school and see motivational speakers on campus. The goal is to help students realize their potential.

“It’s very normal, whether it’s from the military, entrepreneurs, community members,” David Stine Chaffey West teacher Tyrese Crawford said. “We definitely want to echo that as often as we can. They may not receive the message if it’s the first time. And we will keep on telling them until they finally get it. And it becomes second nature to not be lazy, to motivate themselves, to understand that they might have to be independent to know that they have control over their own future. We make sure we bring in various guests in order to do that.”

Victor was one of those students who needed to hear the message time and time again.

“I think even when he was in my class he would mosey in late or mosey in not at all sometimes and I would just say, ‘Victor, you’re almost a grown man,’” Crawford said. “And where you can get away with this and there is not much I can do to you right now, when you get into the real world, it’s going to be a whole different story. And you do not want to set yourself up for that type of future.”

Even Victor admitted he struggled to adjust to his new environment.

“When I used to come to school, I was noisy and one of those kids who talked a lot,” Victor said. “I never listened to the teachers.”

But over time, Victor matured and realized his potential. Before long, he was showing up to class every day. He recently graduated from David Stine Chaffey West and has goals of becoming a lawyer.

“He’s gone from being completely late, horrible attendance to ‘I know what my goals are. I know what I want to do,’” Crawford said.

When asked how he would explain his change in attitude, Victor was quick to credit the educators at David Stine Chaffey West along with his family.

“I actually want them to see me be successful. And I don’t want to be a big disappointment to them. So I actually want to get up, come to school, try to come to school every day, get my work done. And I want to do my best.”



Region 13

Linda Rand

Balboa Middle School, Ventura USD

Linda Rand is a bookworm. She will read anything in sight.

“Reading is like going on an adventure,” Linda said. “You’re visualizing while you’re reading. You’re visualizing what’s happening.”

If you ask Linda about her favorite book series, she’ll quickly answer “Harry Potter”.

“She latched on to Harry Potter and I think Harry Potter is very much the story of an outsider, almost like an immigrant who knows nothing about the world and the school that he enters,” said Kirsten Neumann, a teacher at Balboa Middle School in Ventura.

It’s easy to see why Linda loves Harry Potter. Like Harry, Linda arrived at Balboa Middle School as an outsider. She traveled to more countries in her first ten years than many will see in their lifetimes. She was born in the United Arab Emirates before moving to Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Ethiopia. Finally, in 2014, she moved to the United States to reunite with her mother.

"I was different and I didn't like school," Linda said. "I used to fake that I was sick and stayed away from school for weeks. I used to put signs on my room door and say, 'I hate school.'"

Despite the best efforts from educators, they could not seem to get through to Linda. She learned Arabic as a young child and could not read or write in English when she enrolled in sixth grade at Balboa Middle School.

"One of Linda's greatest challenges was she hadn't been able to go to school when she lived in the United Arab Emirates," Balboa Middle School assistant principal Deanna Baczek said. "We figured it to be about a second grade level for her home language. And now that she was coming to a new country, new language, new culture, new everything." There was another reason Linda did not want to come to school. As a Muslim, Linda stood out at Balboa Middle School by wearing her traditional hijab every day. But it did not stop Linda from wanting to educate her classmates on her religion and culture.

"Linda has taught more students at this school about what it is to be a Muslim and to speak Arabic and write their names backwards," Neumann said. "So I think that speaks to her character that not only is she able to be different but to allow that difference to teach others."

By her eighth grade year, Linda was thriving. She was not only fluent in English. She carried a 4.0 GPA and was one of the top accelerated readers in the school.

"As educators we can offer, offer, offer," Baczek said. "But at some point, it's the student who has to make that decision that they're going to go the next step. And Linda did that. Once that switched was flipped, she became the most amazing student ever. She works so hard. Such grit. She's just one of the hardest working students and very determined. And she will do what it takes to be successful."

The young woman who once could not read now cannot stop reading. The once-outsider finally has a true place to call home.

"We're so proud of her," Baczek said. "And every time I think about it, I think this is why I'm in public education because these kinds of stories. Everybody can learn. And if we work together and keep that in mind, miracles can happen."



Region 14

Jespa Awomah

Arena High School, El Segundo USD

From the way Jespa Awomah smiles, you'd never know about his past life. It was a life of isolation, intolerance and intense pain.

"Little kids would all scream and run," Awomah said. "They called me a monster because of the the burns so it was really difficult."

Awomah was just ten months old when he crawled into a stone fire pit inside his family's home in Cameroon. He lost the use of his right arm and eye. Jespa's mother took him to a hospital but he was unable to receive proper medical care. As a result of the severe burns, Awomah was ostracized, especially in school.

"I always feel like I'm not a human being when I was in Cameroon," Awomah said. "They had to keep me at home because I could not be in school because they felt I stopped kids from learning. I was always sitting in the heating place away from other kids. It was just really difficult."

But little did Awomah know he was about to meet two guardian angels. Rebecca Akumbu and her sister, Ruth, ran Plant A Seed Africa, a nonprofit organization providing educational materials to underprivileged children. After learning of Awomah's story, they launched a social media campaign to bring him to the United States for medical treatment. With the financial assistance of Torrance Memorial Medical Center and the Children's Burn Foundation, Awomah made the 19-hour trek from Cameroon to Los Angeles.

"When I got here, my doctor told me that after he was done with me, I'm going to be able to shake hands with him because my hand was attached to my body," Awomah said.

Awomah underwent eight surgeries at Torrance Memorial, rebuilding his right arm, both of his eyelids, his scalp. But the biggest surgery was the reconstruction of his eye when he received a new prosthetic.

"It was a life changing experience," Awomah said. "Anytime I was going into surgery, I wasn't thinking about the pain. I was thinking about what would happen next. I would think about the result."

Matthew Reiss, a burn and reconstructive plastic surgeon at Torrance Memorial, said he marvels at the little moments that made all of the hard work worth it.

"It's awesome," Reiss said. "It's so rewarding. One day he came in and he was like, 'I can close my eyes now! I've never been able to close my eyes before.' Shaking his hand for the first time. The first time he gave someone a hug. All of those milestones were just awesome."

Instead of returning to Cameroon, Awomah stayed in California. He enrolled as a freshman at Arena High, an on-line continuation school in El Segundo.

"Jespa's hunger to learn is beyond impressive," Arena High principal Marisa Janicek said. "If every single student had a growth mindset like Jespa, unstoppable. He comes every day like a sponge ready to absorb whatever he is learning."

In less than two years in the United States, Awomah is fluent in English. He's an 'A' student at Arena with plans to transition to El Segundo High School in the fall. Things that were once inconceivable, like riding a bike or playing the piano, are now realities. And yet through it all, Jespa never lost his drive and his spirit.

"He is someone we all want to be," Janicek said. "I don't ever want to stop learning or enjoying life. And that's what I see Jespa. I want my own children to be like Jespa. I want them to wake up every morning happy that they're learning and growing and opportunities are coming at them to take."

At long last, Jespa is the young man he was always meant to be.

"When I was crying, I would just pray to God," Awomah said. "And now God has answered my prayer."



Region 15

Jatia Raymond

Fairvalley High School, Covina-Valley USD

"I'm trying to tell you what I see in myself when I look in the mirror. But all I see is a silhouette because the figure's not clear. But I'm confused. I don't know what to say. I don't know who to be. I don't know what to do. All I know is what it feels like to be half-dead and abused."

The words she writes are filled with sorrow, sting, and survival. The poem is titled "An Image of Me". It's something Jatia Raymond while sitting in juvenile hall. She says the poetry is her way of working through years of pain and abuse. It is her form of therapy.

"I enjoy writing poetry," Jatia said. "And my poetry, when I write how I feel, you know how I feel. That's how I cope with it."

Her mother was a drug addict. Her father was a man who not afraid to use physical violence.

"My dad, he was an abusive type of man to everybody," Jatia said. "To all his girlfriends. He popped my left eye out because one day I was sleeping in the bed with him. And I used to wet the bed. And I wet the bed when I was in bed with him. And I woke up. He was beating me with a belt buckle in my eye. And it was nasty. It was green and black and bleeding in my eye. I couldn't see."

When Jatia was just 6 years old, her father died of a brain tumor. She moved in with her aunt to what she thought was a safer environment. But Jatia quickly learned otherwise as she became a victim of human trafficking.

"My auntie let people sexually abuse me," Jatia said. "She told me that if I had sex with a man, well, men, that she could bring my dad back from the dead. And I believed it. So I started doing it but when it happened and it hurt. And I was crying for her name and stuff all the time. She would just be standing in the doorway fixing her pants or something. And she don't care. She's so heartless."

After years of abuse, Jatia struggled to trust men, though that should come as no surprise. But that all changed when she met Fairvalley High principal Dana Craig.

"I just see Mr. Craig as a father figure to be honest," Jatia said. "Father Falcon. I used to call him that. Mr. Craig gave me a reason to want to come to school. And sit down at that desk. And make sure I learn everything I need to know."

It was Craig's open-door policy and gentle demeanor that allowed Jatia to open up about her tumultuous childhood.

"It kind of seems like more credit than credit is due," Craig said. "I couldn't be any more proud of her in what she's been able to overcome. That's a very humbling compliment to get. It's as good as it can get between a principal and a student. That's for sure."

When asked where she would be without Dana Craig in her life, Jatia gave a pessimistic and blunt answer.

"I'd probably be still in jail," Jatia said. "Still in group homes. Placement. Doing whatever I want. And not going to school. Crying somewhere. Blaming somebody else for what I'm doing. But he's here now so none of that is happening."

She's seen too much for a girl her age. But Jatia Raymond is determined to not give up. She's come too far in her journey to stop now as evidenced by the closing lines in her poem.

"I might have been through this struggle. But I'm a survivor as well. So when you ask me who I see in the mirror looking back at me, I'm gonna say a girl who survived hell."



Region 16

Christian Lopez

Cesar Chavez Learning Academie, Los Angeles USD

Christian Lopez's journey to the United States was anything but easy. So, too, was his childhood in El Salvador.

"I saw so many things," Christian said. "From somebody being robbed to somebody being killed."

He grew up in Cuscatancingo, home to the infamous 18th Street Gang. In fact, gang violence turned El Salvador into the murder capital of the world. There was an average of nearly one homicide per hour in the first three months of 2016. El Savador has a murder rate 22 times that of the United States.

"Gang life over there is really, really bad," Christian said. "I wasn't happy anymore. I would go to school but I would always be afraid that somebody was going to come behind me. I told my mom, 'I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to live like this.'"

In 2014, Christian's mom arranged for her son to move to California to live with his dad. He enrolled in LA Unified School District at Cesar Chavez Learning Academies. He knew little to no English. And yet, he immediately made an impact in the classroom.

"I was shocked and stunned that somebody who had been there that amount of time could learn English that quickly and speak it at that high of a level," Cesar Chavez Learning Academies teacher Cesar Valadez said. "And write it at that high of a level."

Teachers were so impressed with his writing that they wondered if it was all too good to be true. One teacher went as far to confirm Christian did not plagiarize his work.

"So when I saw his writing early on, I'm like, 'How does someone who's been in this country for such a short period of time write so well?'" Cesar Chavez Learning Academies teacher William Chavez said. "But Christian, from the very first essay, from the very first writing sample, he's always been consistent."

His maturity is unprecedented for a high school student. His commitment to not only learning a new language but thriving in his new environment is apparent.

"In many ways, he's an adult," Valadez said. "He's an adult in the way he carries himself. He's an adult in the responsibilities he's taking on. He's an adult in the fact that he doesn't see school as just school. He sees it as his job which I think most students should do."

But at the end of the day, Christian's motivation is his family back in El Salvador. They are his motivation. He says his hope is to one day find a way to move his family to California so they can escape the crime-ridden country of El Salvador.

"I think it does boil down to the fact that he understands that he came here and he's separated from the people he loves," Valadez said. "So if he's going to make that sacrifice, he's going to make that sacrifice for something that's worth it. And education is worth it for him. He understands that by getting an education, he can help the people he left behind."



Region 17

Nicholas Macchiavello

Edison High School, Huntington Beach UHSD

There are questions in life we can never adequately answer or explain. But for the people who know and love Nicky Macchiavello, one question stands out.

"Why do bad things happen to good people?" Edison High administrator Elliot Skolnick asked. "And there's no simple answer."

Nicky was the kid everyone wanted to be. He was a soccer standout at Edison High in Huntington Beach. He was popular. And he was beloved. But on January 10, 2015, Nicky's life changed in an instant when he and his friends went to a motocross track in Riverside. Nicky crashed and was rushed to Arrowhead Regional Medical Center.

"We didn't know how to react or what to do," Edison High soccer coach JP D'Brot said. "One minute you see Nick playing on the field and the next second you see him in a recovery room."

Doctors diagnosed Nicky with a traumatic brain injury and placed him in a medically induced coma for ten weeks. But Nicky and his family had support throughout the entire Huntington Beach community. “It was like, Oh my gosh, we’re not alone,” Nicky’s mother Patricia Macchiavello said. “We’re here praying for Nicky. But everybody is praying for Nicky. Everybody that we know is praying for Nicky.” Edison High’s student body also stepped up, organizing events to raise money to help Nicky’s family with medical bills. “We did car washes,” D’Brot said. “We did t-shirts, bracelets. Whatever we could to help out the family. It spread out really quickly. It showed how much people cared for Nick and how tight this community is.” Nicky later returned to school and even to his soccer team. But he had a new role and a new title. “He was the captain,” D’Brot said. “His senior year, he was basically the captain. He had a captain band. And Nicky would come up to the games. And he would be cheering us on. And every time we would go on the field, he’d do the Charger cheer.” And yet for all of the ways Nicky changed as a result of the accident, he’s still the same Nicky. Still joking. Still laughing. Still bringing joy to those around him. “I’ve talked to numerous counselors and they always tell me that kids who have those kinds of traumatic accidents tend to plateau and I don’t see that,” D’Brot said. “I see a drive that is indescribable.” Nicky’s new life is far from perfect. He’s still learning to walk again. He is still seeking normalcy. But his determination is unmatched. “It brings me joy to know that people can have something bad happen,” Skolnick said. “Something that was unplanned. And they can proceed. They can move forward in their life in a way that has so much dignity and commands respect. He gives me hope.”



Region 18

Rodney Lacanienta

Poway Adult School, Poway USD

His fall from grace is difficult to comprehend. Rodney Lacanienta had a self-described “good and normal upbringing.” He grew up in a two parent household with a loving family. Rodney Lacanienta was not lacking for anything or anyone. But somewhere along the way, something changed that sent Rodney on a downward spiral. “It started when I was around 13 or 14,” Rodney said. “I got jumped in a gang. Started smoking weed. Started drinking a lot of alcohol. Stealing cars. Then I got into drugs heavily. And I just liked that feeling. I did crystal meth. That first feeling was just the rush. And I was just chasing it ever since then. It wasn’t a cheap drug. At 14, we don’t have jobs or anything so we do what we gotta do to get money. I stole cars. I robbed drug dealers. I robbed people that loved me because that was the easiest one.” Rodney says he’s been arrested more times than he can remember. “I’ve been to all the jails in San Diego and all the jails in Nevada,” he said. After two stints in prison in Nevada, Rodney was released in 2015. It had been eight years since he made contact with his family. When asked how he could explain the lengthy estrangement, Rodney chalked it up to fear and disappointment. “I love my family,” he said. “I love my mom and dad so much that when I’m on drugs, I don’t like them to see it. I don’t want to be around them. So as long as I’m on drugs, I stay away. It just hurts me for them to see me all strung out and messed up. So I just stayed away. Because of my embarrassment, I would never have the energy or the power to even call or reach out and call them.” Rodney called his mom and said he was ready to return home to San Diego. His parents welcomed him with open arms. But his father had one rule: Rodney needed to return to school and earn his diploma. “I would not tolerate him being with me and not doing anything,” Jose Lacanienta said. “I’m not going to have him languish, watching TV all day and do nothing.” Rodney enrolled in Poway Adult School where he quickly excelled as a student. “He was so eager to make a change in his life,” Poway Adult School teacher Johanna Reynolds said. “And to just finally finish up his education. He knew what he wanted to do. And he did everything he could to do it well. So he took pride in his work. And he took pride in his choices to make a better life for himself.” Rodney initially feared he would struggle going back to school. But he credits his teachers for his success.

"I just felt like I could do this," Rodney said. "They made me realize my potential. And they gave me so much encouragement and it became a reality for me."

On Aug. 2, Rodney graduated from Poway Adult School and plans to pursue a college degree in theology in hopes of becoming a faith-based counselor.

"It doesn't matter how far gone you are," he said. "You can always pick up the pieces and succeed if you want to. It's not going to be easy. I can tell you that. But if you want it, you can have it."



Region 19

Richard Lemmons

Ramona High School, Riverside USD

When Richard Lemmons sits down at a piano, time seems to stand still.

"How I can describe it is you just fall into the piano," Richard said. "Mentally, you're just there. You don't know anything else is going on."

But more importantly, piano serves as Richard's escape from reality.

"Piano has been a way for him to just forget about everything else," Ramona High piano teacher Ronda Barnes said.

"And just something that brings him joy. And you can always tell that by the songs that he would choose."

The peace and tranquility Richard feels each time his fingers touch the keys is empowering because his early childhood was anything but peaceful. His relationship with his biological parents is best described as non-existent.

"I know that they are like an acquaintance of mine but I don't necessarily consider them my mother and father," Richard said.

Richard's grandparents deemed his mother and father unfit to raise a child. So they took it upon themselves to step up and fill that role. In fact, Richard's grandparents took him home from the hospital. His biological parents currently reside in Mississippi. But in 2009, Richard's grandfather passed away. Even today, Richard says he still struggles with the loss.

"It destroyed me," Richard said. "It threw me into a very severe depression. I really have not been myself ever since then. Just severely depressed since then. Who wouldn't be depressed losing a father?"

Richard faced another tragedy six years later when his grandmother died. Richard confessed, at that point, he lost the will to live.

"I honestly was at the point where I told my friends I was going to kill myself," Richard said. "But someone just told me to hold on and stick it through."

In fact, there were plenty of people who did not let Richard give up on himself. A host of educators in Riverside Unified School District banded together to help out. Julie and Paul McIntyre, educators in the district, offered support. And another pair of educators, Brian and Jean Marie Harris, opened their home to Richard.

"Brian and I said, 'Ok. We will take him,'" Ramona High teacher Jean Marie Harris said. "'He's got to have someplace.' We did not want him going into the foster care system."

The Harrises told Richard they would treat him the same way they did their own children. Richard's relationship with Brian and Jean Marie is so strong he refers to them as father and mother.

"The Harrises are like my parents now," Richard said. "They took me in. Just all around kind of patched me back together. They just have this sense of home to them. They feel like family."

There was a time when Richard Lemmons struggled to make it through the day. He lost so much at such a young age. But now, he has a new outlook on life. At long last, Richard has found a sense of peace.

"I don't know how to describe it other than a miracle because when I look back on it, I don't think this could have been possible," Richard said. "Just a combination of all the love and care. And all the things I fell in love with to do combined into one and brought me back up to who I think I can be."

2018

Adult Ed

Patricia Ashley Holmes

Highlands Community Charter School

In September 2017, Patricia Holmes earned her high school diploma, capping off a difficult journey.

In 2004, Patricia's husband left her. Within ninety days, her car was repossessed and she was facing homelessness as a single mother with a criminal history. After hitting "rock bottom," Patricia moved to Sacramento. She attended two different adult schools, but after a few years she was no closer to her diploma than when she started. She felt like giving up was her only option.

Eventually, she found a coach who mapped out a plan, directing her to the Greater Sacramento Urban League, where she enrolled in the Higher Heights Adult School program in partnership with Highlands Community Charter School in May 2015. In February 2016, Patricia started the felony expungement process, and by December, her record was cleared.

At Higher Heights, Patricia found a place to learn and thrive. The road wasn't easy, though. Her commute to take her kids to school then get across town to attend classes herself took 1½ hours on public transportation, a trip she reversed to return home. Although she was overwhelmed with graduation requirements, Patricia completed Digital Literacy classes and the HiSET exam, excelled in English and Algebra, and graduated ahead of schedule.

Since graduation, Patricia gained full-time employment working with the homeless and displaced community. She was promoted to Case Manager, supervising her own caseload of displaced community members. She is attending community college to earn an AA and was recently able to purchase a new car.



Adult Ed

Wendy Paola Samayoa

San Mateo Adult School

Wendy Paola Samayoa arrived from Guatemala in July 2016 and in August began at San Mateo Adult School (SMAS) as an English as a Second Language (ESL) student. In 2017, she enrolled in the high school diploma program. In her country, Wendy was a college-educated teacher; learning English and getting her diploma were like starting over again. That didn't stop her from getting involved at SMAS, however.

In the summer of 2017, Wendy joined SMAS's Ambassador program, in which she welcomes new students to school. In the fall, Wendy successfully campaigned for and served as Student Council President for the 2017-18 school year. Additionally, she presented at two 2018 conferences on "Student Leaders as Agents of Change."

She helped pioneer two programs in the Spring 2018 semester. The first was the ESL City Government Academy, a collaboration between the City of San Mateo and SMAS to empower students to feel comfortable accessing City services and expand the network of agencies for future civic engagement. The second pilot was the ESL Eat Healthy Be Active Community Health Program. Wendy was instrumental in the administrative preparations for this program.

In addition to all of this, Wendy works part-time at an attorney's office five days a week.

Wendy graduated with her diploma in June 2018 and is planning to study ESL at community college in spring 2019. She continues to provide language and translation support services to beginning ESL evening classes. She has been encouraged to become a teacher in the United States.



Region 1

Jasmine Phillips

Anderson New Technology High, Anderson Union HSD

When she transferred to Anderson New Technology High School, a school of 200, Jasmine Phillips had trouble finding the motivation to study and set goals, or the confidence to believe in herself. She never knew her father, and after skipping school and running away from home, she was placed in foster care.

Amy Killingbeck, administrative assistant at New Tech, said that Jasmine’s situation at the time was very negative, that she didn’t love very many things around her or herself.

“Growing up, I [sometimes] see the relationships between my friends and their parents and it’s like, ‘man, I wish I had that,’” Jasmine said.

Jasmine, now a junior, “didn’t have structure in her life. She could pretty much do whatever she wanted, so if she didn’t like doing something, she just didn’t do it,” said Principal Carol Germano.

Jasmine would come to school late. She began to fail classes. As she entered her sophomore year, her GPA was below 2.0.

“I think she was discouraged. Didn’t see the value in education. Didn’t understand why she needed to do it,” Germano said. But with the help of the educators and administrators at New Tech, Jasmine discovered a support system that helped her build confidence and discipline.

She also found herself drawn to the healing power of art. She picked up a camera and used photography to rediscover her love of learning.

Jasmine has a natural talent for photography.

“She’s captured some amazing photos,” Killingbeck said. “I think part of what is going to make her a great photographer is that she’s so patient and still. She’s expressing herself with the beauty she sees in front of her, which could be the birds or the ducks down the road, the cats and the dogs looking out of fences.”

With a lot of hard work, Jasmine brought her grades up to As while finding time to practice photography.

Jasmine has always been very private, so art has been life changing for her, Killingbeck said.

“I feel like it saved her life, because she’s seeing beauty when everything before was all dark,” Killingbeck said. “I watched her struggle at school, very closed off to everything, and now she is seeing and expressing life, beauty, and vitality. It’s giving her a purpose.”

“She loves outdoor scenes a lot,” Germano said. “It speaks to her wanting to be free and learning to appreciate everything else that’s out there in the world. It brings me joy when I see her smile, because for the first two years, we didn’t see too much of that.”

Jasmine continues to move forward, revealing her strong and creative nature. Killingbeck said that Jasmine “never makes excuses. She has come far. She has had to figure it out on her own and make choices for herself with not a lot of guidance. She has had to learn to take care of herself and be motivated completely on her own.

“The growth in her has been amazing. I’m not sure that a lot of people could be successful as she is right now with the stepping stones she’s had to take in her entire life,” Killingbeck said.

Jasmine is now thinking about her post-secondary goals. She is considering becoming a freelance photographer and is working as an intern.



Region 2

Francisco Marquez

Rocklin High School, Rocklin USD

It is such a simple gesture.

“Every morning I go in and I say hello to my teachers. ‘How was your weekend?’” Rocklin High junior Francisco Marquez said. “‘How was your day so far? How was your morning?’”

With each wave, with each greeting, Francisco knows he’s making a difference in the life of a teacher or administrator.

“He walks in my room and he sticks out his hand and he shakes my hand every time I see him,” Rocklin High teacher Matt Bumgardner said. “He just has a really positive energy. He just emanates kindness.”

Rocklin High teacher Adrienne Tacla says Francisco’s selflessness is not only appreciated. It’s rare.

“It’s always about others first,” Tacla said. “It’s not ‘what can you do for me?’ I get excited about the days that he’s in my class because I know that he makes me feel validated as an educator.”

When asked why he makes such a concerted effort with his teachers, Francisco is quick to credit his parents for the way they raised him.

“That’s how I grew up,” Francisco said. “That’s how I treat people. My peers. My friends. Even people that I don’t know. That’s how I treat other people. This is who I am.”

Francisco grew up in a house where his parents only spoke Spanish. To this day, Francisco serves as a translator for his mom. In addition to learning a new language, Francisco also struggled with certain parts of reading comprehension.

“He has difficulties being an English language learner plus having an IEP,” Rocklin High teacher Rachelle Sloan said. “He kind of has a double whammy in a sense. He tries very hard to blend in. He wants to be someone who doesn’t need support. So he works really hard to be just like everyone else.”

Francisco admits school can bring its fair share of challenges. As a result, he has to put in extra time to reach his goals. “School for me, sometimes personally it can be difficult in some cases,” Francisco said. “But most of the time, in my opinion, I just find ways to achieve it.”

Francisco also knows the support system at Rocklin High is responsible for some of his success.

“They help me with mostly all of my work. I do appreciate their help. I really do appreciate their help. Without them, I’m not sure where I would be.”

He’s overcome a lot to get to where he is today. Now, Francisco Marquez is on the fast track to high school graduation day. But what stands out most is his selflessness, something that he’ll carry with him long after his time at Rocklin High.

“He comes in,” Tacla said. “He knows exactly what he needs to do. If he doesn’t have something to do, he’s off to go help somebody. And that’s what gives me joy. That’s what you want to see in your students. And that’s what you want to see when you send your students off into the world. If they could just have a little bit of Francisco, it makes me happy.”



Region 3

Michelle Broskie

Walnutwood High School, Folsom-Cordova USD

At just 17, Michelle Broskie has already survived several painful experiences, emerging from them with a dedication to academics and a strong spirit. Her will to overcome obstacles has made her the Region 3 2018 Every Student Succeeding award recipient.

At 8 years old, Michelle was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes and celiac disease.

“From that point,” she said, “I had to learn to advocate for myself, [to see] if my blood sugars were wrong, to see if something was gluten free, because I’d have severe consequences if I didn’t. Celiac and gluten sensitivity ranges on the spectrum. Mine is severe.”

Then, when Michelle entered middle school, she was bullied by former friends.

“You wake up in the morning [and] they’ve created another social media account to harass you with,” she said. “It was beyond stressful. It went on relentlessly from seventh through eighth grade. And then at a certain point in eighth grade – I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t focus in any of my classes. I would sweat profusely. Even in the dead of winter. I was shaky. I was paranoid. I never felt safe.”

On top of this stress, Michelle was shocked when doctors discovered a massive cyst on one of her ovaries. Then, they found a cyst on the other ovary. The process of getting diagnosed was itself difficult.

With emergency surgery, doctors removed both cysts, and it was time to rest. “It felt good to have it fixed. But at the same time, I knew I wouldn’t be getting back to traditional school anytime soon. I had to figure something else out. The stress and trauma of the surgery, that was not easy to get over. It was really hard in the middle of it. I fell into a really bad depression.”

Michelle transferred schools to Walnutwood High, an independent study school for students with unique circumstances. “We’re just like a comprehensive high school,” said teacher Jessica Cisneros-Elliott. “We just deliver it in a different way.” It would have been easy for Michelle to shut herself out from the rest of the world, but instead, she dedicated herself to academics.

“I always loved school. So I always had big dreams,” she said. “Having time off while I was sick with the diabetes and celiac and then having time off with the ovarian surgery and bed rest, I had a lot of time on my hands. So I applied myself to school. I pushed through it. I worked and worked and worked and worked.”

But no one could prepare Michelle for the next threat. While in her junior year, working at a local internship, a supervisor preyed on her.

“Sophomore year was her banner year,” said Cisneros-Elliott. “We were doing great. Wonderful things were happening. And then she got the gut punch of all gut punches with that internship.”

Despite all this, Michelle first enrolled in college classes at age 15 and is now only six credits away from receiving an associate’s degree. Something once so far away is now a reality for the young woman who took everything life threw at her, and fought back. Now, Michelle finds time to be excited for the future.

“I’ve learned I’m really strong. I can overcome things,” she said. “I can achieve goals I never would even think of having. Or think of setting. Or think would even be possible. It gives me a confidence that I don’t think a lot of people have. I love myself. I trust myself. That might have been the hardest part of all this was just coming to terms with myself. “It’s OK to be different. It’s OK to struggle. It’s OK to think you can’t do it. It’s OK to have a day where you just can’t do anything. It’s OK to let yourself feel things. It’s OK to not follow the norm. Just really think of what you want for yourself.”



Region 4

Raevan Waldon

Valley Oak High School, Napa Valley USD

Valley Oak High School, a continuation school in Napa Valley where 72 percent of students are low-income, takes in new students very often—every six weeks, says Principal Maria Cisneros. Students who fall behind at comprehensive high schools get an opportunity to graduate from Valley Oak High.

“You’re looking at [kids from] single parent homes. Parents working three or four jobs here in Napa,” Cisneros said.

“These are the kids, the families that are working in the vineyards and hospitality. Some live out of town or have to move because they can no longer afford rent here [or] can’t find housing.”

When Raevan Waldon first arrived at Valley Oak High two years ago, she too was dealing with a past of living in foster care, and she was getting F’s in class.

“I always appreciate watching kids and students who have struggled but are so resilient,” said Tiffany Kuban, Valley Oak High counselor. “They don’t give up.”

As she slowly but surely got her grades up, Raevan embodied this resilient spirit.

“Even though she’s definitely had some challenges in her life, she’s not allowed that to define who she is,” said Cisneros.

“I see a happy person. I see a person that’s always smiling. Very respectful.”

“When she first got here, she was, like a lot of our students, guarded and sheltered and a little lost and confused,” said teacher John Mautner. “And then, she just found herself. And she just kind of flipped the switch and thought, ‘Oh, I trust my teachers.’ She’s been an A student ever since.”

“I think when you have young people that have traveled from foster home to foster home, it’s difficult to connect,” Cisneros said. “Because you’re just waiting for the shoe to drop. ‘When am I leaving?’”

Many new Valley Oak High students can appear “battered if not broken,” but, as Mautner said, one of the differences for Raevan is that she has goals in mind.

“She’s got deadlines,” Mautner said. “The joy of seeing somebody overcome their obstacles and kind of grow into who they are. Realize their identity. She’s someone who really knows who she is. It just brings joy to see that. Because you have so many students who are trying on personas and personalities and often destructive ones. And it’s not who they are. But you can see who Raevan is when you meet her.”

Raevan has truly taken all of those challenges that she’s faced. She’s really flourished. She’s a ray of sunshine, Cisneros said.

“She is one of those young people that reminds you again what hard work looks like,” Cisneros said. “And the compassion that kids learn through this process about taking care of self. And then in turn start taking care of others.

We can’t be more excited for her in her journey.”

Raevan remembers a time when she did not think she would graduate from high school.

“I’m actually kind of proud of myself,” she said. “There’s a lot of people here who do care. Even on my bad days. I kind of feel like now that I’ve found my center, I know what I’m going to do with it.”



Region 5

Emily Tang

John Yehall Chin Elementary, San Francisco USD

Change often brings about a sense of uncertainty.

“You’ve grown up in a country and that is what you’ve known,” Chinese Education Center Principal Victor Tam said. “You know your family there, your extended family there, your friends there, your teachers there, the school there, the community there. And that’s been your life.”

Emily Tang liked her old life in China. Her parents described her as one of the top students in her class and a teacher’s dream.

“She was a very good student,” Emily’s father Jian Ming Tang said through a translator. “And she was having good grades.”

But on May 22, 2016, Emily, along with her mother and brother, moved from Guangzhou, China to San Francisco to live with her father. It was a reunion of sorts for the Tangs, as Emily’s father spent years in the United States trying to secure citizenship for his wife and children. The transition was tough on the entire family, especially Emily.

“At the start, I didn’t even know an English word,” Emily said. “So I can’t finish homework. And I don’t know what the teacher’s saying. So I can’t learn anything.”

Emily’s parents enrolled her at the Chinese Education Center, an elementary school for newcomer immigrants.

“I remember Emily the first few days, being very quiet,” Tam said. “Very reticent. Not too outgoing. And then, as she got more comfortable, her personality started to take shape.”

After one year at the Chinese Education Center, Emily transferred down the street to John Yehall Chin Elementary.

“She’s a very fast learner,” John Yehall Chin Elementary Principal Allen Lee said. “Though having gone through many learning challenges, she has persevered. And we could see the progress from when she first arrived to now.”

Emily’s mother credits the support system at both the Chinese Education Center and John Yehall Chin Elementary for her daughter’s rapid growth and success.

“The teachers here at the school are very patient and also very encouraging,” Weiu Xiu Qin said through a translator.

“Letting her know that sometimes it takes time. Just very patient and a lot of verbal encouragement to help her along the way. She’s learned so much English already in such a short time.”

That encouragement helped Emily find a sense of confidence in her new environment.

“I feel like I learn so much stuff,” Emily said. “And I’m happy to be here because of course I have friends. And I can play around with them every day.”

Emily’s teacher, Jonathan Cheung, is hoping her work ethic and dedication will rub off on the rest of his students.

“I’m continually impressed with her,” Cheung said. “Just how fast she grows. How fast she picks things up. How motivated she is to better herself. It’s an inspiring story.”

In less than two years, Emily has gone from a once-shy young girl to a blossoming student who is quickly mastering the English language.

“She found a way to shine here,” Tam said. “And that’s part of who she is.”



Region 6

Mariana Thomas

Black Diamond High School, Pittsburg USD

Nothing can prepare you for the death of a parent, especially when it’s unexpected. Mariana Thomas knows that well.

“I lost my dad when I was 12,” Mariana said. “I would stay home every morning. And every morning that I woke up, I’d be like, ‘Please let this be a bad dream. Please just let this be a nightmare.’ And every time I woke up, my dad wasn’t there.”

On Feb. 19, 2013, Mario Thomas died after suffering serious injuries in a car crash in Pittsburg. Five years later, Mariana is still coping with the loss of her dad.

“A girl is supposed to look up to her dad,” Mariana said. “Her dad is supposed to be her hero. Her number one hero in the world. When you lose your father, it feels like you don’t have nobody here to save you anymore.”

In the wake of his death, Mariana spiraled out of control. She admits she used fighting as a means to deal with her pain. At school, she lacked interest in her classes which led to poor grades.

“I started off at Freedom High School in Oakley,” Mariana said. “I didn’t really go to class like that. I had all F’s. I only had one B at that school.”

Mariana needed a fresh start, so she transferred to Black Diamond High, a continuation school in Pittsburg.

“She came here and she hadn’t found her footing yet,” Black Diamond High Vice Principal Eric Hosking said. “And she was behind. And then, after a couple quarters, she started to connect.”

One of the educators Mariana connected with was one of her teachers, Nadedja Casselberry. It was Casselberry who helped Mariana work through some of the trauma in her life.

“We all go through things,” Casselberry said. “Every single one of us. She’s rare in the fact that she’s able to maintain her composure despite the obstacles she faces. She can come in with a smile every day.”

When asked where she would be without the educators at Black Diamond High, Mariana responded in blunt terms.

“If I never came here and got the support that I got, I honestly feel like I probably would have been in jail,” Mariana said.

“I really appreciate a lot of these staff members and teachers because I know they’ve seen the potential in me. I just knew it because they never gave up on me. They never gave up on me. Ever. They showed me that they cared and they were there for me when I needed somebody.”

Hosking says it’s students like Mariana who remind him to develop relationships with all of the students so they have a better understanding of the challenges they face on a daily basis.

“You have to get to know them to know their backstory,” Hosking said. “And if you don’t know their backstory or what they’re struggling with at the time, you don’t understand how special they are.”



Region 7

Carson Stubstad

Amador High School, Amador County USD

Carson Stubstad keeps his schedule pretty busy. He was both Senior Class President and Service Club President at Amador High on top of his normal schedule filled with AP courses. But that’s exactly how Carson likes it.

“I’ve always wanted to be a part of everything,” Carson said. “And being at the point where you think you can’t do anything really showed me that there’s always something you can do.”

In November of 2013, Carson found his bright future very much in doubt when he began experiencing muscle weakness on the soccer field.

“His PE teacher and the soccer coach and a couple parents said something’s wrong with your kid,” Carson’s mother Ellen Stubstad said. “He’s running weird and he’s falling over. And we didn’t think much of it other than we decided to go to the hospital and just kind of get him checked out.”

After a battery of tests and several misdiagnoses, doctors told Carson he had chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy, better known as CIDP. The rare disease is associated with muscle weakness, loss of reflexes and decreased mobility in the hands and feet.

“It’s like your nerve’s like a wire,” Ellen Stubstad said. “And it chomps at the outside of the wire. And that can grow back over time. But his also got a bit into the inside which would be your axons.”

The disease had an immediate impact on Carson’s daily activities. Simple things like opening a locker or holding a pencil were now complex tasks. The loss of balance led to multiple falls on the Amador High campus. Carson received medical care at Stanford University, a three-hour drive from the high school. Despite the frequent doctors’ appointments, Carson opted to keep his condition private from many of his friends. In fact, he went to great lengths to hide it.

“With my braces, I would always wear jeans,” Carson said. “And I had a catheter at one point where it would stick out like this. And I was known for wearing sweatshirts. But it was all normal.”

Carson was also determined to stay up to speed with his schoolwork.

“All these appointments we went on, it was, ‘Get me back to school,’” Ellen Stubstad said. “He also wanted to keep his grades up. Because he thought if his body was going to fail him, then he’ll focus on his brain.”

While many of Carson’s friends were unaware of his battle with CIDP, some of the staff members at Amador High were looped in and quickly stepped up to help.

“That’s the pride we have here in Amador County of the advantage of being small town is we truly are a family,” Amador USD Assistant Superintendent Jared Critchfield said. “And you just watch from counselors to staff members, teachers, it doesn’t matter. And this is the kind of stuff this school has done for decades.”

Nearly five years since the diagnosis, Carson is now in remission. The unfortunate reality is the disease could return at some point in the future. Now a freshman at the prestigious Claremont McKenna College, Carson is not allowing that fear to affect his plans. In fact, he says he’s grateful for the disease.

“It made me the person who I am today,” Carson said. “I feel like I’m a lot more open now. Before that, there was not a lot of adversity. There were just small things. But going through something this serious, in a time where you’re growing and learning, it opened my eyes to other people around me.”



Region 8

Joelle Drake

Sakamoto Elementary School, Oak Grove SD

She is only 11 years old, but Joey Drake is wise beyond her years.

“A lot of my friends and my family say ‘How are you so mature?’” Joey said. “They think I’m older than I am. But I say because of what I’ve had to go through, I know things that not all 11-year-olds know because not all 11-year-olds have to go through things like this.”

Born with cerebral palsy, Joey faced her fair share of challenges growing up. But she refused to let her condition dictate her daily life.

“Since she was first diagnosed, I knew she was just going to be a fighter,” Joey’s mom Lottie Drake said. “She never slowed down. Everything was a little bit delayed as far as the developmental milestones go. But she met each one with a smile and hard work.”

With intense physical therapy, Joey quickly surpassed expectations. Initially, she struggled to use her right hand and needed leg braces for walking. She still needs her braces for playing sports. But outside of that, you would never know of her struggle.

“I didn’t realize that she had cerebral palsy until her mom mentioned it at conferences,” Sakamoto Elementary teacher Bevelee Doran said. “I knew she had a brace sometimes. But it just never slows her down.”

Joey admits her battle with cerebral palsy has made her more empathetic to students who may be perceived differently than the rest of the class.

“When I see people who are making fun of other kids, I get sad because that would sometimes be me,” Joey said.

“Sometimes they would look at me. ‘What are you wearing? Why do you have those on your feet?’ And I would just explain to them why. When I see other people like that who are different, I just make sure I’m nice to them and make them feel that they aren’t different in a bad way. They’re different in a good way.”

When Joey entered Sakamoto Elementary in the fall of 2016, she had no clue what was next in store for her and her family. Joey’s mom, Lottie, had been diagnosed with stage 3C breast cancer.

“She’s always been the light of the family,” Joey said. “And just to watch that light slowly fade away, it was really hard to just watch your mom just go through that.”

Lottie went through a year of chemotherapy along with a double mastectomy. Through it all, Joey was by her mom’s side.

“She was amazing,” Lottie said. “She was always kind of an old soul. But this stepped it up a notch. Lots of notches actually. She had to deal with something pretty serious.”

The Drake family credits the staff at Sakamoto Elementary for helping them through such a difficult time. Joey’s fourth grade teacher, Madeline Marshall, says the family-like atmosphere allowed Joey to cope with her mother’s battle with cancer.

“There was definitely a really strong sense of community,” Marshall said. “And Joey was at the heart of it. I hoped that helped her get through a really hard year. And I kind of think it did.”

Lottie Drake is now in remission and the Drake family has a sense of normalcy. The uber-talented Joey is back to her busy schedule, participating in athletics, music and theater. She says the adversity she and her family faced forced her to look at life in a new way.

“It’s made me and I think my whole family more grateful for what we have,” Joey said. “What (my mother) has is survival. We have more hope for things that will come. And we will be able to live life to the fullest.”



Region 9

Jaskiret Rai

Kerman High School, Kerman USD

You’ll have to forgive Jaskiret Rai if he seems a bit tired. Such is life for the full-time student, full-time worker, and full-time volunteer.

“He called me last night at 9:30,” Kerman Unified School District superintendent Robert Frausto said. “I was already in bed. He was on break. I said, ‘What time do you get off?’ 1:00. He has, like, three different jobs. And then obviously he’s going to school. I don’t see how he finds time in the week to do everything, really.”

It’s a work ethic that can be traced back to when Jaskiret was 6 years old. The son of Punjabi immigrants, Jaskiret grew up in a house with limited English. His parents worked in the fields while his grandmother took care of the children.

After failing first grade, Jaskiret’s teacher predicted his future in blunt terms.

“She did tell me I would never amount to much success because I didn’t understand English,” Jaskiret said. “She called both of my parents and she said, ‘He can’t even write properly. He’s not going to learn this language. He’ll probably end up like you guys with a lack of education.’”

Jaskiret now says he would thank that teacher for motivating him to succeed in the world of education. But he did not do it alone. In fact, he credits much of his success to Pam Sellick.

“I used to be the librarian for the district and then I went into the classrooms,” Sellick said. “And we did research reports. And I clearly remember him because he was so excited about it. And he loved learning. He stood out amongst his peers even in fourth grade.”

Sellick took a special interest in Jaskiret and gave him his first set of books from her personal collection at home.

“I owe Mrs. Sellick everything,” Jaskiret said. “I can never repay her because she basically taught me how to read. She cared about children’s education. No doubt about that.”

As fate would have it, the two reconnected at Kerman High. Jaskiret was now a standout student. And Sellick was his principal.

“To see a student go from fourth grade, limited English, barely reading to in high school now he’s taking advanced courses,” Sellick said. “That makes me really proud.”

Jaskiret felt indebted to educators like Sellick who made such a monumental impact on his life. He turned that gratitude into goodwill by giving back to his community. You’ll often find him reading to students at Goldenrod Elementary. He also sits on the board as a student representative for Kerman Unified School District. And he did not rule out the possibility of running for a school board seat in the near future.

“It just never stops,” Jaskiret said. “But if you have so much passion and you like what you do, it doesn’t feel like anything. If we can make a difference in someone’s life, that’s all that’s going to matter at the end of the day.”

In a world where teenagers are often self-consumed, Jaskiret is determined to pay it forward. And he would not have it any other way.

“You don’t typically find kids like that who want to volunteer anymore and make the community a better place just because,” Frausto said. “And that’s what he’s all about. He wants to make Kerman a better place to live.”



Region 10

Rolando Pablo Lorenzo

San Benito High School, San Benito HSD

It was the hardest decision Rolando Pablo Lorenzo made in his young life. At the age of 14, Rolando left his family and left his life in Guatemala for better opportunities in the United States.

“I came here with a dream,” Rolando said. “And to be somewhere in life. Leaving my family, I wish I could have them with me here. Supporting me. Giving me love that most of the kids need.”

Rolando made the trek from Guatemala to California with his grandfather before eventually landing in the small community of Palcines where he now lives with his uncle. Rolando admits he struggled to adapt to his new surroundings.

“When I arrived in California, it was different,” Rolando said. “Very different. The culture. The language. Traditions. Everything.”

And then there was the language barrier.

“When I first arrived, I didn’t speak English,” Rolando said. “I didn’t know any word in English. Not even saying ‘Hi’ or ‘Hello.’”

Rolando immersed himself in both work and school. He spent his mornings working in the fields and his nights in the classroom where he met San Benito High teacher Carissa Alvarez.

“From the first day I met him, he had that something special that not a lot of kids have,” Alvarez said. “He is a worker. He just has this desire to learn and to improve. And he’s got the immigrant hunger. Where I think he’s seen how hard life can be and he sees education as his way out.”

It should come as no surprise that Rolando thrived as a student at San Benito High. Alvarez says he was every teacher's dream student.

"The ELD (English Language Development) teachers would joke and we would look at the rosters and we would see who had Rolando," Alvarez said. "And we would be like, 'Oh man!'"

Joanne Kaplansky, an English Learner Program specialist at San Benito High, predicted Rolando's success from the very beginning.

"He was just very eager from the get go," Kaplansky said. "He's a role model for all of our students that no matter what the circumstance is, anything can be accomplished."

Rolando graduated from San Benito High in June, fulfilling his dream of receiving a high school diploma.

"To me, it was something impossible," Rolando said. "Because I didn't imagine to be in high school. To learn English. To graduate. To have a diploma."

As for what's next, Alvarez says she sees big things in Rolando's future.

"He's the kid that's going to roll with the adversity and he's going to overcome," Alvarez said. "Because it's just who he is. He's not going to take no for an answer. He's just going to keep pushing."



Region 11

Mickaela Valenti

Stockdale High School, Kern HSD

Mickaela Valenti often finds herself transported to a new world each time she enters the art room at Stockdale High in Bakersfield.

"I just keep working," Mickaela said. "Sometimes I don't even notice that the bell has rung."

Her passion for her portraits are evident to anyone who has seen her work.

"She's our example to other students that I work with," Stockdale High special education teacher Mickey Padilla said. "I say, 'Look, if you guys want to put the effort behind it and the work behind it, you can be a Mickaela too. You could be a student that can strive and do wonderful things.'"

But there was nothing wonderful about Mickaela's early struggles.

"During my childhood, I had a hard time reading and writing and speaking," Mickaela said. "I thought it was normal. 'She's probably just stupid.' I was told that a lot."

Mickaela's parents worked with her every night to improve her skills. They enrolled her in special education classes. And they brought in Padilla every week during the summer to help Mickaela with her studies.

"Some days were head down on the table not wanting to do things, but then she would get up," Padilla said. "And I would say, 'We only have this amount of time and if you can get through it, we can do great.' And she would work through it."

But the bright spot for Mickaela came through her new-found love of art.

"When I couldn't say what I meant and my big sister wasn't there, I had to somehow be able to communicate," Mickaela said. "So I was able to draw sometimes. Or point out things. So I always liked drawing or looking at images to make sure I'm able to communicate."

Mickaela honed her craft through countless hours of painting, drawing, and sculpting. She's known for her two-dimensional characters that consists of cutting out thousands of tiny pieces to create one beautiful work of art.

"Patience is like the number 1 thing I have to have in doing this," Mickaela said. "Since it's very time consuming, one piece can take about a month while others can take about a couple of weeks. It all depends on what you're willing to work on."

Her hard work paid off when Mickaela became the first special education student in the history of Stockdale High to take an advanced placement course: AP Art.

"I never thought I'd be able to do it," Mickaela said, fighting back tears. "I honestly thought that I would never be able to do an AP class."

But not only did she enroll in the class, she thrived in it.

"I have most of my AP students take AP classes in everything else," Stockdale High art teacher Linda Hyatt said. "They're top performing students. But in terms of their production in the art, Mickaela outshines any student I've ever had in AP Art."

The young woman who was frequently called “stupid” is now making history. The speech delays are gone. The reading and writing skills vastly improved. Her art is immaculate. It’s been quite the journey for Mickaela Valenti. But she’s grateful for all of it because of where she is now.

“I had flaws and I hated myself for it,” Mickaela said. “I thought it was normal for me to do that. I thought it was normal that people were mean. I thought it was normal that I couldn’t read. It’s hard. It’s frustrating. But it’s good.”



Region 12

Jessica Corona

GEC - Goodwill High School, Victor Valley Union HSD

At Goodwill Education Center in Victorville, educators are committed to helping students in unique circumstances find a sense of belonging and community.

“We help students that have not been successful,” counselor Lora Walsh-Martin said. “For whatever that reason is. They need that support. They need that; to know that somebody cares about them. Asks them how their day is. And I find that that’s what we do here. And I feel that’s what makes a difference.”

Jessica Corona transferred to Goodwill Education Center after struggling both academically and socially in middle school.

“I was always the one to goof around,” Jessica said. “I wasn’t really taking school seriously until 11th grade.”

In November 2016, Jessica’s mother was diagnosed with urinary system cancer. Jessica made the decision to change her ways and get back on track with her schoolwork.

“When she was diagnosed with cancer, I dropped everything,” Jessica said. “I stopped playing around. I made a promise to her that I would graduate early. I came to school on time. I did my work.”

Goodwill Education Center Principal Kevan Loyd quickly noticed Jessica’s newfound commitment to education with her mother’s wishes at the forefront of her mind.

“I think that was a turning point for her,” Loyd said. “She realized that there’s something more important than actually being a social butterfly here at school. She wants to graduate and do bigger and better things because she wanted to take care of her mother.”

But on October 9, 2017, Jessica’s mother lost her battle with cancer. It’s a loss Jessica still feels every day.

“It’s like losing another piece of me,” Jessica said. “I cry at night sometimes. I have difficult days where I don’t want to get up. I don’t want to do anything. I don’t want to talk to anybody. I want to shut everyone out.”

It would have been easy for Jessica to regress after her mother’s death. But the community at Goodwill Education Center stepped up and provided support.

“We all have a part,” Walsh-Martin said. “And basically, it’s cheerleading. It’s kicking them in the butt and saying ‘Come on. Let’s go.’ But we are family here. And with us being family, we surround.”

In May 2018, Jessica fulfilled her promise to her mother by graduating from Goodwill High.

“After all she’s overcome, the behavioral issues at the other high school, her mom passing, she still had the drive to graduate from high school,” Loyd said. “That was the greatest thing she could have done for me is to actually graduate.”

It’s been quite a transformation for Jessica Corona. From a challenging student trying to find her way to high school graduate, Jessica is looking ahead to the future. But she’ll always have her mother in her thoughts.

“I think Jessica now is a person who understands grit,” Goodwill Education Center Dean of Students Benisha Carr said.

“How to persevere. And she knows that if she puts her mind to anything, she can achieve. I think her mom is looking down on her and is extremely proud of the wonderful young lady her daughter has become.”



Region 13

Nick Morales

Agoura High School/Indian Hills West Credit Recovery Program, Las Virgenes USD

Nick Morales once lived a life of self-destruction.

“I always thought this [high] is how I want to feel for the rest of my life,” Nick said. “As an addict, I didn’t care about you. I didn’t care about my mom or my dad, my grandparents, or anyone who actually used to care about me. It was, ‘how can I make money? What can I do to get the next high? And what do I need to do to get it?’”

Nick's childhood played a role in the decisions that led him to addiction. His father, deported when Nick was 8, was seldom accessible.

"My mom had her own problems with drug addiction," he said. "And got sober. And relapsed. Having to go through all that was not the most stable thing. But with that said, I've always had my grandparents in my life. From when I was little, they really tried to take care of my mom and me."

By the time he was a teenager, Nick was drinking alcohol. Then starting with marijuana, he escalated to crystal meth, to which he became addicted.

"I'm this 15-year-old kid living in this meth house," Nick said. "What is going to happen if I continue on this path? And it came to me. 'I'm going to die.'"

"Nick was literally on the street, down and out," said Jack Maranto, Indian Hills Credit Recovery Program teacher at Agoura High. "But he used a sheer force of will to make something of his life and change it."

Nick's best newfound trait may be his talent for helping others. The once-selfish addict is now selfless in every way.

"I know that with my experience, I'm uniquely qualified to help another alcoholic or drug addict," he said. "And with that said, I like doing it. I love watching those people change. I love watching someone broken turn into a person with a will to live. If I could do that for the rest of my life, no question about it."

Maranto credits Nick with having a strong sense of his own potential.

"I think he wanted to save his soul," Maranto said. "I think that he was different because he made a conscious choice and wanted to put in the work ethic to do it. Nick is resilient. He bounces back. He is a natural magnet for other students because he's so approachable. He makes it easy for them to talk to him. When I see [Nick] in the classroom, I know it's going to be a good day in the room."

Maranto has never met a student quite like Nick.

"In my 37 years, I haven't had a student that has overcome the difficulties that Nick has, and gotten to this point in his life in such a positive state, and graduate," Maranto said. "I'm his mentor, but I feel like Nick's been mentoring me. I've become so much more aware of the incredible difficulties that people go through with addictions. Nick's added to my life that way by teaching me about it and having me think about it and reflect on it."

"Nick is an incredible young man," said Agoura High School Principal Brian Mercer. "From where he was freshman year to where he is now and what he's accomplished – what he's going to do for people in need – that's what I'm most proud of for Nick."

With new passion and purpose in life, Nick has shown incredible maturity and tremendous leadership of being humble enough to tell his story to help other teenagers going through addiction and making poor choices. Even if it's just one person, he's made a difference, Mercer said.

Now clean for two years, Nick is in a much better place.

"Life is not an every day struggle anymore," Nick said. "I don't think about using drugs on a daily basis. I have friends. I have family. I have people who I love and I care about. I help people. Life happens on life's terms. But I have the tools to be able to deal with it now."



Region 14

Stella Linardi

Whitney High School, ABC USD

Stella Linardi knows what some people may think of her. As an undocumented immigrant, she says she often finds herself trying to prove her worth.

"I think a lot of people see immigrants as more of a burden that the nation has to compensate for," Stella said. "But a lot of students like me, we all just want to go to college. We all just want to do something with our lives and give back. It's just really hard in this climate to not know whether you're wanted or not."

Born in Indonesia, Stella and her family immigrated to the United States when she was just 3 years old.

"They came to America to do what was right by their kids and their families to create something better," Whitney High Assistant Principal RoseEllen Shea said. "And for all those years even being here, it was scary for her to be here. It was scary for her to put herself out."

Stella and her family spent the next decade trying to save up enough money in hopes that one day, Stella could call herself a United States citizen. She received temporarily relief in 2016 when she became a DACA recipient.

"My family was so happy because now this was a form of protection for me from deportation," Stella said.

Stella could have only cared about her own status. But she was content to become a voice for some of the undocumented immigrants in this country too fearful to speak for themselves.

"I don't think it's something you can plan as much as it is a calling," Shea said. "And I think she has that calling and I think she's answering it. She always goes beyond herself. She's looking to change generations. And to be honest with you, that's what our country needs. And she's willing to go there."

Her work outside the classroom is nothing short of exemplary. She served as co-president of the California Scholarship Federation and Future Business Leaders of America while at Whitney High.

"I've worked with a lot of really incredible, impactful students," Whitney High counselor Alyssa Skipper said. "Never anyone like her. And I don't know that I'll ever even get a chance to encounter another student like that who so truly cares about other human beings."

This fall, she began her freshman year at Cornell University, a prestigious Ivy League school.

"Knowing that Cornell is such an advocate and a voice for people like me, that really comforted me," Stella said.

The future of DACA is still unknown. That means so is Stella's future in this country. It's a sobering reality given the impact she's made on so many people. In the meantime, she'll continue to do what she's done so well: change minds and change lives.

"When we see our students like Stella, we're in an interesting time right now in this country," Whitney High Principal John Briquet said. "And I think people worry and wonder what the generation coming up is going to be like. And I can tell you, with young people like Stella coming up, we're going to be just fine."



Region 15

Federico Hernandez

Temple City High School, Temple City USD

Federico Hernandez does not want your sympathy. He does not want your pity. He simply wants to be treated like everyone else.

"He does not want to be associated with having a visual impairment," Temple City High teacher Grant Rowe said. "Even though it's obvious he does. He walks in with a white cane and he's reading brail. A lot of teachers have said to me, he's as intelligent or more intelligent than his sighted peers."

Federico has been blind as long as he can remember. He was diagnosed with retinoblastoma, a rare form of eye cancer that nearly cost him his life.

"What I remember my parents saying is the cancer couldn't really be taken care of," Federico said. "They gave me chemo. But it seemed like we were feeding it. Like it fell asleep and came back stronger. And eventually, it was like a matter of life or death. If they kept my eyes on me, I would have died."

Federico underwent enucleation, a surgical procedure that removes the entire eye. It left Federico without his vision, but grateful to be alive.

"You learn to live with darkness that you live with every day," Federico said. "You just have to live your life as normal as you can."

But any sense of normalcy Federico had grown accustomed to quickly changed the summer before his freshman year of high school.

"I started to feel a pain in my leg and I thought it was because I was exercising," Federico said. "Maybe I pulled a muscle. Maybe I hurt something else. And eventually, it grew up to the point where I couldn't walk anymore. I couldn't stand up anymore."

Federico had osteosarcoma, a bone cancer often linked to retinoblastoma. This meant more chemotherapy and more time in hospitals.

"The pain that you felt during these cancers, it hardens you up," Federico said. "You don't feel anything. Sometimes that can get into your emotions. I just wanted to go back to my normal life."

Federico enrolled at Temple City High in the spring of 2016 after missing what would have been his freshman year of high school.

"He has to work so much harder to learn to study, to understand," Longden Elementary co-principal and former Temple City High assistant principal Aaron Chang said. "And then he pushes teachers and myself to be better educators. So I think he makes everybody around him better professionally and personally."

Chang admits interacting with students like Federico makes his role as an educator well worth it.

“That’s my favorite part of the job is getting to know these students, their stories,” Chang said. “What makes them unique. What makes them resilient. What gives them their personality. That’s what inspires me.”

No one can question the grit of Federico Hernandez. A two-time cancer survivor, Federico is determined to not be seen as someone with a disability, but as someone who is an equal.

“He’s been through quite a bit as a person,” Chang said. “He’s gone through a lot of physical hardships and emotional hardships. And it inspires me because he bounces right back up literally and figuratively. And I hope to be like him when I grow up.”



Region 16

Beatriz Vasquez

Northridge Academy High School, Los Angeles USD

Beatriz Vasquez estimates she’s spent more time at the hospital than at her school.

“It was hard,” Beatriz said. “I missed out on a whole lot. There are some times I email the teachers to send me work at the hospital. Or when I come back, I just get this whole bunch of work and try to catch up.”

But through it all, Beatriz has always made time for her education.

“She’s had long extended absences,” Northridge Academy High assistant principal Alex Carmona said. “And when you think it’s going to be very difficult for her to make up all the work, she somehow comes back with a lot of dedication and a smile on her face which is just incredible.”

Beatriz was born with a Ventricular Septal Defect, a heart defect due to an abnormal connection between the lower chambers.

“Emotionally, I was devastated,” Beatriz’s mother Rosa Vasquez said. “I felt hopeless as a mom. I felt that I couldn’t do anything. I think a mom’s instinct is always trying to help your child. Trying to get them better.”

Beatriz underwent multiple procedures and surgeries, often requiring long stays in the hospital.

“There were just some times where my mom would say, ‘We have to go to the hospital,’” Beatriz said. “I’d cry. Because I don’t like being in the hospital. I hate IVs. I hate just being there. I’d rather be at home in my own bed with my sisters.” Her life was in no way normal as much as she tried to make it that way.

“She’s never been a child who could just enjoy life at its fullest,” Rosa Vasquez said. “She was a child who was constantly in the hospital.”

As her heart weakened, Beatriz was placed on the waiting list for a transplant. On Oct. 24, 2016, Beatriz and her family received a phone call from a nurse that would change their lives.

“She said, ‘we have a heart for you,’” Rosa Vasquez said.

After a successful heart transplant in November 2016, Beatriz returned to school in the fall of 2017, much to the delight of the staff at Northridge Academy.

“I would like to think that we lifted her up,” Northridge Academy High principal Nidia Castro said. “We held her and we held her tight at times. And we let her go at other times. Going to what she needed to do. But it was a commitment that everyone who has come into her life academically had. We loved her and continue to love her. And I think that made it easy for us to do all the extra stuff that we needed to do.”

Despite her limited time at Northridge Academy, the impact Beatriz has made on the school is overwhelming.

“I’ve had a lot of special students over the years,” Carmona said. “But she is the best in terms of the motivation. In terms of how she motivates her peers. But not only the peers, but also the adults. We’re inspired by her story. By her strength. By her resiliency. It’s just amazing. It’s unlike anything else I’ve seen in my life.”



Region 17

Joe Chao

Los Alamitos High School, Los Alamitos USD

Joe Chao would rather not talk about himself. He’s perfectly content to stay out of the spotlight.

“I want to be treated like everyone else,” Joe said. “I don’t want people to single me out. I don’t really like to be the center of attention that much.”

And yet, Joe might be the most popular student at Los Alamitos High. Just ask his teacher, Tami Sciacca.

“He can command a room when he walks in and not say but two words,” Sciacca said. “He’s been through so much but unless you sit down and just talk with him, you would never know how much.”

In February of 2004, 4-year-old Joe lay in a hospital bed after a blood clot in his brain led to a severe stroke. As a result, Joe was left partially paralyzed on the left side of his body.

“The doctors nearly gave up,” Joe said. “And it was a miracle that I survived. My parents would tell me that a lot worse could have happened. So I guess I just feel grateful for all of it. They taught me to always be thankful. And appreciate what you have.”

Joe spent the next few years in physical therapy, learning how to adjust to his new life. But along the way, he found a sport that captivated his interest: basketball.

“Basketball has always been something that I can go do when other parts of my life aren’t good,” Joe said.

The mechanics can prove challenging at times as Joe predominantly uses his right hand to dribble and shoot. But Los Alamitos High basketball head coach Eddie Courtemarche still wanted Joe on his team.

“When I say he’s a once in a lifetime player, he really is,” Courtemarche said. “He’s every coach’s dream to coach.”

The moment Joe found out he made the squad is one he says he’ll never forget.

“It was probably one of the best moments of my life because not many kids get to play on the high school team in the first place,” Joe said. “And even with my circumstances, I still was given the chance to play.”

After failing to make the team his freshman year, a mistake Courtemarche says he still regrets, Joe spent his junior and senior seasons on the varsity squad.

“When you have someone like Joe and it’s pretty obvious when he gets into the game, even the other team, the other fans get excited for him,” Courtemarche said. “And you would think those opportunities wouldn’t come that often. But he’s probably played in 10, 15 games this year.”

The culmination of Joe Chao’s career at Los Alamitos High came on senior night. Courtemarche told Joe he would be in the starting lineup for the first time in his career.

“I finally did it,” Joe said. “I made the starting lineup.”

But the night was only beginning. With less than a minute to go, and the Griffins lead firmly in hand, Joe checked back into the ballgame.

“He gets in the game and he has an opportunity toward the end,” Courtemarche said. “Shoots it. Misses it. We get the rebound. Shoots it again. Misses it. There’s two seconds left. They kind of throw it out there. He steps in. Heaves it. As soon as the buzzer goes off, ball goes in the net.”

Pandemonium immediately ensued.

“I don’t know if I can put it into words because everyone started going crazy,” Joe said. “Everyone rushed the floor. My teammates were pounding me on the back.”

The three-pointer capped off a 67-53 win over Huntington Beach. And yet, somehow, the bucket counted for more points than you could ever put on a scoreboard.

“Sports has a great way of bringing about those moments,” Courtemarche said. “And the more opportunities you can have those moments, the more you realize how wonderful sports really are.”

Joe Chao, who never craved the spotlight, still found a way to shine. What an ending for the young man whose life nearly ended much too soon.



Region 18

Jamie Geng

Westview High School, Poway USD

She is in a league of her own. Jamie Geng is one of the most talented students to walk through the doors of Westview High in San Diego.

“It’s pretty rarified air,” Poway Unified School District career education specialist Joe Austin said. “I can honestly say when I talk about Jamie that there’s no question she’s the top 1 percent of the students I’ve worked with. And that’s 25 years of high school graduates.”

She’s an AP student. She’s a musician. But she might be most proud of her time as president of the robotics team.

“I’ve got these gears turning in my brain and it’s the most incredible thing to take something from your head, put it on a piece of paper, and put it on a piece of metal,” Jamie said. “And then put a motor on it and see it run. Because that came from you. That came from your mind. Your hands. And it’s incredible.”

In her role as president, Jamie oversaw a group of more than 80 students which forced her to come out of her shell. “Jamie was incredibly shy,” Westview High robotics advisor Dawn Hester said. “I mean, incredibly shy. To then see her over-come those challenges and be able to lead a team. Jamie is the best student leader I’ve worked with in all of my years. And then to see what she does with difficult information and how easy she makes it. How she processes it. And how she comes up with these ideas that I didn’t think of.”

Given all of her accolades, it’s no surprise she was accepted to the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “I’ve dreamed about going to MIT since I was seven,” Jamie said. “And just looking at what people at MIT have done for humanity. I just could imagine myself going there and now that it’s a reality, I’m incredibly excited about this opportunity.”

But there was a time where that dream was in doubt. During her sophomore year at Westview High, Jamie suffered from crippling anxiety attacks.

“I started really questioning myself about, ‘Am I really good at anything?’” Jamie said. “And that led to me just beating myself up for every mistake I made. The worst they would get was I would sit down on the floor and just curl up in a ball because I couldn’t move. My limbs would freeze up. I couldn’t breathe.”

Austin notes it’s important for schools to emphasize the importance of mental health and hopes students like Jamie will lead to more awareness.

“There are students like Jamie every-where. Every school. Every walk of life. Every district. It’s not part of your student profile. We don’t have a read on whether kids have gotten the support they need to be mentally healthy. And that anxiety and particularly in a pressure cooker academic environment.”

Over time, Jamie says she learned to look at the world in a healthier way. Her new-found sense of gratitude is evident as she looks forward to the next chapter in her life.

“Anxiety is not being weak,” Jamie said. “It’s a chemical imbalance in your brain. It’s hard for me to talk about because I feel so lucky that I’m able to come out on the other side of something that could have completely derailed me,” she said. “I’m still not even 100 percent sure how I got to this point. But I’m glad that I’m here.”



Region 19

Luis Diaz

Ramona High School, Riverside USD

The fact that Luis Diaz is alive right now, let alone a high school graduate, is nothing short of miraculous.

“He has an indomitable spirit,” Ramona High teacher Ann Sullivan said. “He doesn’t let life get him down at all. It’s amazing. And if you could bottle it and sell it, you’d be a millionaire.”

If you ask Luis about his childhood, he’s hesitant to go into much detail. He was born in Mexico but moved to the United States when he was five years old. He suffered neglect and physical abuse at the hands of his mother. She would often leave Luis and his younger brother to fend for themselves while the family was homeless.

“My childhood mainly is painful and I try to repress most of it,” Luis said. “I couldn’t understand why it was happening to me. But I didn’t feel necessarily sad. Just kind of hurt. There was just so much physical pain I had to endure.”

Luis missed six months of school while living on the streets. As a result, he had to repeat the first grade. But the trauma from his early childhood was a bigger issue. He spent more than a decade in the foster care system due to his mother’s drug addiction. Luis fell into a deep depression that lasted for several years.

“To hear the story that Luis came from just tore my heart,” teacher Scott Lockman said. “I almost wanted to tear up. No student should go through that. I was just thinking about what he came through. Not having a mom and dad. And the drugs. And the homelessness. All of that.”

Thankfully, at Ramona High, Luis found the family he never had. The school’s AVID program helps first-generation college students prepare for life after high school.

“I really feel the AVID program here at Ramona High School was the catalyst to help him ensure that he doesn’t fall through the cracks,” Ramona High counselor Mark Lim said.

Lockman also credits AVID for helping Luis find his self-confidence.

“I really believe that being part of a program like AVID, being part of an AVID classroom, a family, gave him the support that he needed,” Lockman said. “Gave him the motivation that, ‘Yeah. I can do this. I can really do this. This is really possible. College is really possible for me.’”

When asked where he would be without AVID, Luis gave a blunt answer.

"I would be a drop out," Luis said. "No question about it. I would be a drop out. In a way, AVID was a second family to me. And I found family through friends. And that's the only family I really loved and known."

It would have been easy for Luis Diaz to drop out of school. Instead, he sees his education as a chance to break the cycle and move past the pain.

"Being the first one to go to college in my family. That's just kind of like an enlightenment of a new world. No longer will I have to look at the past. I'll just kind of focus on the future."

2019

Adult Ed

Carlada Angel Thomas

Sutter County Adult Education

Carlada Angel Thomas was a childhood victim of physical and emotional abuse. Her mother was a drug addict and her father was imprisoned twice. Carlada had a "victim" mentality and didn't begin her recovery until her 30s. This single mother decided to not allow her past to define her or her children's future.

Carlada enrolled in Adult Education to earn her high school diploma through the Sutter County Superintendent's Office of Education. She struggled with her classwork, but persisted to be a role model for her children and others who struggled, completing her high school credits in January 2019 and then beginning community college classes. While completing her credits, Carlada worked full-time to support her family.

During the last 10 years, Carlada has helped with a program which provides meals to people in the Yuba-Sutter area. She has worked at the Mobile Community Closet providing clothing, shoes, and school supplies to needy people. Carlada is also the co-founder of WOG Lifestyles, which provides encouragement, affirmation, and resource assistance to the needy.

Carlada hopes to begin a career in social work. She plans to obtain her AA at Yuba College and her bachelor's at Sacramento State University. Eventually, she would like to open a center for individuals left to deal with the guilt and aftermath of having incarcerated parents, helping others avoid repeating the mistakes of previous generations and achieve their goals to better themselves, their children, and their communities.



Adult Ed

Jesus Lopez-Varela

Oxnard Adult School

Although he came from Mexico with a high school diploma and had attended university, Jesus Lopez-Varela was at a disadvantage when he arrived in California because his English language skills were lacking. He began working two jobs, but he soon realized he needed ESL classes. After completing ESL, he applied for a tutoring job at Oxnard Adult School. He needed to get his GED; once he did that, he decided to get his high school diploma through OAS's Options Program. As a Migrant tutor, he helped others work toward their diplomas, while continuing his part-time jobs.

OAS saw the potential in Jesus and offered him a full-time guidance technician position, helping more students pursue their educational goals. After a few years, Jesus decided to take classes at Oxnard College. He was an outstanding student, so OAS supported him in finishing his degree. Jesus graduated with a bachelor's in Spanish from CSU Channel Islands. He wanted to become a teacher, so he found a part-time teaching credential program.

While working on his credential, he saw the need for a Spanish language GED/HSE prep class. He approached OAS with his plan and was given approval once he earned his credential. He has been teaching this class since its inception and has helped students earn their HSE certificate.

Jesus was awarded the Classified Person of the Year from Oxnard Union High School District in 2015. He continues to promote OAS classes at local fairs, neighborhood meetings, and swap meets.



Region 1

Keanen and Keion Evans

Winship Middle School, Eureka City Schools

Keanen and Keion Evans are one dynamic duo. The twins make up the award-winning Viking mascots from Winship Middle School in Eureka.

“Our dance routine was from Just Dance 2018,” Keanen said. “And we danced to 24 Karat Magic from Bruno Mars.”

But there was a time when Keanen and Keion could not be in a gym, let alone perform a high-volume dance routine.

“They couldn’t do assemblies,” the boys’ mother, Faye Prudhomme, said. “Do band concerts. Parades. Things like that just weren’t going to happen. The sensory [stimulus] was just too much for them.”

Prudhomme was just 23 weeks pregnant with Keanen and Keion when doctors at University of California, San Francisco Medical Center delivered some heartbreaking news. She was diagnosed with twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome, a condition where identical twins share the same placenta and there is uneven blood flow between the two babies.

“I was in tears. I was distraught. My whole world was crashing on me,” Prudhomme said.

Neither twin was expected to survive. But on May 30, 2005, eight weeks before their due date, Prudhomme give birth to Keanen and Keion.

“I started checking their limbs,” Prudhomme said. “And I was like, ‘Oh my goodness, they’re OK.’ And then I just started bawling. I’m like, ‘My babies are OK.’”

But as the twins grew older, Prudhomme noticed they were not hitting normal child development milestones.

“I did notice, right about a year old, I still wasn’t getting the eye contact,” Prudhomme said. “I wasn’t getting the speech. It was hard because there were quite a few times where I got choked up and I was like, ‘My babies don’t even know who I am.’ We got the diagnosis it was autism.”

Autism is a disorder that impairs social interaction and language development and is often accompanied by sensory issues. There are more than 200,000 cases each year in the United States. The autism spectrum is as wide as it is complex.

“I don’t want them to feel like they have to grow up to be that label,” Prudhomme said. “I want them to be Keanen. I want them to be Keion. I don’t want them to be, ‘Oh these are the boys with autism.’”

Keanen and Keion were non-verbal until the end of first grade.

“It was back in that time in 2010, 2011 when we didn’t even talk,” Keion said. “So we communicated by using whiteboards.”

Thanks to early intervention and dedicated educators like Tina Kastler, the twins are blossoming as they get ready to enter high school.

Winship Middle Principal Teri Waterhouse attributes the boys’ success to the school’s close-knit community.

“I think it’s just a testament to how far they’ve come and how comfortable they feel around students and faculty here at our school,” she said.

There are still challenges ahead for Keanen and Keion. There is no cure for autism, but Prudhomme says she’s ready for whatever comes next.

“I’m going to keep encouraging them to reach beyond the stars.” Prudhomme said.



Region 2

Chloe Blanchette

Albert Powell Continuation High School, Yuba City USD

Chloe Blanchette is surprising everyone, including herself.

“There’s been a lot of times where I’ve just sat back and been like, ‘How did I get here?’” Chloe said.

The 17-year-old has seen too much and lost too much. She was raised by her grandparents after her parents were unable to take care of her. But at the age of 11, Chloe watched as both of her grandparents battled a meth addiction. They lost their house and moved into a trailer park riddled with drugs, violence and abuse. Chloe often went days without food or proper shelter.

“I didn’t accept it, but I just realized that it could make me stronger,” she said. “I could either take it and be like, ‘Oh poor me’ and end up just like them and do all the drugs and everything. Or I could take it and be where I am now.”

During the days of darkness, Chloe sought to bring light to her community. She turned pieces of yarn into friendship bracelets and would give them out to people she described as “in need.”

“It was the only thing I could do, so whenever I’d see people who looked like they were down or needed a little bit of an extra push or smile, I’d give them a bracelet,” she said. “And that made me feel really good. Even if it’s not big, it made me feel good knowing that I was doing something.”

After bouncing from house to house and school to school, Chloe enrolled at Albert Powell Continuation High.

“My life changed so much when I came to Albert Powell,” she said. “I feel like a different person in a sense. I think I’m not the typical kid to come to a continuation school because I don’t have a bad school history. I didn’t get in fights. I didn’t skip a bunch of class. I purely came here because I wanted to come here so I could graduate early.”

Albert Powell High Principal Jennifer Cates initially thought Chloe might not be the best fit for the school given that she was not off track. But she quickly changed her mind.

“I probably would have said no on paper,” Cates said. “‘You don’t need us. You’re doing OK. There’s others who could probably benefit from being here before you are.’ But I could just tell that she needed us. And ironically, I think we needed her as well.”

When Chloe was not in class, she spent time running the school’s clothing closet, a place for students to grab clothes, hygiene products and school supplies. She said she saw it as a way to give back to those in need.

“I think that I’m not super selfish because I have been in multiple positions where I haven’t had anything or I’ve needed something,” Chloe said. “So I guess I acknowledge that there are other kids that don’t have things or other people that don’t have things or need things.”

In June, Chloe fulfilled her goal of cramming two years of school into one and graduated from Albert Powell Continuation High. It was quite the accomplishment for a young woman who lost so much at such a young age. But, then again, this is only the beginning for Chloe.

“She doesn’t go around saying, ‘Well, all these terrible things have happened in my life’ and use them as an excuse,” Albert Powell High teacher Jillian Damon said. “She’s actually used it, I think, as a way to fuel her and give her passion to do something more, to do something great. ... And she knows ‘I’m going to break this cycle. I’m not going carry this on. This stops with me. I’m moving ahead. And who’s coming with me?’”



Region 3

Jelan Gentry

Rio Americano High School, San Juan USD

Jelan Gentry knew the odds were stacked against him.

“I knew that I didn’t want to be another statistic,” he said. “I didn’t want to be another one of those kids that just fell off.”

When he was 15 years old, Jelán told his mother he was gay. The family struggled to accept him for who he was, so Jelán made the tough decision to leave the house.

“I was kind of feeling like no one was really having my back,” he said. “I started to rebel and I started to run away. Once I ran away, I was bouncing around from house to house pretty much. I was sleeping on couches, and was missing a lot of school from that.”

Jelan went through a slew of foster homes, but he remained hopeful.

“I knew that there was a family out there that was going to be able to talk things through with me,” he said. “There was going to be a family out there that was going to be able to handle my sexuality.”

Jelan finally found a stable foster home, but he found his true family at Rio Americano High School.

“We have a really strong LGBTQ community,” Rio Americano High School Counselor Meghan Wilson said. “And we also hold meetings. And the kids are inclusive. And I think he could be who he really was here. And he knew he was accepted in that way.”

That’s not to say everything was picture perfect from the start. Jelán arrived at Rio Americano broken and bitter. It took time to build relationships with staff members and students.

“Jelan definitely came in not trusting anybody,” Rio Americano High School Vice Principal Rob Kerr said. “So that is a tough thing to build over time, and luckily Jelán hung in there.”

Rio Americano High School Principal Brian Ginter met Jelán when he first arrived at the school. Ginter said he was immediately drawn to Jelán and his potential.

“I kind of felt like he could make something of himself and turn it around,” Ginter said. “And I just stuck with him no matter how mean or nasty he may have been at the time. But he did turn it around because he wanted to.”

“When you’re happy with yourself, no one can tell you what you can be and who you can be.”

- Jelán Gentry

Over time, Jelán embraced the people at Rio Americano as they encouraged him to live life as his truest self.

“I feel like I found a very supportive community here at Rio,” he said. “No matter what I wanted to do. If I wanted to wear nails one day, I could wear that. If I wanted to wear wigs one day, I could do that here.”

Jelan graduated from Rio Americano in December and plans to attend college in North Carolina this fall.

“Honestly, I would say I’m really proud of who I am now,” Jelan said. “Yes, I still deal with things to this day. But when you’re happy with yourself, no one can tell you what you can be and who you can be. I’m so strong that no one can break me down. I know that I’m always going to pick myself up no matter what.”



Region 4

Ali Hussain

Rodriguez High Regional DHH, Solano COE

It is tough to find the words in any language to describe the perseverance of Ali Hussain.

“It can’t be explained how isolating language is if you don’t have it and you can’t access your education,” Solano County Office of Education assistant director Marianne Duncan said. “That’s why his story continues to inspire me. The more he learns about what’s possible, the more he wants to do.”

Ali is deaf — and he’s on a mission to educate.

“Oftentimes, people who can hear will look at people who are deaf, someone like me, ‘Well, you’re not as good as me,’” Ali said. “Or ‘You’re lower than me. You can’t do such and such.’ I’m like, ‘No. I can do just as much as you can.’ It doesn’t matter if you’re hearing or deaf, we are equal.”

Born in Pakistan, Ali had limited access to education. He went to school when he was 6 years old, but language barriers prevented him from learning with the rest of his peers.

“I tried my best to learn to read and write the language there in Pakistan,” Ali said. “And I was lost most of the time. I was able to get several things from visualizing it and seeing it on paper. But the struggles that I had was because there was no communication.”

In 2014, Ali moved with his family to California. The learning curve would prove steep. Learning a new language in a new culture is a challenge in and of itself. But Ali needed to learn two languages: English and American Sign Language.

“When he came here in the ninth grade, he had no language whatsoever,” Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher Katherine Reyes said. “So the limits of his language were pointing, utterances, grunts. And that was how he communicated. He didn’t understand what people were talking about. But he wanted to understand. He wanted to learn.”

Ali credits his teachers, interpreters and classmates at Rodriguez High for helping him find a sense of belonging.

“I felt empowered here,” Ali said. “A lot of different people on staff were willing to help me and teach me. And just build my confidence. And give me those opportunities that I could grow and learn and then finally have a point in my life where I could see a future.”

Ali graduated from Rodriguez High in June and now plans to pursue a career in technology in hopes of finding ways for the hearing and deaf to communicate more effectively with each other. He even has dreams of attending Harvard Business School.

“He’s very inspiring,” Reyes said. “He’s inspiring to other students here. He shows that it doesn’t matter where you come from. It doesn’t matter if you didn’t have language exposure at a young age. You can start. You can start now if you haven’t picked it up yet. You can still do it. If you keep going, then you can succeed. That’s what Ali is embodying. That’s what he’s showing.”



Region 5

Llisel Badajos

Half Moon Bay High School, Cabrillo USD

Llisel Badajos has never been one to shy away from a challenge.

“She gets an idea she wants to do something and she doesn’t let her inhibitions hold her back,” said Julia Smith, Half Moon Bay High counselor.

As a freshman, Llisel joined the wrestling team. By the time she reached senior year, she was widely considered to be one of the top wrestlers in the region.

“She’s really good,” Half Moon Bay High wrestling coach Tom Baker said. “She was one of our team captains this year and just never missed a practice --- was always there, always energetic, always picking up kids that were down.”

When asked what she loves about the sport, Llisel had a simple answer.

“I love wrestling because it just makes me forget about all my problems,” Llisel said. “It’s helped me take out my anger on all those problems I’ve had in my past.”

Llisel grew up in a home where only Spanish was spoken. She took English language development courses through middle school to catch up with her peers.

“It wasn’t easy for me to learn English,” Llisel explained. “My parents always felt like they were left out sometimes because they didn’t know how to help me.”

Her family also dealt with immense financial struggles. There were times where Llisel feared they might lose their home. But that only strengthened her desire to become a first-generation college student.

“My parents never really had the chance to get that education because they never had the money to,” Llisel said. “And I just want to prove to my parents that I can be so much more than just another random student.”

On a mission to stand out from her peers, Llisel joined the “One of a Kindness” campaign at Half Moon Bay High, a group of student leaders and advocates tasked with creating a more positive environment at the school.

“She stands out in a lot of ways,” Half Moon Bay High Principal John Nazar said. “And a lot of our kids do. But she’s special in many aspects. She’s really selfless. She cares about others. And for a high school student to show that, I think it’s incredible. It’s a sense of joy and a sense of accomplishment that it feels like what we’re doing is worth it.”

Llisel is quick to credit her parents for her successes. She said she uses their sacrifices as motivation to become the best version of herself.

Although she graduated from Half Moon Bay High in June, there is no question Llisel has left an indelible mark on campus.

“I think Llisel has created a legacy at the high school,” Smith said. “And I think she’s really helped to change the culture at the high school. So while Llisel might be leaving, she’s kind of set this precedent for younger students and definitely a legacy.”



Region 6

Armando Wright

Decoto School for Independent Study, New Haven USD

Armando Wright never had a proper childhood. His parents both battled drug addictions, which often left Armando to take care of himself.

“There were nights where my mom and dad would go missing and I’d be at home by myself,” Armando said.

Armando’s father was deported to Mexico after multiple stints in prison. His mother’s drug addiction got worse and Armando moved in with his grandmother.

“Once I began living with my grandmother, I did go through a lot of years of depression and anxiety,” he said. “I just remember most nights crying. Just wishing that things could be better for me.”

Armando had seen too much for a boy his age. His struggles with anxiety and depression persisted during his early high school years. But his commitment to education remained. After attending two different schools his freshman and sophomore years, he enrolled at Decoto School for Independent Study.

“He actually approached me — contacted me through email about interest in our school,” said Decoto School for Independent Study Principal Grace Kim. “He kind of did research, I think, on our school and felt like this was going to be a good fit for him.”

Thanks to the small school environment and a supportive staff, Armando flourished. He completed all of his courses while also juggling a full-time job. When asked how he kept motivated, Armando pointed to his parents’ struggles and not wanting to go down the same path as them.

“I’ve always had that mentality that I need to keep pushing,” Armando said. “I need to keep doing my work. I need to keep doing what I need to do to succeed. I didn’t want to end up like that. And the only reason that I kept motivated and kept going and decided to go to college is because I want to have a better life. I don’t want to be like them. They’re struggling right now and I don’t want to struggle. I want to be me.”

Decoto School teacher Allan Johnston said he saw Armando’s potential very early on.

“He is quite the kid,” Johnston said. “I think right from the get go ... he had a vision and a goal for himself. And I think he’s sort of carried that through.”

Most young men and women have no idea what type of career they want to pursue in the future. But Armando said he’s known for a while. After graduating from Decoto School for Independent Study in June, he plans to pursue a degree in social work. He says he wants to help others any way he can, especially those struggling with depression.

“I know what it’s like to be really down,” Armando said. “I know what it’s like to have those thoughts. But I got the help that I needed and there’s people out there that need that help as well. I just want to help kids out that have gone through similar situations that I did. And I want them to know that there’s people there for them.”



Region 7

Keannu Linnell

Lathrop High School, Manteca USD

Keannu Linnell was Mr. All-American. A three-sport athlete at Lathrop High, Keannu excelled at everything. But for all of his battles on the football field, wrestling mat and baseball diamond, his biggest battle came in a hospital room.

“You don’t know what you’re going to do or how you’re going to handle it until you are faced with it,” Keannu’s father, Alec Linnell, said. “There’s no script. There’s no book. There’s nobody that can tell you how to be or how to act. It’s something that goes deep inside your soul.”

During Keannu's sophomore year, the junior-varsity quarterback started complaining of blurry vision. Doctors initially thought he suffered a concussion. But as the symptoms worsened, Keannu's parents pushed for answers. On Dec. 3, 2016, a CT scan confirmed the family's worst fears: a brain tumor.

"My worst nightmare was coming true," Alec Linnell said. "And I knew at that time we had to knuckle down and take care of business."

Three days later, Keannu underwent surgery to relieve hydrocephalus, or fluid in the brain, which can cause severe headaches. Keannu suffered a stroke on the operating table, leading to a medically-induced coma.

"It was heartbreaking," Keannu's teammate Frankie Guzman said. "It didn't feel real. It felt like it was made up. It didn't hit me until I went to go see him with my own eyes, because I had to see it to believe it. And when I saw it with my own eyes, it broke me down. It tore me down because that's my quarterback."

Doctors performed a second surgery to successfully remove the tumor, but the all-American was now a shell of his former self. Keannu was non-verbal and partially paralyzed with short-term memory loss. After six months in the hospital, Keannu moved to a rehabilitation center with the goal of returning to school at Lathrop High.

"He could have given up," Lathrop High principal Greg Leland said. "He could have quit. He could have felt sorry for himself. The family could have said this is the end. Nobody did that. Nobody in the family did that. Keannu never did that."

Keannu had plenty of help. His older sister, Callia, had just become a mother and was pregnant with her second child. But she sacrificed time with her children to work as Keannu's full-time caregiver.

"Helping my brother is a whole different situation that I didn't think I was going to be going through," Callia said. "But it's definitely rewarding seeing him get better. Seeing his legs move more. Seeing his arms move more. It kind of brings me some joy seeing that."

While Callia says it was an easy decision, it's one her parents did not take for granted.

"She dropped everything," Alec Linnell said. "And she knew what she had to do. And in that process, she found out her calling. What she wanted to do in life. And this is what she wants to do. She's an amazing woman. She's made all of us very, very, very proud of her. She's exactly what everybody aspires to be when put in that predicament."

When Keannu returned to school full-time in the spring of his junior year, he had one major goal in mind: graduation. But earning his diploma was not enough. He wanted to get out of his wheelchair and walk across the stage to receive it. And so, on May 30, surrounded by his friends and family, Keannu returned to the football field and did just that. It was not how he originally imagined it, but it was a far greater accomplishment than any touchdown pass.

"I was thinking what am I going to say to him to inspire him to stand?" Alec Linnell said. "And I told him, 'Stand my son.' I tried to yell it as loud as I could as if I was at a football game. The very fact that they said he'd never see his 17th birthday, let alone graduate with his class was an achievement in itself."

When asked about the last 2 ½ years, Keannu credited his work ethic.

"I never gave up," Keannu said.

But there is still work to be done. Keannu knows this. His family knows this. But they remain stead



Edenvale Elementary School, Oak Grove School District

Sept. 7, 2013 was the worst day of young Leo Chavez's life. He was just 6 years old when his father stabbed his mother, Martha Casillas, to death at their home while Leo was watching television in the other room.

"It was heartbreaking," Edenvale Elementary Principal Ryan Haven said. "You don't know what to say. You don't know how to console a child. You know that they're going to need a lot of encouragement and support."

Leo and his older brother, Mario, were left in the care of their 22-year-old sister, Katia. But Haven recognized it would take the entire Edenvale community stepping up to help Leo grieve the loss of his mother.

"One of the things that I remember many times kind of mentally committing myself to, and I think a lot of people on our staff did the same thing, is saying, 'Leo is our kid,'" Haven said. "'We're going to see him through. We're gonna walk with him through this. He's not alone. And we've got him.'"

In the weeks and months that followed, Leo struggled to control his emotions. After all, he grew up in a house where he constantly saw violence.

"At first it was hard because he got in a lot of trouble here at school," Katia said. "Fighting. Hitting girls. Getting mad so easily. Didn't listen."

Leo battled with bouts of depression during the first few years. Haven admits there were stretches of silence, made harder by the fact that Leo was an English language learner.

"Although we have tons of staff who speak Spanish, he's trying to figure out the English language as well as the vocabulary to describe his feelings," Haven said. "And he's mad. And I think there was a lot of anger that he went through."

Yolanda Guerra was the school's health clerk. She made it her mission to take Leo under her wing and help him find peace in the midst of grief.

"He would tell me that Ms. Yolanda was his second mom," Edenvale Elementary teacher Jacqui Murbach said. "That was his second mom that he would go to for everything. She would make sure that she fed him in the mornings. Ms. Yolanda definitely kept track of him."

In February 2019, Guerra died after a battle with leukemia. Once again, Leo had lost an important figure in his life.

"He's held it together really well," Murbach said. "If I was in his situation, I wouldn't have been able to handle it in the way that he did. He grieved in all the right ways. He talked to people in all the right ways. It's almost because he had that past trauma experience that he was able to handle Ms. Yolanda passing so well."

Through it all, Leo Chavez recognizes his success. And he is quick to credit the Edenvale community for helping him overcome such an unspeakable tragedy.

"It feels amazing," Leo said. "I've been here for seven years now. And it's been a real journey."

And while he is moving on from Edenvale Elementary as he enters seventh grade, Haven says Leo's school family is not far away.

"He knows he has a home here," Haven said. "He knows he has a home at Edenvale. He knows he can come here and that he will get support."



Region 9

Jammy Harris

Sunnyside High School, Fresno USD

Take a stroll through Sunnyside High’s campus and you’re sure to find Jammy Harris and her million-dollar smile.

“She’s got a smile that lights up the room,” Sunnyside teacher Tasha Hicks said. “And then when you find out that there are all [these] reasons that the smile couldn’t have been there, it makes it all that more precious.”

Jammy lacked stability throughout her childhood. Her mother battled with schizophrenia, which left her father as the sole caretaker.

“My daddy was somebody I looked up to,” she said. “He always used to compliment me about everything I did because he was like, ‘You’re a beautiful black-skinned child.’ He loved me. He always wrapped his arms around me.”

But on Feb. 6, 2012, Jammy lost the most important person in her life when her father, James Earl Harris Sr., passed away. She was 9.

“It was my breaking point,” Jammy said. “After he was gone, that was when all the hardships came in. And the crying. And the tears. And a lot of hurt.”

With her mother unable to care for her, Jammy and her little brother moved into foster care. By the time she arrived at Sunnyside High as a freshman, she was hanging out with the wrong crowd.

“Jammy came in dealing with a whole lot of things that most 14-year-olds and lots of adults have never had to deal with,” Hicks said. “And so she was really trying to just find herself.”

In time, Jammy found the right group of friends and she became involved with a number of clubs on campus. She currently holds a 3.6 GPA while taking honors and advanced placement courses.

“I’ve been teaching 16 years and I’ve had a ton of incredible kids. I really have,” Hicks said. “But Jammy is one of a kind. She really is. Somehow, through all the things this child has endured, she has learned that failure is never final, that a small defeat is not going to be the thing that destroys you. She bounces back like most kids I’ve never seen.”

Sunnyside High teacher Uziel Jimenez said he’s impressed with the way Jammy has found success in spite of her tough upbringing.

“She’s assured of her success because she’s had to live life in the face of certain failure, I guess is the best way I can put that,” Jimenez said. “So if you’re already expecting possible disappointment in your life, then you know how to navigate through it, how to persevere through it, how to advocate for yourself, in that sense.”

Jammy will return for her senior year at Sunnyside High in the fall. After high school, she hopes to attend one of the historically black colleges or universities. Although she has lost both her father and, more recently, her mother, Jammy feels immense pride over her accomplishments.

“People always ask me questions,” she said. “‘How do you do it?’ I tell my story so people know that the struggle is real. I am proud of myself and I just want to be able to make my family proud.”



Region 10

Cindy Aguilar-Castaneda

Gonzales High School, Gonzales USD

She is only 18 years old, but Cindy Aguilar-Castañeda is already doing big things in the city of Gonzales.

“She is one of the most phenomenal leaders I’ve ever met,” Gonzales High teacher Virginia Brown said. “Her leadership skills are just out of this world. She’s able to draw people in from all sides of the community — business people, city council members. I think everybody who meets her believes she’ll be president one day.”

Gonzales has a population of 8,000 people — and everyone in this town knows Cindy.

Perhaps the most intriguing question around Cindy is how she finds the time to do so much. She served four years on the Gonzales Youth Council, played saxophone and clarinet with her school’s jazz ensemble, and took courses at Hartnell College.

“I’ve always been a workaholic,” Cindy said. “It’s just in me. I don’t know if it’s maybe my trauma that I feel like I have to do something. I have to be worthy. I have to be resilient.”

When Cindy was a sophomore, her body started to break down. Simple things like holding a pencil or picking up her backpack were challenging. After a few hospital visits, doctors diagnosed Cindy with lupus, an autoimmune disease where the body’s immune system attacks its own tissues and organs.

“It was just this really dark shadow coming over me,” Cindy said. “It’s been really hard adapting. I missed a lot of school. But I was able to manage it.”

Despite Cindy’s medical battle, she ended the semester with a 4.0. Gonzales High Assistant Principal Miguel Malagon credits her resilience for her success.

“There have been days that I have seen Cindy with pain,” he said. “But she’s still here. She pushes herself beyond limits.”

In June, Cindy became the first member in her family to graduate from high school. And this fall, she started college at the University of California at Berkeley.

Cindy said she recognizes the gift of a quality education is one that she can one day pay forward.

“I am carrying on my shoulders all the women in my family. None of them had the experiences that I was able to have,” she said. “I get to have an education. And I get to hopefully be able to use that for good and be of service to others.”



Region 11

Haley Keeling

Visalia Charter Independent Study, Visalia USD

Haley Keeling will never forget the first time she held her daughter, Dalia. It was a moment too surreal, too beautiful, too perfect.

“I can’t really describe the feeling because even talking about it, I’m just so joyful about it,” Haley said. “It was very emotional. I finally felt like, ‘This is mine, and nobody can take it from me.’”

But to truly understand the gravity of the moment, we have to go back to the beginning. Haley Keeling’s childhood was a cycle of chaos.

“There wasn’t any stability and her mom would come and go from her life,” Visalia Charter Independent Study Principal Michele Reid said. “Dad wasn’t as present as you would expect someone to be. And so that caused a lot of disruption and dysfunction in her. And to the point where she eventually became homeless.”

Despite the volatile upbringing, Haley always understood the importance and value of a good education.

“I didn’t have anything else stable in my life except for school,” she said. “I always knew that I could come to school. I always knew that if I did good in school, it would help me be stable in my life.”

That’s not to say there weren’t setbacks. With every heartbreak and disappointment, Haley struggled to stay motivated in school.

“I always felt like there wasn’t anything for me,” Haley said. “I didn’t have a family. I didn’t have a home. Why should I keep coming to school? I wouldn’t try as hard. I would make sure I was barely passing.”

Then on her 16th birthday, Haley learned she was pregnant. She was going to be a teenage mother, just like her mother. But this time would be different. It had to be.

“When I was first pregnant, everybody told me, ‘You’re going to drop out,’” Haley said. “‘You’re going to be just like your mom.’ And I didn’t want to be like everybody else. I’ve always wanted to stand out and be different and exceed the stereotypes.”

When baby Dalia entered the world on June 27, 2017, Haley was ready to give her daughter the life she never had, even if it meant doing it all by herself.

“It’s hard to do what she did,” Visalia Charter Independent Study teacher Shannon Boswell said. “And she didn’t do it with any support. That was the thing. The life lessons that she’s had and the things she’s faced would sideline a lot of adults.”

Time after time, Haley has put her daughter’s interests and well-being ahead of her own.

“She’s more concerned about ‘Where am I going to sleep tonight?’” Reid said. “‘What food am I going to feed my child? How am I going to get diapers for her?’ That’s what her focus is.”

Haley graduated from Visalia Charter Independent Study in June and is working on becoming a Certified Nursing Assistant in order to improve her financial stability. While the workload can be daunting, Haley need only remember who she’s doing it all for.

“Sometimes I do break down into the weak mindset of, ‘I can’t keep going to school,’” Haley said. “‘It’s too stressful.’ And then I look down at her and I’m like, ‘I don’t want her to live the life that I have lived.’ And I know that the only way for me to get through it is to go through the stress. And the stress isn’t too much to handle.”



Region 12

Valeria Montes

Chino High School, Chino Valley USD

Valeria Montes always excelled in her classes. She says school always came easy to her.

“Ever since I’ve been in middle school or even elementary, you can see that I was one of the successful kids,” Valeria said. “I was always in honors and I knew that I would always get straight A’s in my classes.”

But in the fall of her freshman year at Chino High, Valeria was in a bike accident. She hit her head on the pavement. A few months later, Valeria took another blow to the head during a soccer match.

"I didn't feel any different, but the way I was comprehending the topics and all that, it wasn't the same," Valeria said. "All the lights would be 10 times brighter than before. I would kind of see little dots and lights around. I thought I needed glasses at that point."

Doctors first diagnosed Valeria with a migraine headache, but the symptoms never seemed to fit. After nearly a year of countless appointments and hospital visits, a neurologist told Valeria she suffered a traumatic brain injury with post-concussion syndrome.

"At that point, I felt a relief, but along with that relief, a kind of worry that I'd never get back to where I was," Valeria said. "I had to accept the fact that I wasn't going to graduate top 10."

Valeria struggled with bouts of depression given the uncertainty of her future. Chino High AVID teacher Jon Davis admits it was hard watching one of his students deal with that type of pain.

"Just to see her spiral is the hardest thing because you want your kids to succeed," Davis said. "We try to do as much as we can as teachers to help them through the process. But when you don't know what's wrong, it's really hard to help."

Valeria's grades suffered, so she transferred to Buena Vista Continuation High where she could take independent study classes. She returned to Chino High for her senior year with a renewed sense of passion and purpose.

"When you go through obstacles like this, unfortunately for many people, it has a tendency to harden your heart," Chino High principal John Miller said. "Not Valeria. If anything, she's learned to love more. She's just got that emotional, intellectual and academic maturity that you just don't see very often."

Upon her return, Valeria made it clear to teachers and administrators that she wanted to fulfill her goal of graduating with her class.

"She came in and really right away was in a professional, polite, wonderful way advocating for herself," Chino High Assistant Principal Anna Purcell said.

On May 28, Valeria was dressed in cap and gown as she received her high school diploma. And while she said she would have liked to graduate in the top 10 of her class, graduating was an accomplishment in and of itself.

"It's really emotional because I wouldn't have thought I'd get to this point," Valeria said. "I didn't know if I would get back to this school or even to this point. I didn't know if I'd be able to graduate. Now I'm just grateful for graduating at all."



Region 13

Daniel Morozov

Pine Grove Elementary School, Orcutt Union SD

It is never easy to lose a parent. In the span of just 24 hours, Daniel Morozov lost both of his.

"It was horrible," Pine Grove School teacher Rebecca Belanger said. "My heart broke. I was just sad. Devastated. I can't even imagine what he went through."

On Aug. 21, 2017, Konstantin Morozov shot and killed his ex-wife Natalia Morozova in Santa Maria. He then abducted Daniel and drove to Los Angeles. An Amber Alert was issued at 1:30 a.m. on Aug. 22. Police found Daniel and his father later that night. After a standoff, police shot Konstantin Morozov, who later died at a hospital. In an instant, 9-year-old Daniel was an orphan.

Natalia Morozova's boyfriend, Jesse Gonzalez, was grieving from the murder when social services called and asked him to take in Daniel. The answer was simple.

"Just knowing that he's just a kid and he lost so much and he has no one. How can I just let Daniel go?" Gonzalez said. "I cared for him. I loved him. There's no way. I couldn't."

Two weeks after losing his mom and dad, Daniel returned to Pine Grove School in Santa Maria.

"Our intent was to make school as normal of a place as possible for Daniel," Pine Grove School teacher Ron Maderas said. "The very first day when he went out to the playground, I still remember him walking out on the blacktop and all the kids coming up to him. And they just welcomed Daniel."

Getting back to normal was never a reality. But a new normal? That was a possibility. And it would start with Jesse.

"Jesse's a really nice guy," Daniel said. "Like on a scale of one to 10, I like him 10. Maybe more."

It has only been two years since that tragic night. Daniel is still fragile and still grieving. Daniel and Gonzalez attend therapy sessions together to talk about their loss.

"We just let him know that it's OK for him to feel how he feels," Gonzalez said. "It's OK for him to feel angry. To feel sad. For him to miss his mom and his dad. That it's normal. And that life goes on. I tell him one day we'll see your mom. And sometimes he says, 'Can God call me now? I want to see my mom.' I'm like, 'No.' I tell him that in time. God has a plan."

All the people who have lifted Daniel up over these last two years said the young boy has had a huge impact on them, too.

"I've obviously taught many many wonderful children over the years," Maderas said. "And Daniel will always be unique based on the fact that we're attached. We were attached through his tragedy and him forcing me to re-examine the way I teach, re-examine the way I reach out to children. So Daniel actually helped me to become a better teacher."

No child should have to suffer such a tragic loss at such a young age, but Daniel is healing. So, too, is Gonzalez.

"He makes me complete," Gonzalez said. "There was always something missing in my life. And now I have it. I feel like my life is complete with Daniel."



Region 14

Richard Montes

Gretchen Whitney High School, ABC USD

Whitney High School in Cerritos is consistently ranked as one of the top schools in the country. When Richard Montes arrived at the school as a seventh grader, he was overwhelmed.

"It's definitely a rigorous school. And I used to always compare myself to everyone else," Montes said. "But at the same time, seeing these people always succeed, always being so active and involved, it really inspired me to try and imitate that."

Despite living outside of the district, Richard made the daily commute from Hawaiian Gardens to Cerritos to compete with some of the best and the brightest.

"I think Whitney was a great proving ground for him," Whitney High Principal John Briquetet said. "We knew that he belonged at Whitney. But he discovered that he belonged at Whitney through the activities and experiences that he had here."

Richard has plenty of motivation to succeed. His childhood was, at times, heartbreaking. His father was an alcoholic who became violent after having too much to drink. After a series of domestic violence incidents, Richard's father was deported, leaving him in the care of his mother and two older sisters.

"My mom worked constantly to make sure we were all stable," Richard said. "And my struggles were nothing compared to their struggles. So I wanted to make sure that all the effort, all the hard work they put into raising me paid off in the end."

Richard credits his mom and sisters for helping him become the person he is today.

"The women in my life have always been really, really strong, independent women," he said. "I learned from them what it really means to be a man, not from my father."

Richard admits he initially shied away from the pressure at Whitney High. He questioned if he should take the easy way out and return to his home school. Instead, he immersed himself in school activities including Model United Nations and the Association of Latin American Students.

"I think that for a lot of students, after getting knocked down once, it may be easy to just kind of give up," said Whitney High counselor Valerie Diaz. "But Richard didn't."

Now a Whitney High graduate, Richard is grateful for the journey and is ready to face whatever obstacles may come his way.

"Challenges are just a part of life," he said. "But you're not going to gain anything, you're not going to grow as a person, if you just sit around and complain about them."



Region 15

Alexandra Savage

Condit Elementary School, Claremont USD

It was the news every parent dreads. In March 2016, doctors diagnosed Lisa Marston-Savage's 8-year-old daughter, Alexandra, with medulloblastoma, a type of brain cancer.

"I just remember the words ringing in my head," Marston-Savage said. "I could barely even process what she was saying."

Alexandra was set to start fourth grade at Condit Elementary when doctors delivered the devastating news.

"When he told her she would have to miss the first day of school, that she wouldn't be able to go to school for the year of treatment, that's when she started to cry," Marston-Savage said. "So I think that's when it set in how much her life was going to change."

Alexandra underwent a grueling treatment regimen. First, doctors performed surgery to remove the brain tumor. That was followed by six weeks of radiation and 10 months of chemotherapy.

"Other kids, they don't know what I've gone through," Alexandra said. "I have special accommodations. Because of the radiation, it destroyed some of my brain cells. Not only the cancerous ones but also the good ones. No one understands it until they've been through it."

No one would have faulted Alexandra had she taken a year off from school. But she never viewed that as an option.

"I really wanted to keep up with my generation, my grade," she said. "I didn't want to have to fall back a year because those weren't my friends. They weren't people I knew."

She took online courses through Claremont Unified School District to keep up with her classmates. And by April 2017, just 13 months after the initial diagnosis, Alexandra was back with her friends at Condit Elementary.

"I worked so hard," she said. "The doctors were like, 'Are you sure you want to go back to school so soon? It's too soon.'"

That's not to say things were easy. Alexandra struggled with the long-term effects of the radiation, including cognitive challenges that required extra time in the classroom. But that never stopped her.

"It was, 'OK. Give me an assignment. What do I have to do?'" Condit Elementary teacher Jenny Genovese said. "If she felt like she was falling behind in any way, she would work double time to get it done."

It's been more than three years since Alexandra's life changed forever. Now she is in remission and on her way to middle school.

"Alex is truly a success story in more ways than one," Condit Elementary Principal Christine Malally said. "Clearly overcoming this hurdle with all the things that she's been through. But just watching her grow as a young lady and seeing her have that sense of pride in that she's doing this. She's doing this on her own."



Region 16

Cory Suzuki

Gardena High School, Los Angeles USD

Cory Suzuki has never shied away from hard work.

"We've added AP courses over the past four years at Gardena [High] to try and increase the rigor that we provide our kids here," said Assistant Principal Didiana Ramirez. "And Cory has stepped up to the challenge. He's not afraid to sign up for AP Calc, to sign up for AP English Language, and AP English Lit, and AP U.S. History — he's not afraid to rise to the challenge."

Cory knows all about challenges. At the age of 4, doctors diagnosed him with autism.

"I was bullied a lot when I was a kid," Cory said. "And sometimes I would cry in my room. And I'd be like, 'Hey, I can't really deal with this anymore.' I was shocked when people saw me as different. But as I grew up, I was thinking to myself, 'This is something that is me, that makes me unique, that differentiates me from others, and I just have to accept it.'"

Cory not only accepted his autism, he embraced it and became an advocate for his peers who are also on the spectrum.

"For me, autism, it's kind of like a benefit for me because it's something that not everyone knows about and they can't even see it physically," he said. "Like when I talk to some people, they don't say that, 'Hey, this kid is autistic.' Autism is not a disability and a lot of people see it as a difficulty. And it's something that needs to be taken care of."

That sense of selflessness is rare for any high school senior, and educators at Gardena High took notice.

"He is an articulate young man who is not afraid to speak about his story," Ramirez said. "He's not afraid to speak about the things that he's passionate about like bullying and special education."

About one in 59 children are diagnosed with autism. Nearly one-third of children with autism have an intellectual disability. That made Cory's academic success all the more impressive.

"I think he exemplifies everything that Gardena stands for and wants to do for their students," Gardena High teacher Kristine Denton said. "And that is meeting every challenge. Taking all the toughest courses. And then excelling in those courses."

The hard work paid off as Cory earned the distinction of class valedictorian at Gardena High. And so, on June 5, dressed in his white cap and gown, the young man who was non-verbal until the age of 5 was up in front of his peers delivering the commencement address.

"Life has its respective hills and valleys," Cory said in his speech. "And that's totally OK. Life is supposed to be messy. We as fallible humans make mistakes all the time. Yet we are all significant in many aspects. Why is that you may ask? It is because we are able to overcome those challenges and predicaments that come our way."

In the fall, Cory will attend California State University, Long Beach, where he plans to pursue a degree in mathematics. But he also wants to continue to advocate for other people with autism who may not be able to advocate for themselves.

"Autism is not something that characterizes people. It's something that people should embrace, because people with autism can achieve a lot of things and not that many people do realize that," he said. "I'm glad I have it because it's something that I can use as a strength in life."



Region 17

Emmanuel Moreno

Walker Jr. High School, Anaheim Union HSD

It was not long ago that Manny Moreno spent nearly every day at Walker Junior High in the principal's office.

"I don't think there was a day that went by that he and I didn't have a conversation," said Principal Jennifer Brown at Walker Junior High School. "He couldn't make it through the day without being angry at someone or something. Everything seemed to set him off."

There was a reason for that anger. Manny grew up without his biological father, who spent extended time in and out of prison.

"He kind of had it rough," Manny's mother Aurora Godoy said. "I think that the odds were against him from the beginning. It's always been a struggle. How do you tell your kid that they're special or they're important when everyone else is pushing him aside?"

Teachers described the old Manny as volatile and scary. He often used his father to excuse his violent behavior.

"He threw a chair at a principal at an elementary school he was going to in Anaheim," Godoy said. "And he said, 'What do you want me to do? I'm my dad's son. What do you expect me to be? What do you expect me to do? His blood is in me.' I was in tears and I told him, 'You are not your father's son. You are my son. I am your mother. I am your father. I'm your world. You're my world.'"

In seventh grade, Manny had more discipline incidents than any student at Walker Junior High. But Principal Brown never lost hope.

“You always have to see the whole student because if you try to just treat the behavior, then you’re never going to make a change,” Brown said. “I knew that his anger wasn’t really with me. He was just an angry young man. We couldn’t just be angry at him as well. And so we kept doing everything we could. One support after another. And saying, ‘How much love can we give him?’”

Manny was placed on a modified schedule during his seventh grade year at Walker Junior High because he could not control his behavior. Teachers feared what might be in store for eighth grade given the frequent outbursts.

“I didn’t know what to do,” Walker Junior High teacher Austin Fullmer said. “I didn’t know if he was going to be more emboldened and more of what he had shown. Or if he was going to have matured. So I had a lot of anxiety just specifically because of Manny.”

But by the time Manny stepped foot on campus in the fall as an eighth grader, he was a completely different student. Over the summer, he joined the Anaheim Rams, a Pop Warner football team. He says football made all the difference.

“In Pop Warner, they check your grades and if your grades weren’t good, they wouldn’t let you play,” Manny said. “If your behavior wasn’t good, they wouldn’t let you play either.”

Fullmer said the sudden change surprised everyone at the school.

“It was just a complete 180,” Fullmer said. “I’m getting emails from his teachers who knew him or had heard of him from last year saying this kid is incredible. He’s great. He’s helpful. He’s working hard.”

The young man who once could not make it through the day without an issue is now the model student. He even landed on the honor roll the first quarter of his eighth grade year.

“If I could have a Manny all the time, my job would just be the best job in the whole wide world,” Brown said. “I would just say, ‘You don’t even need to pay me. This is all I need to do for the rest of my life.’ ... He made my year.”



Region 18

Marbella Cruz

Calexico Academy, Imperial COE

It was not long ago that Marbella Cruz was looking for ways to end her life.

“I would always say I’m not going to make it to 17,” Marbella said. “I will die before 17. I didn’t want to live.”

The severe battles with depression and anxiety stemmed from an early childhood tragedy. Marbella tried to hide her emotions from friends and family. She says she felt completely alone which eventually led to self-harm.

“She was cutting herself,” her father, Salvador, said through an interpreter. “And when she would go to the bathroom, we would have to pay attention because I figured she might cut herself. I didn’t know. It was a really difficult time.”

Marbella described the cutting as an addiction that controlled her life.

“The cutting was bad,” Marbella said. “My scars will never go away. They were too deep ... I look at them and I think that if I would have just gone a little deeper, maybe I wouldn’t be here where I am now.”

Marbella’s actions not only affected her immediate family but also her classmates at Calexico Academy.

“Those stories not only impact families but they impact the staff in the classroom,” Imperial County Office of Education Senior Director Monalisa Vitela said. “The kids. The students that we serve. Her friends. Her peers. So it’s a very difficult time for everyone.”

After multiple suicide attempts, Marbella sought help from a therapist. She worked through her emotions and found a safe outlet in education.

When Marbella learned about a medical assistant college course in El Centro, she jumped at the opportunity.

“I’ve always liked school a lot,” she said. “I like challenges. So I feel like that motivated me more.”

She commuted 25 minutes each way via public transportation and walked 1/4 of a mile to her classes.

“It was challenging,” Marbella said. “It’s a college class. It helped me a lot because it was a challenge. It kept me busy. Kept my mind busy.”

Marbella not only passed the national medical assistant exam, she also passed national exams in EKG and phlebotomy. She already has her sights set on top medical schools like Harvard, Stanford and Johns Hopkins in hopes of one day becoming a cardiothoracic surgeon. Quite the feat for a young woman who did not think she would live to see her 17th birthday.

“I just don’t know that words can describe the way that you feel when you see someone that could have taken their life, and here they are where they’ve blossomed into this beautiful flower,” Vitela said. “It’s overwhelming.”



Region 19

Alexis Arrivillaga

Ramona High School, Riverside USD

Alex Arrivillaga knows there is a stigma around eating disorders. But she still wants to share her story.

“When you have an eating disorder, it’s really hard to find hope and imagine yourself ever being happy again,” she said. “Food wasn’t really something that was a conflict in my life. Now that I have an eating disorder, it’s something that isn’t just particular moments. It’s something I struggle with throughout the day.”

Alex battled with social anxiety and depression throughout her childhood. But by the time she entered Ramona High as a freshman, she was also dealing with anorexia.

“It’s kind of complicated because I think it developed out of a way to cope with my problems,” she said. “I decided to purchase pills that would help with weight loss. And I’ve never really disclosed this to a lot of people. But they were laxatives. I would take them and tell myself, ‘OK, I’ll only take a few.’ And then just stop so I could lose water weight. But when I take them, I feel like the life is being sucked out of me.”

Cynthia Ilizaliturri is Alex’s mother. She knows all about eating disorders because she dealt with them as well. She struggled with both anorexia and bulimia. So when her daughter started to lose weight, she immediately noticed the signs.

“It’s hard to attack this disease,” Ilizaliturri said. “Where no matter what you do sometimes, it’s taking over. I was in the kitchen and she came by, and she looked lifeless. And it really scared me. I felt so helpless. And I told her, ‘Alexis, I can see your eyes and I see death staring at me.’”

At her self-described lowest point, Alex weighed just 94 pounds. With her grades slipping, she sought the help she needed for both the anorexia and social anxiety.

From a 2.67 GPA her freshman year to a 4.17 GPA her junior year complete with honors and AP courses, Alex is now flourishing.

“It’s something I never thought I’d be able to attain again,” she said. “It’s something that’s also really rewarding because I could have let my problems turn me into the worst person that I could be, but I’ve persevered and worked hard to do that.”

Alex graduated from Ramona High in May and started school at the University of Redlands as a first-generation college student.

“It’s such a joy to see that,” AVID teacher Barbara Hutcherson said. “Having gone through everything she’s gone through. And now looking forward to going to a four-year university.”

Alex is still fighting what can be a lifelong battle. So she’ll keep telling her story in hopes that she can one day remove the stigma from eating disorders and mental health issues.

“The fact that Alexis has been very open about her experiences with mental health issues, the eating disorders makes me realize that she really wants to do something about it,” Ramona High counselor Mark Lim said. “To fight the stigma of those that are struggling in this particular area is amazing.”

Adult Ed

Crystal Espinoza

Clovis Adult Education

For Crystal Espinoza, raising a baby as a teen was not an easy thing to do, especially while she was still trying to finish high school and working a part-time job. The stress of being a new mother and working meant that she had to drop out of school to raise her child.

Becoming a teenage mother was a life-changing experience. Crystal had to quickly grow up and become a responsible parent for her child. Working a minimum wage job made her realize that she wanted to attend cosmetology school. This was something she was very passionate about and thought would help pay her bills and support her child. Crystal was able to attend cosmetology school at the age of 19. She completed the program by the age of 20. She started her career as a stylist and also worked a second job so that she could support her family. All the while, she still dreamed of earning her high school diploma and was determined not to give up on that dream.

Like many people, Crystal had been through some very difficult times in her young life: becoming a teen parent, marriage at a young age, suffering from domestic violence for almost 10 years, going through a divorce, and losing family members, including one of her own children.

Overcoming all of these things made her realize that going back to school and earning her high school diploma was something that she could accomplish. So she took the chance and enrolled at Clovis Adult Education in 2017.

Crystal quickly realized that she needed to make some adjustments to her schedule. She needed to multitask and remain flexible while juggling school, work, and family. She was determined and kept the motivation she needed to stay in school, work, and still make time to be a great mom. Crystal didn't let anyone or anything get in the way of the goal of earning her high school diploma. She faced many difficult decisions and knew she needed to remain focused, more so than ever before in her life.

While at Clovis Adult Education, Crystal was a leader and role model student. She encouraged others to not give up and reach their goals. All of her teachers said she was such a positive and inspirational student who was determined to follow her dreams. Crystal felt that the Clovis Adult faculty and staff supported and encouraged her throughout the process. They equipped her with the tools she needed to have in order to be successful, not only in academics but in life.

Crystal is now attending Fresno City College and plans on transferring to Fresno State to earn her bachelor's degree in education and a special education teaching credential. Having a son who is in special education inspired her to work towards a degree in that field. Crystal is looking forward to working with students in special education and becoming even more of an advocate on her son's behalf.

Crystal attained her initial goal of earning her high school diploma; it's now time for her to chase new goals. She is working on completing her degree and becoming a teacher. Crystal believes in giving back to the community by working with children with special needs. The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams and Crystal is one of those people.

Crystal was a class speaker at the Clovis Adult Education Graduation of 2018. She was also the recipient of the AT&T-Central California Women's Conference-TRiO scholarship. Crystal was recently hired as an instructional aide for the special education department in Clovis Unified School District. She is working with elementary aged children with special needs.



Adult Ed

Logan Robert Hindle

Charles A. Jones Career & Education Center, SCUSD

Logan's story begins at a very early age. He was designated a female at birth, but by an early age, he knew that he wasn't a girl. His father left when he was very young. As Logan grew up and announced at age 5 that he didn't want to be a girl anymore, his mother kept dressing him in dresses, and his stepfather verbally and physically abused him.

By the time he was a teen, he was in the juvenile justice system. After numerous run-ins with the law, he became a ward of the state and was in and out of foster homes. At 14, he came out to his family. Because his family rejected him, he ran away to San Francisco. With no support, he became homeless and a drug user.

After some time on the street, he met an older woman and they fell in love. She took care of Logan but his addiction continued. Eventually, they moved to Sacramento. But even with the change in scenery, the internal struggle persisted. He tried to shape his female body into a male form and started dressing like a man. He was confused and ended up leaving the woman. He started living sober, but he was still living in the wrong body. He became angry at the world, depressed and anxious. Nevertheless, he settled into living his life. At 25, he met his wife, but still struggled internally about his identity. Logan researched and eventually found a doctor that started his transition process.

At 27, Logan had his first testosterone injection. He started to change physically, growing hair all over his body. A year later, Logan's wife wanted a child, but she could not conceive, so Logan stopped taking injections and became pregnant, giving birth to a son at age 30. Providing for and protecting his son became his top priority, so Logan went to school and became a CNA.

During this time, he tried many times to get his GED, but always failed. He also went through a traumatic time of his wife abandoning him and an attempted suicide. While receiving medical attention, Logan was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. This gave Logan some comfort as he understood the sources of his anger and abandonment issues. It also pushed him to bring stability into his life.

He wanted to become a Medical Assistant, but he had no HSD. At the age of 42, Logan hired a tutor and was finally able to get his GED. He finally enrolled in the Medical Assistant program at Charles A. Jones Career and Education Center. His time at CAJ was difficult. Although now clear in his identity as transgender, his wife left him and he had to raise his son while continuing in the program. He lived on unemployment the entire time. At many points, he wasn't sure how he was going to make it, but after all the struggles in his life, he was committed to his calling as a Medical Assistant.

Logan graduated as a Medical Assistant in 2019, and now works at the Sacramento Native American Health Clinic. He works with patients in the Trans Clinic, as well as with patients with Hepatitis C and various addictions. It is important for Logan to care for and encourage patients who lack confidence and self-worth. He brings empathy and compassion to his work. He also hopes to continue his education in the future.

Logan says, "If it were not for Adult Education and Charles A. Jones Career and Education Center and the Medical Assistant Program that gave me the chance to prove myself, believe in me, took the time to listen to me, and gave me all opportunities to succeed, I would not be where I am today."



Region 1

Brandon Thatcher

Shasta High School, Shasta Union High School District

Brandon Thatcher exemplifies positivity. Every day, he arrives at school with a big smile. He often goes out of his way to say good morning and ask about your day. He is genuine and thoughtful, selfless and gracious. But there has been nothing easy about Brandon's upbringing. He battled homelessness throughout his childhood. He often walked three miles to get to school before educators stepped in and helped find him a bike. Brandon was also diagnosed with a delay mutational falsetto, meaning his voice did not drop in pitch like most adolescent boys. Despite little support at home, Brandon has remained determined to overcome these obstacles. Thanks to an incredible work ethic and a strong support system at Shasta High, Brandon epitomizes the belief that every student can succeed.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I really like sports, drawing, riding my bike and hanging out with friends.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

I've faced many challenges throughout my life. Being homeless was especially tough as I tried to balance school and wrestling. For a long time, I walked three miles to get to school, but it was worth it. Oftentimes, I did not want to leave school because it was the one place that made me happy. I also dealt with a speech disability that made it embarrassing for me to talk to other people because my voice was so high. I wanted people to take me seriously, but my speech issues made that difficult.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

So many people were there to help me be successful including Brendan Furnari, Collin Anderson and my karate teacher, Scott Halsey, who always believed in me and pushed me to get through the tough times. I should also point out my speech therapist Mrs. Dougherty. She saw my speech problem and sat down with me every week and we practiced speaking lower. I also practiced on my own for a whole summer and my voice tone improved dramatically. All of these people really helped me develop as a person so I could reach my goals.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

I think if I had any advice to give it's to just be yourself and don't be afraid to go for your dreams. No matter the circumstances, you can always find a way if you have a strong work ethic and have faith in yourself.

What does it mean to win this award?

It means a lot to me that so many people care about me and want to help me be successful. I hope I made them proud by winning this award.



Region 2

Maisy Bishop

Arete Charter Academy, Pleasant Ridge Union School District

Maisy Bishop was born at 24 weeks. She weighed 1 pound, 12 ounces. She survived heart surgery when she was only four days old. While doctors eventually released Maisy from the hospital with no major concerns, the long-term effects of her premature birth showed up by elementary school. She was diagnosed with dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia along with sensory issues. She would require special education in reading, writing and math. As Maisy moves on to high school, she knows her strong work ethic will serve her well in overcoming any obstacles that come her way.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I play volleyball. I play guitar and write songs, paint, write poetry. I like to play with my cat, hang with friends, paddle board, ride my bike, do embroidery. I like spending time with my family. I like to express myself through my different hobbies and activities. I meditate and work on self-love and self-improvement.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

It was hard for me to accept help because I thought if I admitted that I needed help, then that was admitting that I failed and that I could not be like everyone else. I wish I could tell my younger self that it's OK to ask for and receive help.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

Maria Sinisi was not only someone who I could talk to about everything, but she made my day better and understood my brain in a way that no one else did at the time. She was my special education teacher. She helped me when I was anxious and nervous. She gave me strategies to understand other people and new ideas. She helped me learn to read and understood that I needed to see things in different colors, not just black and white, so I could understand what the words said.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

Love yourself and accept that you may never be able to get rid of your disability, but you can affect how it impacts you and you can work to improve it. Learn as much as you can about it so you can learn yourself how to understand it. Never stop fighting to survive, whether it is mental, physical or emotional. The world will not stop for you, so you have to keep working at learning and growing. Love and trust yourself.

What does it mean to win this award?

It means that all the times I felt that I and life were hopeless ... are now causing me to be recognized for keeping at the hard things. It made me realize that I would never have made it to this point if all of the people who helped me through the years had not been there. They fought to help me learn the way I needed to.



Region 3

Maribel Zaragoza

Cesar Chavez Community School, Yolo County Office of Education

When Maribel Zaragoza became pregnant at the age of 14, she made the choice to build a positive future for herself and her daughter. She immediately worked on parenting skills and looked for strategies to provide a strong developmental and social-emotional foundation for her child.

Understanding that education directly impacts financial security and stability, Maribel created goals and concrete plans to achieve them. She started going to Yolo County Office of Education's Cesar Chavez Community School in 2017, eventually enrolling in the Yolo County Construction Program. She proved to be a calm, thoughtful and influential leader in both the classroom setting and at the worksite, all the while continuing to raise her daughter.

On Nov. 8, 2019, Maribel graduated with a fully accredited high school diploma at the age of 17. She plans to continue her education and work toward a job with advancement opportunities, so that she can build a successful future for her and her daughter and new baby boy.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I was successful in school and graduated early, in November of my senior year. My primary interest is in the culinary profession. Since graduating and using my Food Handlers Certification, I have started my own home-based business called Lalazsweetz. I focus on small customized orders, and have fun with the creativity they give me. The most important thing I can share with you about myself is that I love being a "Mama" to my babies. They are my hobby, my sport, and the focus of my life. I have a daughter and a son who are my motivation for everything.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

My biggest challenge has been the emotional challenges that come with loss. I lost my brother and my boyfriend within four months of each other. I have persevered through that grief to continue to provide a happy and stable home life for my kids and for myself. My biggest obstacle in school was moving and being pregnant. Those two things can cause a student to really fall behind in school. At one point in high school I was credit deficient, but I knew my education was important to my future and I pushed myself to be successful in school.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

A very special educator named Kristen helped me along my crazy journey. She has become a very special person in my life. I consider her family. Kristen has helped me mentally and physically in many ways. I am very grateful for her and I'm glad we met.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

I would tell other students who face challenges of their own that they have the ability to be happy. If you find the positive in your days and you work towards your goals, you will feel proud and stable and confident and happy. Overcoming challenges is a success.

What does it mean to win this award?

Winning this award means a lot to me. It reminds me that I have a lot to look forward to in my pursuit of happiness and my goals. It reinforces my potential and motivates me.



Region 4

Victor Peña

Santa Rosa High School, Santa Rosa City Schools

Victor Peña wasn't interested in school early in life. His parents were high school students in Santa Rosa when he was born, and his father was in and out of prison for years. Victor's mother raised him and his brothers as a single parent.

In fifth grade, teacher Mrs. Kam tested him for Gifted and Talented Education, and Victor scored higher than any student who had previously tested. His grades improved, but he struggled in middle school.

For his sophomore year of high school, Victor's family moved to Mexico, where he ran for class president and won. When the 2017 Puebla earthquake struck central Mexico, Victor created a regional donation center for earthquake victims that became a statewide disaster relief center. When he returned to Santa Rosa for 11th grade, he realized some of his courses from Mexico would not transfer to Santa Rosa High School.

"He was instrumental in leading the change in Santa Rosa City Schools board policy about courses on international transcripts and their placement on our high school transcripts, so that students from other countries can graduate from our district," said Superintendent Diann Kitamura.

Victor said arguing his case to the board introduced him to public speaking, which he plans to use in his future career.

"Hopefully, one day I'll be running for public office and for a school board," he said.

What are your favorite subjects and hobbies?

My favorite school subject has always been history and the social sciences — being able to connect with people and learn about the past and not commit the same mistake twice. I was very active in school politics. I went to more of the district meetings and ELAT (English Literature Admissions Test) meetings to speak about what we could do to benefit our EL learners. I spent my time in high school at those meetings and advocating for those students. In a way, it's my duty.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

I grew up without a father figure. In the end, that was more of a motivation. If anything, an obstacle that was challenging was finding the motivation to try in school and pursue higher education. It wasn't until three years ago when I decided to lock down and focus on pursuing higher education, and shoot for the best grades and academic scores. Before that, I was a straight D and F student. My main goal was just to graduate and hope for the best.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

If I had to choose overall — that one educator that really started that change for me and started opening my eyes and was able to come down from being just a teacher to a mentor and friend — that would be Ed Navarro. He’s principal at Rincon Valley Middle in Santa Rosa. When I got into his class, I was an F student and didn’t want to be there. We were able to connect on a deeper level. He told me about the gifts I have. I never knew I was a pretty good writer until he gave me the opportunity. He guided me and worked with me to better my skills as a writer. That was my biggest gift.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

For students coming from outside the country, the biggest advice I have to give to them is to have “ganas” (the will) to continue. That’s what you have to have. Don’t be scared by the tough parts of having to learn a new language. Find that an opportunity to grow as a person.

What does it mean to win this award?

I’m grateful that I have won this award. I’m very honored. I think of it as a way not to get my message out, but to be able to put my story, and not just mine but a story that tens of thousands of students have been able to relate to.



Region 5

Larriesha "China" Cox

Downtown Continuation High School, San Francisco Unified School District

Before Larriesha “China” Cox came to Downtown Continuation High School in San Francisco, she attended school on the other side of town. She rarely went to class, had conflicts with teachers and, when she arrived at Downtown, was a full semester behind on credits.

But as China adjusted to her new school and formed more positive relationships with staff, she changed her mindset. She set a goal to have 100 percent attendance, which she achieved her senior year. Plus, she served on the school’s student leadership committee and on the school site council.

As part of the Wilderness Arts and Literacy Collaborative program at school, China participated in habitat restoration activities at local parks, joined multi-day camping trips and visited national parks. She used photography to create projects and narratives to present at the collaborative’s exhibitions. In 2018, she used photos to tell a story of environmental change, and in 2019, she created her own autobiographical digital story that combined family photos with photos taken during field studies.

China’s hard work paid off. She graduated a semester early and is now enrolled at the City College of San Francisco.

“She went from being disengaged and unmotivated to being a school leader and a positive example for her peers,” said Downtown Continuation High School Principal Ellen Wong.

What are your favorite subjects and hobbies?

My hobbies and interests include music and my pets. I currently have a collection of ball pythons that I’m hoping to expand.

What has been the biggest challenge you’ve overcome to get where you are today?

One of my greatest challenges that got me where I am today is deciding to transfer schools during my sophomore year. I needed to transfer in order to graduate high school on time. It was a difficult process that needed to be done in very little time, but I was determined. And although it was hard, I could have never imagined such a perfect outcome.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

I owe my success to the Downtown High School community, but most importantly, (to) my Wilderness Arts and Literacy Collaborative family. Without my three teachers’ guidance and encouragement, I don’t know where I’d be today. But it definitely wouldn’t be college. They changed my entire view on school and for that I am forever thankful.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

No matter what you face, you are strong enough to overcome it. It can get rough, without a doubt, but the journey can build you up to a new and amazing person that you never knew was possible.

What does it mean to win this award?

It means a lot to me to win this award. It's motivation for me to continue my education, because I'll never know the outcome. I've surprised myself with my accomplishments once, and I hope to do it again.



Region 6

Leilah Castle

Alhambra High School, Martinez Unified School District

Leilah Castle is a survivor. For a time in elementary and middle school, she was homeless. In 2012, her sister was shot and killed. And in 2014, when Leilah began living with her aunt, she suffered from bullying at school.

Despite these obstacles, Leilah succeeded academically, achieving a 3.5 GPA while taking Honor's English and playing sports. She was a member of the support crew for the Netflix show "13 Reasons Why," and her hobbies include lacrosse, writing, music, astrology and enjoying mystery and crime shows.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

[The] challenge most difficult to overcome was stepping up and telling my sexual assault story. For months, [I] held on to something that was so toxic for my mental health. I was too afraid to tell someone. I had no witnesses, I didn't know him that well and I wasn't intoxicated, so I was afraid people wouldn't believe me. Eventually, I told a small number of people who were all close friends because I couldn't keep that pain in. They really helped me feel more value of myself, and also step up and make sure my voice was heard.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

The first educators I would like to recognize are Ms. Seto and Ms. Tokos (now Mrs. Hughes). These two were my learning center teachers for sophomore and junior year. They both helped me during my time of depression.

[School psychologist] Ms. Nadia has a great impact on my life, and she's been talking to me since my sophomore year. She's helped me with homework, she's fed me when I didn't have breakfast or lunch, she always made time for me to come and talk when I was feeling down, she made sure that I didn't let my bad mental state bring me down, she had the most faith in me, and not once has she given up on me.

Another educator I would like to recognize is Mr. Burns. He's my senior learning center teacher. He pushed me to do better and always offered to help me and never gave up on me. He treated me with much care and respect. I wouldn't have been able to graduate if it wasn't for him, Ms. Fennel, and Mr. Doigny.

Last but not least, of course all of the administration in the VP, including Ms. Billeci, Ms. Malky, Ms. O'Malley and especially Mr. Chamberlain for helping me get to where I am today. I know I was only supposed to pick one, but truly, I couldn't just pick one because these educators are immaculate.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

If I could give advice to other students, I would say to not be so hard on yourself if you're struggling, because the struggle is hard enough. Do not be afraid to use your voice when in need. Do not let anyone tell you that your depression isn't a reason to not do schoolwork, because trust me, it's extremely hard!

What does it mean to win this award?

Winning this award was so crazy. I was struggling with friendships and school and work, and the balance of all that and winning this award gave me faith and showed me that good things really do come my way. It made me feel proud of myself, and I don't remember the last time I felt proud of myself.



Region 7

Gysselle Bibiano

Argonaut High School, Amador County Unified School District

Gysselle Bibiano has defied and exceeded expectations since she was born. The now 18-year-old was pronounced dead at birth. She was resuscitated and intubated for nearly 12 hours. At six months old, doctors told Gysselle’s mother, Vanessa Gutierrez, that Gysselle had cerebral palsy and ataxia and may never walk or talk.

But Gysselle did both. “She told me I would walk and talk, and I listened to her,” she said of her mother at an awards ceremony.

At Argonaut High School in Jackson, Gysselle volunteered in the campus’ special education preschool class. After one of the preschool students died, Gysselle led an effort to raise \$9,600 for a memorial playground. She also organized a “mini-prom” for special education students last year who were unable to attend the school’s prom.

She became the first graduate from the Marilyn Triglia Education Center at Argonaut. Gysselle plans to attend Columbia College in Sonora and become a special education teacher.

“Gysselle is the most remarkable story I have ever been a part of,” said Argonaut High School principal Troy Gassaway. “She has been in the Amador Unified School District for over 12 years and has been supported by ACSA members at Jackson Elementary and Jackson Middle School. It truly took a village to get her where she is today.”

What are your hobbies and interests?

My favorite subject in school was math because it was the easiest, and I’m actually really good with money. The hardest class was Mr. Duggan’s English class, which was a college prep class. Even though it was hard, I really enjoyed it.

When I wasn’t working hard for school, I spent my time taking drama in school and outside of school. I also did track and field and I was part of the Latinx Club. Working for Little Ponies is also an important part of my senior year.

What has been the biggest challenge you’ve overcome to get where you are today?

The biggest obstacle I’ve had is learning how to accept that not everyone is accepting of me and my disability. I try really hard to be “normal,” and I’m really good at doing things on my own; it just takes me a little longer.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

Roseanne is one of the aids at Triglia, and for my four years at Argonaut High School, she pushed me to do my best, she encouraged me to try harder and she motivated me to get to my goal. For that, I will forever be thankful to her.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

My advice to other students like me is to never give up. If you put your mind to it, you can do it! Winning this award is proof that it doesn’t matter the obstacles given to me throughout my lifetime. If I set a goal and work really hard to accomplish it, I will definitely reach it.

Thank you to everyone who believed in me and pushed me throughout the years. I am grateful for having people who also believe in me as strongly as I believe in myself.



Region 8

Ashley Hernandez Pio

Apititud Academy at Goss, Alum Rock Union School District

Ashley Hernandez Pio was born with a rare birth defect that affects her limbs. Ashley's arms end at her elbows, which she uses like hands to do everything from writing to playing bells in the school band. Although Ashley always tries to do things the same as her peers, writing at a desk requires her to contort her body in a way that is uncomfortable. To solve this, Ashley, her teachers, her parents and her therapy support team collaborated on a "desk wedge" that can be transported as she rotates to each of her classes.

Ashley's classmates gravitate toward her, not because she is different, but because of her positive attitude that makes everyone feel good.

"There are no excuses when it comes to Ashley, only obstacles that she learns how to overcome with hard work," said Principal Maria Manzanedo.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I'm the first child of a family of four. I grew up in the east side of San Jose next to my three cousins who are my neighbors. I like to listen to music and exercise. I also like to go on adventures — anywhere is fine for me. I would like to travel the world one day.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

I don't really think I have gone through a big challenge in my life, but to me this is the closest to that. To me learning to fully accept myself for me was really hard and frustrating. I would also judge myself and compare myself to others. It was really hard, but with the right help I got through it.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

I've had many teachers along the way who helped me a lot, like my 7th and 8th grade math teacher who knew that I could do better, pushed me along the way to do better. But I want to mention my first educators who are my parents. They helped me by giving me lots of love, giving me confidence, always supporting me no matter what. I really appreciate everything that they have done for me.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

There is so much that the world has to offer — don't let the small unimportant things get to you.

What does it mean to win this award?

It means a lot to me to win this award, to be able to share my story with people that don't know me. I'm very grateful for this award, for the people that made this happen.



Region 9

Jesse Franco

Kerman High School, Kerman Unified School District

When he started 9th grade, Jesse Franco could be seen around Kerman High School with a smile on his face, playing football and being friendly to everyone he came into contact with. But after a few months, Jesse started struggling with schoolwork and was placed in home-hospital for several months. When he returned sophomore year, he was still not the kind, carefree person people knew.

With the help of his school counselors, site and district administrators, and outside therapy, Jesse got the help he needed for his mental health issues. By junior year, he started competing in track and field, which led to the district sending him to a prestigious track and field camp at Stanford. Jesse was noticed by several college coaches and decided to sign with Fresno Pacific University. Jesse could have easily given up or "fallen through the cracks" were it not for the team of people supporting him.

What are your hobbies and interests?

During my junior year, I really took an interest in athletic training and chess. The athletic training class gave me the opportunity to find my passion. Joining the chess club made me happy because I met new people that I now consider friends. Track and field is a sport that I never expected to fall in love with and have a passion for. I found shot put and discus really interesting; the reason being, chess and throwing have similarities between one another. There's a foundation that you have to learn in order to excel with both. Both chess and track require you to be very technical and that's the reason I enjoy them so much.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

One of the biggest challenges that I had to face was the fear of being myself. During my freshman year, I didn't know how to be myself, and so I surrounded myself with people that made me feel like I was different and special in some kind of way. I did many things that hurt my health and that I wouldn't have done if I would just accept myself for who I am. One thing that totally gave me another perspective on life was when I tried to end it all. I thank God for putting that person there that saved me. I feel like this is my second chance and now I have to prove myself and do so while finding happiness.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

I can't say one educator helped me go through everything and discredit every little bit of advice from a coach or teacher or my friends and family. I can do my best to describe the ways they helped me to get through things. Many people would give me advice that opened little opportunities in my head. Special people to me knew who I was and how I was, and they wouldn't think of me any differently. People would talk to me like the person that I wanted to become, and that really motivated me.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

Some real advice that would actually help in my opinion is telling them you have to be strong and even though it seems really hard right now, you have to picture yourself without any problems and make a path. It's hard to understand but you have to understand that all that pain is temporary, and you have the power to eliminate what you're feeling.

What does it mean to win this award?

I am personally so grateful for this award because it is something that will remind me of what I've gone through to make it where I am now. But I can never stop trying and never be satisfied. I've set rules that come with this award, so I'll never forget about my hardships and never allow obstacles to stand in my way of greatness.



Region 10

Monique Blackwell

Seaside High School, Monterey Peninsula School District

There was a time when Monique Blackwell felt like the principal's office was her classroom.

That changed in 7th grade when her teacher, Mr. Strenfel, took the time to build a relationship with Monique. By the time she reached Seaside High School, Monique was taking AP and college courses, interning at the District Attorney's Office and engaged in activities like Black Student Alliance, competitive cheer, and Upward Bound, a college prep program for students with the potential to be first-generation college graduates.

During a 2019-20 Back to School Kick-off Day, Monique stood in front of the nearly 1,500 staff members of Monterey Peninsula Unified School District and shared her story.

"Here at MPUSD, I have had a handful of teachers that really expected me to do well and I will forever appreciate them for their belief in me," she told staff. "I recently learned that others expecting greatness from you will never be enough unless you expect it for yourself. And I expect nothing but greatness for myself this school year so that I can succeed in my future."

What are your hobbies and interests?

Favorite subjects: English and history. Hobbies: During high school, I participated in clubs such as BSA (Black Student Alliance), National Honors Society, and GEAR UP. I enjoy writing, listening to spoken word, and music.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

The most significant challenge that I have faced throughout high school has been my brother being released from prison after not seeing him for almost six years. This challenge helped me figure out what I wanted to do in my future. I figured that if I did not like something in the justice system, I would fix it. His release had a huge effect on my ability to learn and stay focused because my brain was always thinking about my brother and his safety in our city. I lost focus and it reflected on my report cards. When I had actually seen how his release affected me, I had to make changes. I talked to my counselors at Upward Bound about how I felt. I set goals, got involved in new activities, and did things that challenged myself, such as joining clubs like BSA, applying to internships, and getting more involved in the school. This challenge has helped me find my motivation and career interests.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

Many educators have helped me along the way. There wasn't one specific person/group that had helped me more than others. I got counseling, tutoring support, and many chances to build my volunteer hours by my school, Seaside High, and programs such as Upward Bound and GEAR UP. Because of the educators from these programs, I considered myself a very competitive college applicant. All 11 schools I applied to accepted me. Many educators have helped me get past the moments that appeared to last forever.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

I would tell students that you have the ability to create your own path. Whether that path is different or similar to others. As long as you are happy with yourself.

What does it mean to win this award?

It means a lot to win this award. It is a blessing to see other people take an interest in my future/education. It makes me realize how much support I have gotten from others to get me where I am today. I will be forever grateful.



Region 11

Americus Campos

Granite Hills High School, Porterville Unified School District

As her single mother struggled with drug addiction, Americus Campos was left to raise her younger half-siblings and often missed school so she could watch the children. She was just 8 years old. For years, Americus and her siblings experienced homelessness, abuse and neglect.

When Americus was reunited with her biological father, she carried resentment and experienced anxiety attacks from the years of trauma. With help from her high school counselors and treatment for her PTSD, anxiety and depression, Americus was encouraged to break the cycle and focus on making a better future for herself through school activities and academics.

What are your hobbies and interests?

Throughout my four years of high school, I was involved in many things [basketball and softball teams, MECHA club, ASB, cheerleading, Grizzly Fights Cancer Club, Z-Club and Heartwarmers Club]. Throughout all four years I was in the Digital Design and Communications pathway which revolved around recording and editing videos as well as reading scripts and taking photos. I also joined the yearbook class my senior year and it was a thrill! It was like having a personal family filled with friends on campus. Writing and reading novels has also been a huge part of my life. When I was going through life struggles they would take me away.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

A big challenge I had to overcome through high school was overcoming my anxiety and PTSD. I was also bullied a bit for being labeled "a nerd," "teacher's pet," and "too outgoing."

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

I am so grateful for the counselors Troy Alvarado and Dana Newkirk as they made a big impact in my life and education in high school. A big thank you goes to them for helping me adjust to my disability that was holding me back and teaching me to use it to instead build myself up and challenge myself.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

My advice to anybody that has future or current challenges is to learn that they are not there to stop you from moving forward. Those challenges are for you to decide whether you are going to stop and fall back or climb them and use them to learn and grow.

What does it mean to win this award?

Being the winner of this award made me quite emotional — it let me know that my hard work did not go unnoticed. Winning it told me that people realized it was not so easy accomplishing what I have accomplished and it made me realize that everything is OK. When I was being considered for this award, it had actually inspired me to keep on going and to not settle for less than what I have originally aimed for in life.



Region 12

Joaquin Enriquez

Upland High School, Upland Unified School District

Joaquin Enriquez was born to entertain. A gifted singer and actor, he has performed with the likes of Broadway stars Bernadette Peters and Megan Hilty. Gifted with a relentless work ethic, Joaquin is dedicated to his craft. His cheery disposition and positive outlook on life are infectious. And yet, you would never know Joaquin has been homeless for the last year.

Abandoned by his family, Joaquin has relied on the support and generosity of friends and educators at Upland High. Through all of the instability and uncertainty, Joaquin has not allowed his challenges to stand in the way of his goals. He is determined to keep moving forward and find success in the entertainment industry.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I truly have a profound love and passion for the arts and entertainment. When playing a certain role, I try to enhance a particular character by adding a twist. I do this because I never want to be compared to other individuals. I want to be seen as original. I try to better myself each day by constantly working on my craft and setting goals for myself. I have a clear vision for what I want to do in the near future and I'm hoping that someday I could end up being successful in the entertainment industry.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

I've been living on my own for over a year now. Personally, it has been mentally draining and exhausting. I try to not let my personal situations affect other individuals, so I try my best to maintain a positive mindset each day. There are times where it is difficult to find a home to sleep in at night. But I always tell myself there is always someone out there who has it worse than I do. To a certain extent, I'm thankful for the struggle. I never allow these challenges to wear me down. Instead, I use it as motivation. I know success begins and ends with me. And if I keep pressing forward, I will not lose sight of my goals.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

An educator who helped me every step of the way was my counselor, Janell Aven. Without Mrs. Aven, I would not be where I am right now. She helped me overcome so many challenging situations over the years. She has such a big heart and I am forever grateful for her guidance.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

This past year of living on my own has opened my eyes to the difficulties people face on a daily basis. Being able to emotionally feel what others go through has taught me the importance of giving back and bringing positivity to the community. There are other individuals who are literally homeless, sleeping alone in the streets. I'm lucky enough to have a roof over my head most nights. If I could offer any advice, I would say there is nothing more important in this world than to spread love and kindness. And no matter what, keep pushing forward and chasing your dreams.

What does it mean to win this award?

I am extremely grateful to have won this award. But this award is not only about me. This award is about the teachers, counselors and friends who have consistently helped me along the way. In the midst of my struggles, I have found success thanks to their endless support. Without these people, I would not be where I'm at today.



Region 13

Angelina Espinosa

La Cuesta Continuation High School, Santa Barbara Unified School District

Some of Angelina Espinosa's life experiences have created challenges that have been tough to overcome and have tested her motivation to move forward. That includes the death of her mother.

Angelina got on the right track when she began attending La Cuesta Continuation High School in Santa Barbara. That is where she found the backing she needed to move forward in her life.

What are your hobbies and interests?

Growing up I've always enjoyed art for as long as I could remember. I recently learned that acrylic paint is my favorite medium. Painting is very calming and meditating, which I enjoy.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

After losing someone so significant in my life, it became a realization to me due to my mother's choices that because I'm still so young I get to choose my path. If I were to continue to act and go the way I did, I wouldn't get myself anywhere other than digging myself in a hole.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

All the teachers were so supportive and caring immediately, specifically my PLT teacher Mr. Mike Mowers. From the beginning of the school year of 2019-2020 he was supportive, encouraging, and he always made sure I had what I needed.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

Don't allow the trials and tribulations during this brief time in your life cause you to doubt yourself and question your potential.

What does it mean to win this award?

It shows that everything I've done to get to this point was worth it, proving that I'm on the right path. The change I made in myself to prove to me that I can accomplish more than I give myself credit for makes this even more rewarding.



Region 14

Olivia Grace Fernandes

Cerritos High School, ABC Unified School District

As she approaches the end of high school, Olivia Fernandes is thinking about which careers she may pursue. Becoming a social worker is of particular interest — her mom is in this field and often tells stories about the job.

Someday Olivia can use her own experiences when helping others, especially those who have dealt with disabilities. Olivia was born with Popliteal Pterygium Syndrome, which gave her a cleft palate and resulted in her legs being amputated above the knee.

These challenges caused Olivia to work harder to keep her grades up and improve her speech. Olivia's perseverance has made her more confident and strong so that she can overcome any obstacle before her.

What are your hobbies and interests?

While I have many hobbies, writing is one I find myself doing more often than not. Another hobby that is a part of my routine is yoga. In my freshman year, I was on the wrestling team. This, of course, had its difficulties as an amputee. My coaches had to come up with alternative wrestling moves. In the sport, I learned that it is possible to overcome any challenge if I put my mind to it. Another thing I learned is that no matter how tough something may seem at the start, if I keep pushing forward, eventually all that hard work will become worth it. I will carry these lessons that this experience has taught me for the rest of my life even though I am no longer a wrestler.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

The biggest challenge that I've had to overcome in my life is the syndrome I was born with called Popliteal Pterygium Syndrome. These physical disabilities have presented many obstacles in life for me, both socially and academically.

For instance, my amputation has caused physical struggles because the prostheses I must wear to walk have many discomforts that I needed to learn how to deal with. The academic problems come with the doctor's appointments that I must go to for my prostheses, which are typically during school hours, which means I oftentimes miss far more than is necessary to maintain acceptable grades.

My cleft palate has caused me to struggle in my classes as it makes it harder for others to understand me, which can cause my grade on a presentation to be marked down, which affects my grades. It also affects my social life as many of my peers struggle to understand me when I am talking, which causes a barrier between me and my peers.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

One of my teachers that helped me a lot was Robert Adam, my sophomore year geometry teacher. He helped me when I began to fall behind in math because I was missing class a lot for appointments. He is the teacher that I know I can rely on if I have any challenges, as he has always helped me out.

What advice would you give for students facing similar situations?

The advice I would give is to take time for yourself to take care of your needs as the struggles you may be going through can sometimes feel overwhelming, so you need time to breathe. Also, don't be afraid to ask for help if you're struggling.

What does it mean to win this award?

As someone who has struggled throughout their life, it's an honor to receive this award. There are many who are going through similar struggles to me and it feels great to know that it's not going unnoticed.



Region 15

Dani Dominguez

Bowman High School, William S. Hart Unified School District

Dani Dominguez's story is one of great sorrow and yet great resilience. She grew up in an abusive household. Dani admits she never felt like she had a true sense of belonging. She bounced around from house to house and school to school. At her lowest point, she considered suicide. Dani eventually found hope at Bowman High, an alternative school where the motto is "you matter." She is quick to call Bowman her "happy place" and after graduating this past spring, she has a new outlook on life.

What are your hobbies and interests?

Music has been a wonderful way to express myself and my emotions, especially during challenging times. After I was offered the chance at guitar lessons, I also picked up singing and never looked back. I never thought I would say the words "I'm proud of myself."

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get to where you are today?

The biggest challenge for me has been staying on the right path and not altering the path that I was meant to be on.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

I received help from so many people over the years, but two particular educators stand out to me: Amy Gonzalez and Cindy Takamoto. Amy guided me in all things education. She assisted me with finding the classes I needed to reach my goals. She is responsible for my academic achievements. Cindy helped in my home life and finding a more stable environment where I could learn to thrive.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

If I could offer any advice, I would say don't shut down. You have to trust your instincts. And always strive to do better in life. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Push for greatness in yourself. You must believe in yourself in order to achieve success. For me, staying optimistic about the future allowed me to strive for greatness.

What does it mean to win this award?

I am extremely appreciative to win this award. I see it as a recognition of all of my hard work over the years, especially during times when I could have given up. This shows my determination and ability to get through those tough times.



Region 16

Jehoshua Smart

North Hollywood High School, Los Angeles Unified School District

Jehoshua Jireh Smart has excelled in just about everything he has done and has been a difference-maker along the way.

He's a deacon at church and a member of the Martin Luther King Young Juniors for Justice program that does community outreach. He's a starter on the varsity baseball team at North Hollywood High School and spends time socializing with special education students and playing sports with them.

He's also not afraid to step out of his comfort zone. In his sophomore year, Jireh was recommended for a transfer to a Highly Gifted Magnet school, where an IQ of 145-plus is required for admittance and classes are taught two years above grade level. The leap was a challenge and required an incredible amount of time and energy, including after-school tutoring.

He took advantage of programs that were available to him and is now preparing for college and career.

What are your hobbies and interests?

My favorite subject in school is English hands down. I love literature, writing styles, and reading. My hobbies are reading a variety of books. I love exercising and running. I enjoy cooking and spicing up foods. I enjoy making smoothies in the morning. I try to be health-conscious and eat the proper foods for my health.

My sport is baseball. I have played since I was in second grade. I loved Little League and continued to play up to middle school. In middle school, I switched my time over to the cello. I played at Palms Middle School and I joined the Inner City Youth Orchestra. One of the highlights of this time was meeting Yo-Yo Ma and playing at the Walt Disney Concert Hall many times.

What has been your biggest challenge?

The biggest challenge has been finding a balance between individual growth and collective solidarity. Meaning, I enjoy sharing time and collective space but I also aspire to grow my beliefs, character, passions, achievements and goals as an individual.

Which educators have helped you succeed?

My fifth-grade teacher, Dr. Okore at Westport Heights Elementary School, taught me discipline, organization, work ethic and the seriousness of focus. He also emphasized great songs, quotes and poetry written by great people around the world. In high school, my English teacher Mrs. Underwood helped me find and hone in on my passion for English. She encouraged me to pursue college (even though I knew I was going) and she helped to grow my focus for writing and literature. I felt well supported and educated by Mr. Bradbury, Ms. Guillo, and Mrs. Rudemaker. She helped me to own who I am and feel very good and positive about being at this school and in the gifted program. I am grateful and appreciate each of them.

What advice would you give to others in your situation?

The advice I would give others in new situations:

1. Own who you are.
2. Play to your strengths.
3. Be mindful of your weaknesses but don't give them too much energy.
4. Look through an optimistic lens.

What does it mean to win this award?

To win this award, it feels like my efforts and the person that I have been working on and building myself up to be was noticed and rewarded. Thank you to everybody involved for caring and investing in my journey. And it encourages me to continue to own who I am.



Region 17

Sunjay Guttikonda

Los Alamitos High School, Los Alamitos Unified School District

Sunjay Guttikonda personifies strength, resilience and courage. Diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy at age 3, Sunjay never had the ease of movement of his peers, struggling with balance and motor skills as well as speech and learning difficulties. But from his first year in elementary school, Sunjay never stopped trying, learning or growing. While other students were playing sports or video games, Sunjay endured eight grueling hours of physical therapy every week and worked to achieve basic competency in school. In middle school, he was also diagnosed with Dystonia in both of his legs and later suffered from patellofemoral pains in his knees, which made even taking a few steps extremely painful and required six corrective surgeries. Sunjay began using an electric scooter to navigate the campus in 9th grade, yet chose not to use any of the IEP facilities except for taking extra time for completing assignments and tests. With immense personal fortitude, he started to walk with braces in the 11th grade, and has never looked back. Through it all, Sunjay remained committed to both his coursework and his community, earning more than a 4.0 GPA in high school, taking AP courses and looking to a career in STEM while also volunteering through the California Scholarship Federation. Sunjay never once hesitated in the face of obstacles, choosing to always try, to constantly work harder, and to never give up.

Tell me about yourself.

My favorite subjects in school are math and computer science. My favorite hobby is hiking. I also like to watch airplanes land and take off at the local airports. My favorite sports are swimming and diving (I cannot dive well due to physical limitations, but I enjoy it!). I have been swimming since I was three years old.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

In elementary school, I had speech and learning difficulties (in addition to limitations in gross and fine motor skills and balance), which I overcame by the time I joined fifth grade. Growing up, I found it difficult to watch other kids play sports and do things I cannot do. This contributed to some depression and anxiety. But, on the bright side, at least I was able to walk and swim.

The biggest challenge I faced happened during the summer break between 8th and 9th grades (i.e., the summer before joining high school). I suddenly developed incredible pains in both my knees that radiated up and down my legs when I tried to walk. Every step I took was so agonizing. I could not swim either. I became extremely sad and depressed that I will lose the ability to walk and swim the rest of my life without pain.

Fortunately, after medical tests it was diagnosed that I was suffering from patellofemoral pains due to misalignment of bones in my legs. Bilateral multiple surgical procedures and subsequent grueling rehabilitation gave me the ability to walk again pain free and I started to walk the campus by 11th grade. All these efforts took three years for me to reach the stage I am at today. Now, I am able to walk like I did before I experienced the pains in my legs four years ago. All the while, I was focusing on my studies in school, which proved to be a difficult balancing act. Nonetheless, I got good grades throughout high school.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

During my elementary school years, my fifth grade teacher, Mr. Dean Arnold, helped me by lifting my spirits and making me more energetic after facing speech and learning difficulties at the time. His positivity and encouragement helped me to get on the same level of intellect as my peers.

In high school, I have to mention my counselor, Mrs. Christy Ricks and my English teacher during 10th and 11th grades, Mrs. Andrea Parsons that helped me the most. Their constant encouragement and guidance enabled me to achieve whatever I did in high school.

I would like to also mention Mr. Kenneth Lopour, our Vice-Principal (Student Support and Counseling), for knowing me and nominating me for this award and writing my story to the ACSA committee in a very eloquent manner. Lastly, I would like to mention Mr. Chris Vlastic, our Principal, who always inquired about how I was doing and encouraged me with a pat on the back.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

For students facing similar situations, my advice would be to keep a positive frame of mind always. I agree it is not easy to do that all the time. What helped me achieve positivity is to seek out people with empathy both within my family and at the various schools I attended.

Coupled with a positive frame of mind, hard work and perseverance are the two key traits that will help the most. Lastly, taking one day at a time and focusing on what needs to be done will work wonders.

What does it mean to win this award?

There are a few things that come to my mind on what it means to win this award:

- First of all, it will be a great honor! It will be a motivating and humbling experience for me.
- It will further boost my confidence in both my physical and mental abilities as I go forward in my life. Trepidation is a big thing I have experienced all through my life which sometimes led to unpleasant side effects during stressful situations like big exams.
- My life, my struggles, and my successes can be a lesson and/or source of inspiration to other students facing similar difficulties.
- I believe winning the award also puts a great responsibility on me. It will give me additional inspiration and impetus to mentor and/or guide others in similar situations the rest of my life.
- It will also help other handicapped students to take me and my advice seriously.



Region 18

Jaden Heck

Poway Adult School, Poway Unified School District

During her graduation ceremony from Poway Adult School in August 2019, Jaden Heck spoke about the challenges she has faced. She was diagnosed with two chronic illnesses that leave her with debilitating migraines and extreme joint pain, creating constant difficulties in completing her education on time. Poway Adult School's Independent Study program provided the flexibility that Jaden needed, and her counselor and teacher provided ongoing one-on-one support to ensure her success.

Her experiences with the medical profession over the past six years have led Jaden to her calling: her goal is to enroll in college and become a pediatric nurse, where she can help children who are being treated with serious illnesses.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I love spending time with my two cats and animals in general. I used to work at a pet hotel where I got to love and care for lots of different kinds of animals. Due to the virus, I got furloughed, so I am now a cashier at Sprouts, but just got promoted to the vitamins section which will prepare me for my career in the medical field! (I want to be a pediatric nurse.) I enjoy swimming and I was on my high school team for a couple years. My favorite subjects in school were anatomy and orchestra.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

My biggest challenge that I've had to overcome would be learning how to cope with the reality that I have uncontrollable degenerative illnesses and suffer from a lot of chronic pain daily that results in bad depression and anxiety waves. Learning to cope and change my outlook on my diagnoses allowed me to become confident in my abilities and start living a life where my pain doesn't control me anymore.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

Mary from Poway Adult School saved me in my struggle to get my diploma. She allowed me to work with her and teachers from home and was nothing but flexible, kind and understanding throughout the entire process. I wouldn't have my diploma and been given the opportunities I have today if it weren't for her believing in me.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

My advice to students facing similar situations would be to never stop fighting for yourself and your future, no matter how many roadblocks come your way. There is always a solution out there. Believing in yourself is a key component as well because everyone is worthy of achieving their goals/hopes and dreams regardless of who you are or what you went through.

What does it mean to win this award?

Winning this award truly means the world to me. After struggling through school since I got sick in the 7th grade, I never thought I'd be given something so generous and kind. I am beyond thankful and appreciative of this award and am saving it for college purposes only.



Region 19

Julia Melendez-Hiriart

Ramona High School, Riverside Unified School District

Julia Melendez-Hiriart has never let her status as an undocumented student define her. She came to the U.S. with her family at the age of 9, facing the overwhelming challenges of learning English, financial hardships, housing insecurities, and finding transportation to school, all while being supported by her single mother. By the time she graduated from Ramona High School with a weighted 4.43 GPA and AP Honors distinction, Julia had proven her dedication to excellence and her commitment to civic causes. Her leadership activities have included serving as president of Ramona Habitat for Humanity and participating in the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute in Washington, D.C. Julia was accepted at UCLA and will be starting school in the fall.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I have always been interested in social studies, particularly in history. In high school, I participated in various academic, cultural, and service clubs and organizations. I plan to join similar programs in college because I enjoy the sense of community that emanates from them. Reading is my favorite hobby, so that is mainly how I have been occupying my time recently. I am currently learning how to knit and I frequently bake to pass time.

What has been the biggest challenge you've overcome to get where you are today?

I am originally from Torreón, Mexico, but my family and I relocated to Riverside the summer before I began fourth grade. Adapting to this foreign country was difficult for me, as I was not familiar with the English language. Though I struggled with acclimating to my new environment, I knew that advancing my education was pivotal. My mother is a hard-working single parent, she has sacrificed a lot for me to be able to receive a proper education in the United States and I refuse for her sacrifices to have been in vain. With the help of my peers and my teachers, I was able to learn English and excel academically. My education is my priority because I know it will enable me to have a better life in the future.

What educator helped you along the way and how did they help you?

Throughout my education in America, I have been incredibly fortunate to have been instructed by compassionate and knowledgeable mentors. My counselor, Mark Lim, is one of these individuals. Mr. Lim is an exceptional counselor who has indubitably shaped my life. The fact that I am undocumented has never deterred Mr. Lim from helping me; on the contrary, it has driven him to find new programs and scholarships for me to apply to. I distinctly recall that even before college application season had rolled around, Mr. Lim already had a list of universities for me to apply to that he considered to be the right fit for me. His unwavering encouragement instilled in me a belief that I am capable of much more than I imagine.

What advice would you have for students facing similar situations?

I would encourage students who are facing similar situations to never remain passive. There have been times when I have felt helpless, but the worse thing to do is to let opportunities pass you by. It was beneficial for me to step out of my comfort zone and become involved in clubs and organizations that interested me because, through these experiences, I learned that this begets more opportunities for growth. As an immigrant, navigating varying aspects of life in America has been strenuous; however, constantly asking questions and seeking guidance may have positive results.

What does it mean to win this award?

It is such an honor to have been selected as the recipient of the Association of California School Administrators Region 19 Every Student Succeeding Award. I have watched the stories of other award recipients and they are truly inspiring. In the event that another low-income immigrant comes across my story, I hope that they feel hopeful and optimistic about their own future.

2021

Adult Ed

Miami Abdulal

Corona-Norco Adult School

Miami Abdulal moved to the U.S. in 2011, fleeing the Syrian crisis with dashed hopes and trepidation. As a child in Syria, Miami was often caught holding a hairbrush as her microphone and play-acting as a TV journalist. With limited English and learning and adapting to a new culture, Miami started ESL classes at Corona-Norco Adult School. She then transitioned to Norco College, where she enrolled in an Early Childhood Development course. During college, she was afraid that her dreams of becoming a TV journalist would need to be adjusted because of her language barriers.

Today, Miami is an Assignment Editor at ABC 7, promoted from being a News Assistant two years ago. She started her journalism career by being a radio live reporter for a local Arabic FM station that caters to the needs of the immigrant community in Southern California. Her work focused on helping families navigate the U.S. system. Her show's topics included community support themes, such as filling out forms, understanding the education system, figuring out the health care system and others. She continues to freelance for multiple Arabic channels in the Middle East and support the Arabic diaspora in the U.S. through her work.



Adult Ed

America Moreno

Torrance Adult School

America Moreno has demonstrated outstanding motivation, persistence and work ethic under difficult circumstances. At the age of 18, she came to the United States to escape the violence in Nicaragua. Living and working with a language she did not understand, she faced a life in a new country without her parents.

While speaking only Spanish, America interviewed and was hired to work in the stock room at Marshalls and enrolled in Torrance Adult School in both ESL level 3 and Reading Development B. She began the cycle of working from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Marshalls then going to school from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. As her English skills improved, she was moved at her job to be a fitting room attendant and ultimately promoted to cashier.

Since America joined Torrance Adult School in May 2019, she has completed 14 courses, earned her High School Equivalency certificate, enrolled in Harbor College and is presently completing her last course for her high school diploma. She has been a popular student among her teachers, and her persistence and motivation have impressed school staff. America has assisted the adult school by making marketing videos, focused on choosing a career path to help others. She looks forward to attending a university.



Region 1

Emily Yang

Eureka High School, Eureka City Schools

Emily Yang grew up in a household where she says she never felt safe. One of eight children, Emily was the victim of sexual abuse by a family member. In 2018, Emily courageously reported the family member to police and testified in court. Emily and her siblings were placed in the foster care system, but she never lost hope.

Eventually, they found a new home thanks to Trevor Hammons, a counselor with Eureka City Schools. This fall, Emily became a first-generation college student by enrolling at Humboldt State University.

What was your reaction when you found out you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I was really surprised to be honest. With my story, as heavy as it is, I didn't really think it was going to win because there are so many other people who have their own stories. And then when I heard that I won, I was like, "Oh? OK. Yay!"

Your story is one of great tragedy and great heartbreak but also of great resilience and great bravery. Can you share a little bit about what you had to deal with growing up?

I had to deal with a lot of physical and verbal abuse. But it wasn't just me. It was a lot of my siblings as well. Honestly, to us, it was kind of considered as discipline. But if you thought about it properly, it wasn't discipline. It was very emotional. It really caused a lot of anger to well up in me. And it was just very tough to be vulnerable because we were always having our guards up. It was just very hard to just feel safe at a place where we should call home. But it wasn't a home really. Nobody should ever be in a situation like that where they don't feel safe in their own home.

Where did the courage come from to finally just say, 'enough'? It wasn't just you being brave for yourself. It was you being brave for your siblings as well. Where did that courage come from?

I was always just a very reserved and quiet kind of person. So, whenever something would happen to me, I would just keep quiet about it because that's kind of how I grew up. I had a lot of friends who I talked to at the time. I didn't tell them everything, but I did say that I was struggling a lot. And they were very encouraging and very supportive. And they said, "You should go to the police. You should report this. You should not be experiencing this."

You made your way into the foster system along with your siblings. And then what happened next is so incredible. Can you share how Trevor Hammons came into your life?

I didn't really expect him to come into my life all of a sudden because he was my middle school counselor and I was already in high school. He told me, "I plan on taking in you and all of your siblings. It's going to take a while. But do you want to be in a home with me?" And at first, I was like, "Whoa. This person wants to take in eight people including me. That's a lot." But it was really amazing. I'm really glad that it happened because I'm really grateful to this day. And it's so amazing because I get to tell people, my classmates and friends, he works at Zane Middle School. He's their school counselor.

One of the other amazing parts of your story is that you have three siblings who are deaf. And you have taken the time to learn American Sign Language. And now Trevor Hammons is learning ASL. What has that experience been like?

I was never able to take an official class because most of the schools I had gone to didn't have an official class for it. So, I kind of just learned off my mom a while back when she went to college for it. And when I was in foster care, I knew I couldn't learn it. And then I moved here with Trevor and the rest of my siblings. And we signed up for classes at my sister's school. And she goes to California School for the Deaf in Fremont. And they offer classes for people who want to learn ASL. So, we've been doing it through Zoom almost every Thursday. I feel it was a really good bonding experience because now we can communicate in ASL a little bit more. And we have fun doing it. So, it's a good experience.

For students who have dealt with abuse in some form, what would your advice be to them?

I would say believe in yourself. As hard as it is, it's going to get worse if you just continue on letting it happen and just drag it out. It's definitely a very hard process to go through it. Having to focus on your mental stability and questioning if you're ready to do this. But you have to do it.



Region 2

Adrian Chun

Wheatland Union High School, Wheatland Union HSD

Adrian Chun was looking forward to his senior year at Wheatland Union High School. But two weeks before Christmas, Adrian's mother unexpectedly passed away. The school community provided an outpouring of support for Adrian's family including a food train.

After the death of his mother, Adrian's grades started to fall as he lacked motivation. But thanks to friends and family, Adrian decided to fulfill a promise he made to his mom: graduate from high school.

What was it like to find out you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I was actually in class when I learned I won the award. I felt very happy and kind of proud because I know my mom would be proud to know I won this type of award. She would be smiling and taking photos of me. It meant a lot to me.

Could you share a little about your mother and how she impacted your life?

I honestly felt a lot of pain and sadness. I just use that to push toward my goals that I have in the future. She was basically my number one supporter. She supported me through everything. I knew no matter what I did, she would always be there for me. And after her passing, it was a major flip. And trying to push yourself toward your goals is pretty hard. So, I had to deal with that and find myself through that.

What role did your school community play in helping you grieve the loss of your mom?

The day after her passing, everyone knew about it. My uncle’s girlfriend created a GoFundMe page. And all I saw on Snapchat that night was everybody reposting and saying they donated. And that made me really happy.

How has sports helped shape what you want to do with your life?

Pretty much all my life, since I was 5 years old, I’ve been really into sports. And I always knew I wanted to do something involved with sports. So, I plan to major in kinesiology and want to become a physical therapist.

What advice would you give to other students who are facing similar experiences?

The advice I would give is to understand the pain. And to understand that you will have those types of feelings. But make sure that it motivates you to become someone way better than you were before the trauma.



Region 3

Rayahna Fraijo

Esparto High School, Esparto USD

Right as “Ray” was about to start middle school in Southern California, her mother passed away. She was taken in by her grandmother, but tragedy struck again when her grandmother died two years later. Adding to her double loss, Ray then had to leave the only community she ever knew to travel to Northern California and live with extended family.

Upon arriving at Esparto Middle School, she struggled with grief and fell in with the wrong crowd. But eventually Ray found support, both formal and informal, from her school principal, teachers, counselors, advisers and school staff, which she refers to as “second mothers.” Ray joined athletics, FFA and leadership, determined to make new connections in her school community.

What was your reaction when you found out you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I was very, very shocked. I didn’t know that teachers and faculty had seen me in that light. And I’m very appreciative that they saw me in that light, and I was recognized. I was just very shocked.

All of our winners have overcome some type of adversity or obstacle to get to where they are today. But your story is one of great loss. What impact did the loss of your mom and grandmother have on you?

It was very, very harsh. I was definitely very rebellious. When my mom passed, I was a seventh grader. So instead of hanging out with my class, I was hanging out with the older kids. So eighth graders and freshmen. I would constantly be going out, going to parties. Constantly missing class. I didn’t really care. I just wanted to be distracted. I felt like I had no one. And then moving and having no friends. It was really hard.

You made the move from southern California to northern California and started school in Esparto Unified School District. How did you adapt to your new environment?

In the beginning, I don't think the move helped me at all. It was very hard. A lot of long distance with my friends. It was so different coming here. Smaller school. Different environment. But at the end of the day, I got very close with the office ladies and the principal at the middle school. They were like second mothers to me. And then, from there, I got really close with a lot of friends who have really been there for me.

In what way did the members of your school community shape you and help you get to where you are today?

I think in the beginning, I wasn't with the right crowd when I first came here. But I definitely was wanting to participate in leadership activities. I wanted to be something at this school. I didn't just want to have a horrible life after what happened to me. I wanted to fix it.

What would your advice be for students who have dealt with the loss of a loved one?

It's OK to grieve. I definitely felt like it wasn't OK. And now I realize it is OK. And always just do it for yourself because at the end of the day, everything is going to be for you. Your purpose is for you.

To look at where you are now compared to where you were only a few years ago, what makes you most proud of what you've overcome?

I'm glad that I finally went over that hard mountain and just said, 'It's OK.' I'm doing this for my mother and grandmother.



Region 4

Caitlynn Alimboyao

Vallejo High School, Vallejo City USD

For Caitlynn Alimboyao, "paying it forward" is a value she champions at school, in her community and with her family. After surviving a life-threatening medical emergency when she was 5 years old, Caitlynn learned from an early age to appreciate the service and support of those around her, and strives each day to give back. She embraces her Filipino heritage through community groups, volunteering and learning about her cultural history. Her inspiration comes from her family, especially her mom, and the health professionals and educators who supported her recovery. Caitlynn's goal is to become a pediatrician, helping others as she was helped.

What was your reaction when you found out you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I remember being incredibly honored to receive this award. It was definitely a surprise that my life was going to be acknowledged by people all over the world. I think it's really special that there's a platform for kids to be able to share their stories.

You underwent a lot of medical procedures at a young age. Can you walk us through some of those challenges?

When I was 5, I was diagnosed with stage 4 kidney failure. It started with continuous fever that lasted for three days, and then I had to go to the emergency room at Kaiser. And then they performed an ultrasound and realized that something was wrong, so I went to Children's Hospital in Oakland. From there, they realized that I had an enlarged kidney and an enlarged heart. And they needed to give me a blood transfusion. After the surgeries to insert the PICC line into my arm and the blood transfusion, I was still sick. There were seven doctors who came from all over the world who came to see me in my condition because it was the first case they saw in Children Oakland's Hospital. My veins collapsed because they had to draw blood from me seven to eight times a day. They needed to find the medicine for the bacteria I had, and only after they found it that is when I got better. The doctors said there were no traces of the enlarged heart or the kidney. It was a miracle. It was like nothing ever happened.

Five years old is such a young age to have to deal with something of this magnitude. How did you react to all of it?

It definitely is a young age. And I do have my mom to thank for being there 24/7. I always looked for her in the hospital room. She was always there. I think that she always gave me some comfort. I knew that she was there, and it was going to be OK. And I'm also grateful for all of the doctors and nurses who were there because they were fighting for my life when I couldn't myself.

Your mom is important to you. What was it like being raised by a single mother?

Growing up, I definitely did see the financial struggles and the hardships that she faced while raising a family of four. She really is my role model. I look up to her a lot. I hope that I can give back to her and do the same good that she did for me.

Your future plans involve a career in medicine. How much does that stem from the medical issues you faced growing up?

Being in the hospital definitely gave me my exposure to the medical field. I feel like I did get to see the magic behind it. I do want to be a part of the giving end. And I want to be someone who takes initiative to do good without getting anything in return. I really feel like that's what a pediatrician captures the essence of.



Region 5

Monia Walker

Abraham Lincoln High School, San Francisco USD

Monia Walker exudes charisma and confidence. Every morning, she made the one-hour commute to Abraham Lincoln High in San Francisco Unified School District. She decided to attend Abraham Lincoln as a result of limited opportunities in her home community.

Monia quickly immersed herself in clubs and activities, including the Black Student Union. And this fall, she'll become the first person in her family to attend college. Monia plans to pursue a career in criminal justice at San Francisco State University.

You're living in a community where you've said you feel like there are limited opportunities. So you made the decision to commute to a school that is an hour away from your house. What is that commute like for you?

The commute that I go to school in is very challenging because it's not something that you find people doing every day. People normally go to school close to their homes and their neighborhoods. But for me, I like to take a challenge. I like to go further out. I like to learn more things about different people and see what they're really about. I like to take on new challenges.

You've been involved in the Black Student Union and you've said diversity is very important to you. Why is that?

Diversity matters so much to me because I live in a community where there's not just one particular race. There are so many different races in my community. And when I go to school, I'm surrounded by different races. In my community, we like to share and we're like a family. When I go to school, it's different. So in the BSU, we're a family because we're trying to fight for equality.

You've had some encounters throughout your life that left you feeling inadequate. How have you been able to persevere through those moments?

I don't listen to what people say. I just believe in motivation and tenacity. And I work for what I really want. If this is what I want, I'm going to work for it. And I'm not going to listen to what anyone is saying or let them bring me down because I know I'm more than that.

You've expressed interest in studying criminal justice in college. Why does that appeal to you?

I want to study criminal justice after high school because I've always wanted to be a part of social change. In my community, that's what we do. On Christmas, we fed the homeless. We gave back. That's what we do. There are things that I've witnessed in my community and in my school. I'm in BSU. I'm in a social justice change class. So, this is something I've always wanted to do. And being the first in my family to go to college, that's something that I've always wanted to do.

What advice would you give to other students who are in similar situations?

My advice to people who are in similar situations is to keep tenacity. There's going to be a point in time where you want to give up and I know that. I've been there before. But if this is something that you really want, you have to go for it. You have to keep going. You have to be motivated because your future is in your hands.



Region 6

Hallie Evans

Arroyo High School, San Lorenzo USD

Hallie Evans is determined to become a doctor and break down barriers to adequate health care for Black women.

Hallie herself has faced medical issues and other trauma. In sixth grade, she joined the wrestling team and excelled to three state championships while learning self-discipline and commitment. A result of poor math instruction in middle school, Hallie had to work even harder at her studies. When she failed a test, she told her teacher she was proud of it, because it taught her more than passing the test would have.

With her strong and principled outlook, and a heart driven to give back through volunteer work, Hallie is poised to make a difference.

Your father was in and out of your life while you were growing up. What emotional impact did that have on you?

Growing up, I knew what I wanted at a young age because I didn't want to follow in his footsteps. It didn't affect me in a big negative way. It showed me how life can be so short if you take it for granted. I took that trauma growing up and said, "I'm going to make it something beautiful for me." But I have to say it did make me who I am today.

You've also had to deal with a host of medical issues including having a tumor removed when you were 14. Can you share what you went through?

It was in May my eighth-grade year. I noticed there was a change going on in my left breast. I didn't really say anything, in part, because I was also wrestling at the time. I still wanted to continue to go to practice. I didn't want to go to doctors' appointments. And it came to a point where it was growing so fast, it was poking out through my skin. I told my mom. My primary doctor said, "She has a tumor." From that appointment, I was transferred to a specialist in Oakland. And that's where I met my surgeon. The same day, she told me it was benign, but it had to be removed as soon as possible. She was an amazing surgeon. And I was actually one of her youngest patients.

To students who face similar challenges, what's your message to them?

My message to them would be the same message I would say to younger Hallie. Everyone says it's going to get better. It will, but just know that the challenge that you're facing is meant for you and you can actually get through it.



Region 7

Neomi Chavez

Lathrop High School, Manteca USD

Neomi Chavez was a typical 8th grader. She earned excellent grades, enjoyed playing sports, and was looking forward to attending high school. Then, during the summer before freshman year, Neomi was assaulted, causing her life to begin spiraling downward. Anxiety, depression, risky behavior and shame began to emotionally drown her. Her grades, attendance and friendships began to suffer.

At her lowest point, some very special adults entered her life: her high school counselors. Together with Neomi, they realized they needed to develop a plan to turn her life around. In Neomi's words, the plan was "scary," but she knew she had no other choice.

This path led to her achieving in the classroom again. She dreams of becoming a neurologist and one day helping students overcome the same adversity and trauma that she experienced. Neomi says, "My trauma is part of me, but it's not me."

You've made it clear that leadership roles in athletics and academics are important to you. Why is that?

Being a team leader, I feel like you get to help your other players strive to be who they want to be. I feel like being a leader period, you get to teach other people about confidence and building their strength to do what they want to do.

At the age of 13, you experienced a sexual assault. Can you describe the way this trauma impacted you?

It was very hard to talk to new people. I kind of really isolated myself and kept to myself which is why I wasn't going to school as much. I was very afraid that I was going to be too vulnerable to other people. So, I kept my distance. My PTSD would probably be not talking to men at all. I would be very scared to even come near them, which is another reason I isolated myself. It messed up my school schedule a lot and really took a big toll on me.

What would you like to share about how your academic counselor Lisa Wilson changed your life?

She is amazing. I came to her one day and I just let it all out. She was there with no hesitation ready to help me which I just appreciate so much. She really helped me to stay in high school. And now, I'm here, a senior doing really well this year. I'm super proud of myself. And I can't thank anyone but Lisa because she really tried to keep me in here.

You made the decision to enroll in night school to catch up on your academics. What was that experience like for you?

It was definitely a challenge. I had to go to night school right after school because I was able to pick my time. There were days where I wouldn't go at all because I wasn't feeling it. And there were days where I would just tell myself, 'This is going to help me get better. And I've got to start somewhere so I'm going to start here.' My mom definitely motivated me because I definitely cherish and appreciate my mom a lot. Her thoughts really do get me so I didn't want to disappoint her.

What advice would you give to other students who experienced similar challenges?

It is definitely hard. You will have those days where it's very hard. But I guarantee you that communication is key. And if you talk about it, it will make you feel a lot better. Focus on what you have to do. Don't let what happened to you define you, because it is not you.



Region 8

Nathaniel Lopez

Del Roble Elementary, Oak Grove SD

Fifth grader Nate Lopez has lived more than one lifetime of hurt. His mother passed away when he was very young, and he and his siblings went to live with their grandmother. He experienced trauma that caused him to isolate from others. Then last year, Nate was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia and underwent numerous treatments. Through all he has endured, Nate has found loving support from his "warrior" grandmother Jessica and his Del Roble Elementary "familia."

With a team of educators providing him with positive interventions, Nate knows he is welcomed, safe and cared for at school. He has inspired all those around him with his grace, courage and optimism.

How has your grandmother helped you throughout your childhood?

She was the one who would take me to my doctor's appointments. She was the one who fed me. And she was the one who got the groceries. I'm really attached to her.

You were diagnosed with leukemia last fall. How have you dealt with that?

I just think to myself, just do all the treatments. And the more you do the treatments, the faster you'll be done with it.

For people who don't understand all of the grueling things that go into cancer treatment, can you explain what hospital visits are like for you?

First of all, make sure you stay healthy out there because right now we have this virus. And it's not good to get cancer treatments right now because then you have to take the coronavirus test often. I would have to take two steroid pills. I would have to take leukemia pills. They would have to check my weight. They would have to check my physical abilities so they could do spine taps.

What has your school community done to help you through all of your challenges?

Sometimes they would give me money for hospital treatments or bills.

Do you think of yourself as brave?

Yes. At first, I was scared. But now I just think it's a nuisance.

To people who might be in a similar situation to you, what's your message to them?

Stay fearless and stay strong.



Region 9

Tyler Sheen

Pershing Continuation High School, Central USD

By the time Tyler Sheen arrived at Central High East Campus in Fresno, it was his 19th new school. As a child in the foster system, Tyler struggled to find connections with each new caregiver and at each new school. Facing discipline issues, Tyler enrolled in Pershing Continuation High School. There, he found staff members uniquely positioned to help struggling students. Today, Tyler has made great strides dealing with his anger and making connections with others. He is an FFA officer and is driven by his huge heart to help whenever he's needed, whether it's counseling a peer to not use drugs or handing out meals to families affected by the pandemic.

What did it mean to you to win the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

It's pretty amazing that people noticed what I did. It was kind of tough knowing that I've been through different places, different counties, different schools. When you start to work, and you put in hard work and dedication, it pays off. And this is honestly a blessing that I've noticed that hard work and dedication actually has paid off. And I appreciate ACSA. Knowing the award, Every Student Succeeding, I was actually in shock when I got the news from my principal. It was pretty crazy.

You were taken away from your mom when you were 11 and put into the foster system. What was that like leaving your family?

It was pretty sad and depressing for me. Me being the kid who I was, I loved my mother and we had a lot of good times. We were really close. It was tough going from place to place. I would have limited visitations. So, it would be very tough on me and I would actually cry when I didn't get those visitations with my mother. I went from place to place all around California, maybe around 20 group homes. You wouldn't have your personal space to yourself. You always got told what to do so you didn't really have much freedom. It was challenging.

You talked about staying in 20 different foster homes. How did you cope with that?

Coping was one of my main issues when I was growing up. Coping was very tough, and I actually had to rely on myself a lot in tough situations. When I was in foster homes or group homes, I didn't really have an opportunity to have people by my side like family. Me changing different schools was hard. I was devastated knowing that I had to leave. Knowing that you lose friends, you gain friends, it was kind of depressing.

What would you tell other students who are dealing with instability?

Just keep pushing. Life is full of challenges and bumpy roads. It's not always a straight road. It's always curvy, bumpy. There may not even be a road. You have to make yourself a road. And it's tough at my age. It's really tough at first. You just gotta keep doing it. So, believe in yourself and don't put yourself down because the more you put yourself down, the more the road is going to crack. If you're feeling down, make yourself feel better. If you fail, get back up. I've been in football for the last five years. I got knocked down. I got myself back up. Do what you need to do to get yourself back up.



Region 10

Consuelo Vidal-Perez

Watsonville High School, Pajaro Valley USD

Consuelo Vidal-Perez entered high school with a drive to learn and succeed academically.

But when her mother was diagnosed with stomach cancer, she had to develop resilience. While her mother was in hospice, Consuelo worked with counselors who helped her process her fear and grief. Throughout her painful experience, Consuelo continued with rigorous courses and competitive sports. She never missed a day of school, including the day her mother died. Consuelo has discovered her inner strength and has used what she learned to help other students experiencing crisis.

What does it mean to win the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

Being able to win this award, it means so much. In a way, it kind of shows how I could persevere through grief. And it's not just gone in vain but also it kind of demonstrates how other students can do it as well. And I think to me, that's the biggest thing that I can show other students that they can do it too.

Your mother passed away when you were 15 years old from cancer. How did that impact your life throughout your high school experience?

It was really difficult for me. My mother was absolutely everything to me. She was my best friend. I did absolutely everything with her. During my lunch, I would go with her instead of staying on campus because she's my mom. Having lost her, it was really difficult for me because it felt like my world had turned upside down. I never expected my mom to pass away at such a young age. I always thought she was going to grow old with my dad. Up until her last days, she was my biggest supporter. She was my biggest motivator. And she still is. She still gives me that strength that I need to go on every single day. And not only that, but she still gives me the strength to show my little brother to keep going on.

You had to take on a motherly role for your little brother after the passing of your mother. How has that experience been for you?

It really hasn't been a burden of any kind. If anything, I see it as a blessing in a way. It gives me the opportunity to see him grow up and see him become the person that my mom would have loved to see. It just kind of happened naturally. I guess it was my desire to be there for him and to guide him the way my mom guided me when I was that age. At the same time, it has made my bond with my little brother way stronger than it was before. It's a complete blessing being able to be there for him when he needs me. Just knowing that he's becoming the person that my mom would have loved to see is the biggest blessing I could have asked for.

What impact did COVID-19 and distance learning have on your grieving process?

School for me was really important in how I would get my mind off things and distract myself. When we had to transition into distance learning, the house itself felt more lonely because my mom wasn't here, so it was feeling sad. We have pictures set all around the house of my mom. And staring at them would be so difficult. It just wasn't the same. I feel like the pandemic made me confront my grief. So, it was kind of difficult at the beginning and then as time progressed, I kind of got more used to it. And it helped me come to terms with everything that happened.

You've been part of the AVID program at Watsonville High School. How has your school community been supportive of you and your family?

If it weren't for my school and it weren't for the community, I probably wouldn't be at the place that I am in my life. I feel like they helped me so much. Both my AVID class and my track team, they created this safe space for me where I could go and just be myself and not think about everything else that was going on. Everyone at my school was always so understanding of what was going on. They were always there for me when I needed somebody. They all motivated me to keep going and pushing through. My hurdles team was always telling me, 'There isn't anything in life you can't hurdle over.' They knew that I could keep going on even when I didn't think so myself. The school community has been such a big part of me not giving up.

You've really taken on the role of an inspirational leader at Watsonville High. Where does the motivation come from and how do you think it will help you continue to grow as a person?

The motivation itself to be somebody, to be a leader, to inspire others, it really comes from my mom. She always told me that sometimes you just need to go out in life and do what you need to do. She always said that I was a leader and she always told me that I could do big things. The motivation to become this person that can inspire others and help others, it truly comes from my mom.

How would your mother feel to know you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I think my mom would be so proud of me. Every time that I won a race or I was given an award at school, she would always come to me with such a big smile and she would say, 'I knew you could do it.' I feel like if my mom was here, she would give me a hug and tell me that I did it and I deserve it.



Region 11

Oscar Velazquez

Lee Vining High School, Eastern Sierra USD

After the deaths of his brother and mother, Oscar Velazquez moved around a lot. One family member would take him in, and then another — he no longer had one consistent home. Oscar persevered through his grief and struggles.

While working 20 hours a week at a restaurant, he boosted his grades. He also played on the school's basketball team and served in the student body. School staff supported him with all his goals, even offering him a ride or help with college applications. Now, Oscar looks forward to attending college and beginning the next phase of his life.

How did the loss of your mother and brother impact you, especially as you were getting ready to start high school?

I think that was my biggest challenge I've had to overcome. That was devastating but I've had a really good support group with my family and the community I have. I live in a small town called Lee Vining, California. It's near Yosemite and I'm on a lake. It's very touristy but there's this small community here. And everyone, all the neighbors, are really supportive in every way.

You had some academic struggles to start, but you really made a turn in your junior year by enrolling in some vigorous courses. What led to the transformation?

I was struggling because of my hardships in life. But through the support of the community, the teachers, the students, everyone wanted me to do better. And even myself, I knew I wanted to do better so that's why I decided to take AP courses to better my GPA because I knew I wanted to go to college.

Your school community is about 60 students. How did everyone come together to support you?

They tried to support me in every way they could. And it really helped. They did a really good job in helping me. And they still do. I still have such a great support group.

You'd like to major in finance and you're planning to attend Chico State University. In doing so, you'll become a first-generation college student. What are you looking forward to the most?

I'm most excited to meet all these new people. New friends. New contacts, too. I want to get to know as many people as I can. I'm sure that will help me in life a lot, too. And I'm looking forward to building leadership skills over there at Chico State.

What advice would you give to other students experiencing similar challenges?

No matter what you're going through, you can get through it. You just have to keep pushing. It does get easier, for sure.



Region 12

Matthew Barrera

Sequoia Middle School, Fontana USD

Matthew Barrera's life was upended at the young age of 11. His mother died, and then he had to move from Idaho to California to live with his aunt and uncle. His relatives gave him advice that helped him take on a new perspective — look to the future, not to the past, and specifically, focus on what you want to achieve.

Since his move, Matthew excelled at Sequoia Middle School, earning a 4.0 GPA and joining the GATE program, Eagle News and the school's Renaissance Program. The love and support of his aunt, uncle and school community helped him push forward.

You lost your mom when you were 11 years old and as a result, made the move from Idaho to California. How did your extended family help you make the transition and what impact have they had on you?

They've had a huge impact on my life. They stepped up and took me in. It was really hard when everything happened, and I was basically just there. They gave me all their love and advice and just told me to look to the future and not look too much to the past.

As you found support from your extended family here in California, what particular advice resonated with you?

My uncle always said to have tunnel vision because you can focus on one thing at a time. If you look over way into the future, you're going to get confused and bombarded. But if you have tunnel vision, you can focus on one thing at a time. A lot of times tunnel vision is good to have to focus and get things done.

You have found incredible academic success at Sequoia Middle School and take particular pride in your involvement in the Renaissance Program. Why is that?

The Renaissance Program's main goal is to make everyone feel comfortable in where they belong and help the overall climate and culture of the school. The reason why I enjoy it is the fact that it's nice to help people and make them feel comfortable at school. You're going to spend most of your days at school so it's nice to see everyone being comfortable and make them feel comfortable.

How did your school community including your teachers and friends help you make the transition to your new environment?

A lot of my teachers helped me push forward in life. I can't just name a few teachers but a lot of students as well. From Idaho to California, it's very different. But when everyone took me in, it kind of felt the same afterwards.

What was your family's reaction to you winning the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

Everyone was really happy. They were all proud and just really happy for me because they saw me go from tragedy to getting this award. And I felt proud for myself because it's one of the biggest accomplishments of my life. So, I can be proud as well.

What would your advice be to other students who have faced similar tragedies or hardships?

My advice would be to have tunnel vision. Don't dwell too much on the past but also don't forget it because the past is important. But you should always focus on what's ahead, take it one thing at a time and just focus with tunnel vision.



Region 13

Isabella Francisco

Westlake High School, Conejo Valley USD

Isabella Francisco follows the Golden Rule — care for others as they care for you. Isabella's positive nature has helped her create strong connections to her school community and friends, so much so that she could rely on their comfort and assistance when she lost her father to cancer before her junior year. She admitted it was difficult to remain positive.

Fortunately, her counselor and other school staff lifted her up, and her involvement in activities like spirit cheerleading and in clubs such as the Surgical Club, Shelter Helpers Club and the Recycle for Relief Club gave her purpose. She has also volunteered for her church for many years and would adopt a family in need each holiday season.

You've been described as a natural leader and a kind soul. Where does that come from?

I think that's just how I am. I've always taken the approach of treat people how you want to be treated, so it's good it's paying off.

You lost your father to cancer right before your junior year. What was that experience like for you and how have you worked through it?

The summer before junior year, he passed away. That was a really hard time because my dad was the most important person in my family at the time. I basically didn't want to let that stop me. Obviously, I grieved. But I kept being involved in stuff. But it was a really hard time for a while.

How has your school community supported you through the challenge of losing your father?

After losing my father, my counselor was very supportive. She would always say, "If you need anything, I'm here." And that was a great thing to have. I never really vented to any of my teachers. But I remember my physics teacher and my English teacher at the time kind of distracted me and made me very interested in class. And of course, my friends at school were very kind and supportive throughout all of it.

What advice would you give to other students who have a similar experience, especially students who have lost a loved one?

Keep your friends close to you. Keep the people that you're comfortable around close to you. And if you're ever having a bad day, vent to them. I have bad days every now and then. You'll kind of notice how many people actually care about you and you want to take advantage of that.

What do you think your father would say about you winning the 2021 ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I think he'd be super proud of me. He always said, "you're going to go so far." And I feel like he'd be super proud of me. He'd be like, "I knew that this would happen. I knew you'd win something." And that's a great thing to hear. I feel like he's kind of an inspiration in doing stuff.

What does it mean to you personally to win the Every Student Succeeding award?

I didn't even know I was nominated for anything. So when they reached out to me and told me I won this award, I was surprised. I feel like I'm much more confident. And I want to continue doing more things like volunteering, the things that got me nominated in the first place.



Region 14

Naima Dellawar

Cerritos High School, ABC USD

The year 2020 changed Naima Dellawar's life. In January, Naima was at track practice at Cerritos High School when she suffered a cardiac arrest. Then she had two more while on the way to hospital. Naima was medically dead for 45 minutes. Miraculously, she awoke without any brain damage. In the months following, Naima had heart surgery and began her recovery process at home after the COVID-19 pandemic locked down schools. She was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after suffering her trauma.

With the support of her teachers and her counselor, Rocio Gomez, Naima has overcome these challenges to maintain a 4.0 GPA and participate in four clubs and her school's Model United Nations program. She also created a Cardiac Arrest Awareness Instagram page (@cardiacarrestawareness) to connect with other young survivors of cardiac arrest.

Can you share a little bit about your medical event?

On Jan. 29, I experienced a cardiac arrest while I was at track practice. And a coach came over to me and performed CPR. And then the ambulance came. ... I was in about a two-day coma. I woke up and had surgery for an ICD which is an implantable cardioverter-defibrillator in the case that I were to ever have cardiac arrest again, it would be able to catch it and shock me back.

You were all set to return to school and then COVID hit. What impact did the last year have on you emotionally?

I think especially since I was supposed to go back the day that all the schools closed down, it was a little bit difficult considering that I wasn't able to see my friends, my teachers and all those people who supported me throughout the way of my recovery. And especially given I was dealing with PTSD at that time, it was a little bit difficult.

You've been open about your battles with PTSD. Why is it important to you to speak out?

I think especially during online school, and especially after my experience, I've really noticed that people are going through their own struggles that a lot of people don't know. You just don't know what people are going through. I think for me, I was affected by PTSD following the trauma from my medical event. But I think my counselor did help me to make sure I was going to be OK. And I think seeing a therapist also really helped.

You started an Instagram page to promote cardiac health awareness. How did that come about?

I think I just really noticed there was just not much awareness around the world. Even with my family, we never really knew a lot about cardiac arrest considering we never had a family history of heart diseases. I think it's so unbelievable to see a community through my page. I've met parents who have lost children from cardiac arrest. I've met other survivors. I'm just honored to be a part of this journey and being a part of a community where all the heart survivors can come together and make sure we're raising awareness for this issue.

How has your school community helped you along the way in this recovery?

I cannot thank my school community enough because they've truly helped me, especially my counselor, Ms. Gomez. All my teachers were making sure that I don't overload myself and make sure I was healing after my surgery.

You've maintained a 4.0 GPA while going through your medical issues. How have you made school a priority?

I just set my mind to it. I think especially following the event that I had, I really appreciated every opportunity, everything that I had. I started studying again. I started going back because I wanted to finish what I started before everything happened.

What would your advice be to students facing similar challenges?

I know it may be hard, but thinking about the future and knowing that it will be better in the end is great positive reinforcement. Keep going and don't stop.



Region 15

Angel Barnes

Quartz Hill High, Antelope Valley HSD

For Angel Barnes, the most devastating loss provided the inspiration to succeed. Throughout a difficult childhood, Angel depended on her older sister for support because her mother wasn't always around. Angel found it difficult to show an emotion other than anger.

After the tragic loss of her older sister and young nieces in a car accident, Angel worked with her support team, including Special Education staff, her PBIS Coordinator, counselors and her At-Risk Teacher, who helped her heal and gain the will to thrive. She enrolled in the A-G courses required to attend college and challenged herself to take two AP classes as well as courses through a Virtual Academy.

The struggles Angel experienced have only increased her determination to attend college and create a successful future for herself. She continues to build a relationship with her mother and strives to show all those who have supported her that she can achieve her future goals.

You've had a challenging childhood from the very beginning. What has that been like and how did you get to where you are today?

The mindset that I've had ever since my sister and nieces passed away, it was "I have to graduate for them. I have to do what I need to do for them." I just feel like it was something I needed to do for my family to show them I could do it.

How has your school community helped you with your challenges?

The school community has been good. I have an IEP, so I have a case carrier who checks on me every day to make sure all my classes are going well. She helps me through everything. I feel like this school provides people to help students if they don't really know who to talk to about things.

What was your reaction to winning the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

My counselor and another teacher from my school nominated me for the award and I didn't know about it. I was excited and happy.

Your mother had some challenges to overcome when you were a baby, but she turned her life around and graduated from college. How did her transformation impact you?

Early on, my mother and I struggled with communication. It wasn't as good as it is now. Maybe it's because she wasn't there when I was younger and I clung to my sister more. But now, as I've gotten older, our communication is better.

What advice would you give to students who have faced similar challenges?

The advice I would give them is to not give up. Just because you're in a bad situation now does not mean you'll be in a bad situation later.



Region 16

Natalie Gonzalez

Bell High School, Los Angeles USD

Natalie Gonzalez is in the top 10 percent of her class, serves as a leader in several clubs and took all AP courses available to her at her school's STEM Magnet program. But beneath the surface, she faced inner struggles that could have derailed her.

Since an early age, Natalie has struggled with shyness and self-doubt. Determined to make a change, Natalie joined the tennis team in high school. Through every practice, every loss, and every win, Natalie's confidence grew both on and off the court.

This new resolve was tested last year with COVID-19. Not only did Natalie have to adapt to learning remotely, she also had to overcome the loss of her beloved grandfather who succumbed to the virus. Instead of allowing herself to grieve, Natalie shut her emotions off and distracted herself by overperforming in school. It took her several months to come to terms with his loss, but Natalie can now see how her struggles have taught her to be resilient, confident and persistent.

You have admitted to being a shy kid. But when you got into high school, you became really involved. What changed?

I think at the end of eighth grade, we had all these yearbooks to sign and I realized I didn't have that many signatures. They were mainly my teachers. So I said, "OK. I really need to put myself out there." And I did. When I joined high school, I made sure to join AP classes because I wanted to be friends with the determined people. And I also put myself through tennis because I wanted to join a sport. I wanted to be a student athlete. And yet, it was really awkward at first. I couldn't run to the ball. I couldn't carry my books as much because they were so heavy. But eventually, I got the gist of it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on your entire family. How did the experience affect you?

It's sad to say but COVID did impact my family in a huge way. It took my grandfather. And it hurt my dad and my uncles. And even my grandma, too. At first, we thought it was just a little virus that wouldn't get to us. We were always secure. We would always wear a mask. ... And I went to work in a hospital around my birthday. It was Father's Day around June 20. And we invited my family over. I was in my room all day because I felt sick. I felt nauseous. But I came out briefly to say hi. And that brief moment changed everything. A week later, my grandfather and uncle were hospitalized. And maybe two weeks after that, my dad started getting the symptoms. And my grandfather passed away. My uncle did not. He's still with us thankfully. But it really hurt to see my grandfather go because he was like my second father. My dad was always working late and my grandfather would pick us up from school. And watching him go meant we had to find a new system in our life. And it was different because he was always the one to provide for us and always the one to encourage us and make us laugh. And so when he left, it kind of left, too.

What advice would you give to students who have faced similar challenges?

I would advise those who are feeling shy and out of place like an outcast to kind of push yourself to do something you think you wouldn't like. And then for students who have recently lost a loved one, I would suggest they find closure in any little thing. Whether it be closure through a family member. Closure through a TV show. Personally, my sense of closure was watching SpongeBob with my grandma after school because we were united. We were always laughing. And it brought back that sense of family and familiarity.



Region 17

Kaiyanna Han

William Lyon School, ACCESS-OCDE

Kaiyanna Han has faced more challenges than many people do in a lifetime, and it hasn't stopped her from setting goals and striving to achieve them. She grew up in an unstable home, struggling with poverty and abuse. Beginning at age 12, Kai moved through more than 20 different foster placements, including temporary care, group homes, foster homes and independent transitional housing.

Her awareness and openness about her struggles, including anger issues and trauma, have made a deep impression on the adults who have worked to help Kai gain perspective and remain committed to school. Her strength, bravery and potential to forge her path in life continue to inspire those who hear her story. Kai herself is driven to help others, especially her younger relatives, and give them opportunities and guidance she didn't have.

What does it mean to win the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

It means a lot. I was very emotional when I first found out. And I hope that I can use it to influence people younger than me or people my age in the future.

There was nothing easy about what you dealt with. Can you share what your upbringing was like?

I was born in Inglewood. But I was raised in Koreatown, Los Angeles. I didn't have a mom growing up, so I was raised by a single dad. We lived off welfare, food stamps. He didn't have a job, so I struggled as a little kid. I also faced abuse. Physical and verbal abuse. And it just got worse as I grew older. So, one day, I had a black eye and I went to school. And my speech and debate teacher saw my eye. Social workers got involved and I got put into the system at 12.

You've said you dealt with some anger issues, especially in the foster system. How did the anger manifest itself?

When I first got into the system, I was very angry. I was angry because I felt like I was being punished for my parents' actions. I felt like I was being punished for something I wasn't in control of. I felt everything was at the hands of people older than me. I had no say in anything. So, I was just very angry for that. That resulted in a lot of fights and expulsions.

What does it mean to you to be in a different place today?

It means so much being in control of my emotions. Not a lot of people are capable of doing so. And I feel like my past, my trials and tribulations, I feel like all of that has molded me into the person I am today. I'm very grateful for my experience.

To the students who have gone through similar situations, what would your advice be to them?

One would be don't break away. Don't go AWOL. You're just going to end up back in the same place you're at. You just have to move forward. You can't stop. It gets better. You just have to be patient.

You've moved into transitional housing over the last few months and you've told us you're excited about that. What's next for you as you continue your journey?

I plan on going to the 18 and up program in Fullerton. I plan on going to a two-year community college and then transferring to UCLA. I always wanted to go to UCLA. I always wanted to be in the medical field. And they have a great medical program.



Region 18

Zayne Higuera

Mountain Empire High School, Mountain Empire USD

Zayne Higuera never knew his father, but his grandfather was always there as a caretaker. Zayne and his younger brother were cared for by their grandfather until illness made him unable to look after them, to a degree that Zayne's high school counselor became concerned at his slipping attendance and grades. It became worse when his grandfather was hospitalized and passed away, leaving Zayne at 14 in charge of his younger brother.

Under CPS oversight, a longtime family friend agreed to take in both boys and provide them with a stable home. Though at first the transition was difficult and caused Zayne to act out, he soon started to thrive. With the assistance of his guardian, Zayne's low reading level was identified, allowing him to gain confidence and skills as well as participate in football and wrestling.

Between living up to his grandfather's example, and being there for his younger brother, Zayne has committed to working toward a successful future.

When you found out you won the award, what was your reaction? What went through your mind?

I didn't really know what was going on at the time. I thought people were messing with me to be honest.

What would you like to share about your late grandfather?

He was a really good guy. He was in the service for a long time. And then he retired out of it. In his life, he told me the stories of how he had kids but never really liked it until my brother and I came along. And something just clicked for him to keep us. He really impacted my brother and me in a large way by not giving us up and not leaving and loving us as long as he could.

When he passed away, what type of toll did that take on you?

It took a really big toll because I lost a really big thing in my life because I always looked up to him from the young age when my mom left. And that was really the only person I had by my side besides my brother. It felt just empty.

At what point did you realize that for as much grieving as there was, you still had to make sure to follow the path your grandfather set up for you?

When I realized it, it was probably the middle part of my sophomore year when my grades were not good. I couldn't play the sports I loved. Everything was going wrong. I was getting in trouble and I felt like that's not what my grandfather would want me to do.

What role did your younger brother play in your development and your growth?

He played a big role because I feel like I had to step up and be a bigger figure to him than just a bigger brother. I had to be more. He just pushed me to do that. At the same time, that's when I realized I should just change my life and the way I was going, so I have to thank him as well.

What is your advice for students who are going through a similar situation?

My advice would be that it's always going to hurt. That's never going to change. But you have to figure out at what point you really want to change your life for the better. It might still hurt no matter how much you try and change. But changing for the better is going to make them proud wherever they go and wherever they are because they're always going to be looking down on you and knowing that you've changed for what they know you can be.



Region 19

Adrian Grajeda

Palm Desert High School, Desert Sands USD

Life can change dramatically in just a few seconds. It took only that long for a piece of shrapnel from a car crash to cause Adrian Grajeda to lose his lower leg at 10 years old. He spent the following years learning to walk again with a prosthetic leg and adjusting to the extreme change in his life.

With a positive attitude, a deeply supportive family, inner strength and resilience, Adrian found inspiration from those around him, including from his participation in a Wounded Warrior program. As the years went on, he played football in school, walked the 2019 Rose Parade with the Donate for Life float and learned to surf. Adrian plans to attend College of the Desert this fall, and will no doubt continue to thrive.

How did one day, October 23rd, 2013, shape your life?

When I was 10 years old, it was recess for elementary school and I went out to go play soccer. I was just kicking soccer balls with my friends. And at the intersection, a drunk driver ran through the fence. And some of the metal sliced my leg and damaged all my nerves and hit severe arteries. I fell on the ground, but the teachers helped me, and I was able to get to a hospital.

To be 10 and have to deal with something so tragic, how did you react to all of it?

When I was in middle school, it was super tough going through all of it. And I also had nightmares. I just wanted to be normal.

What type of role did the school community play in those early stages after the accident?

I'm super grateful for a lot of the teachers. When my accident happened, there were plenty of teachers who went over there and helped me. One of them took off their shirt and tied it around my leg to try and stop the bleeding. They did everything they could. And then the coaches – I developed a bond with them helping me through it.

You participated in a Wounded Warriors camp not long after the accident. How much did that change your mindset and how you approached things today?

The Wounded Warriors camp really helped me a lot. Just seeing older people and kids just like me everywhere, it helped me realize that I'm not the only one. And I'm not just a weirdo. I'm just different. Seeing older people living their everyday lives and doing everything perfectly, it really was inspiring. It made me want to grow up and be great just like them.

For all of the students who might be facing similar situations, especially medical trauma, what would your advice be to them?

I would tell them to try their best regardless of their situation. I know that there's only so much you can do. But I would say don't take pity on yourself and give it your all no matter what. You may be different, but everybody has their own problems. And you have to fight through them and give it your all.

Adult Ed

Nicholas Marks

LA Unified Adult Education, Venice Skills Center

Nicholas Marks graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara with a bachelor's degree in Computer Science and a Minor in Music. After graduating from UC Santa Barbara, he began working at a computer security startup called Lastline Inc. as a Logistics Engineer. He also co-founded a band called The Oles with whom he recorded two albums, performed three to five shows a month, and eventually planned a three-week tour through seven states. Unfortunately, Nicholas was let go from his job and also had to move out of his apartment due to flooding. The housing market in Santa Barbara was unsustainable, so he had no choice but to relocate back to Los Angeles where he grew up. During this period of unemployment, he was introduced to the Venice Skills Center and received an education grant to continue pursuing educational goals in the form of certifications. Transitioning from a startup culture into the corporate world proved to require a certificate to qualify for employment.

Nicholas joined the Venice Skills Center in October 2019. He began studying for Cisco certifications in Networking, CyberOps, and Security+ courses. Four months after joining the Venice Skills Center and two weeks into his CompTia courses, the world shut down due to COVID-19. At this point, all classes moved from in-person to remote and finding a job seemed almost impossible. But because of experience with the Venice Skills Center, Nicholas discovered organizations like SANS, and dove headfirst into cybersecurity. He is now a regular guest lecturer and works to mentor his classmates, share news regarding information security and career development.

Shortly after Nicholas began his studies at Venice Skills Center, he accepted a position as an instructional aide at Estrella Elementary School in LAUSD, supporting the campus with IT, distribution and record-keeping of student devices. After a few months, he transitioned to the district IT department as a Support Technician, serving eight campuses with over 500 students and 20 to 100 faculty members at each location. He participated in the National Cyber League competition by CyberSkyLine for the past two years and has placed in the top 3 percent of competitors for three seasons. Nicholas also competed in the SkillsUSA competition for Internetworking, and in 2021 placed gold in the local and state competitions and bronze in the national competition. Recently, Nicholas was invited to join the Venice Skills Center campus as a substitute teacher and is in the process of obtaining Career Technical Education credentials. He looks forward to joining the facility to provide additional resources and classes in programming, network security and automation.

Although Nicholas enjoyed his time working with LAUSD, he decided to explore work in the private sector to apply his knowledge and have more responsibility for critical infrastructure. He's currently accepting a position with a small IT team to support a national law firm. In addition, Nicholas provides technical support and security education to friends and family, including supporting his girlfriend's organization, the Long Beach Chamber Music Group, as the webmaster and occasionally performing with the group on trumpet. During the quarantine, Nicholas assisted by recording educational videos to publish for her students; this was a helpful tool for the students to stay engaged in private lessons and classroom sessions. Together he and his girlfriend also created a YouTube channel to post quarantine performances where Nicholas served as the recording engineer and video editor.



Adult Ed

Diana Viscarra

Sequoia Adult School

Diana Viscarra was born in San Francisco, Calif. However, when she was only 8 months old, her father tragically died during a vacation to Mexico. Left alone with her six children and without a means of providing for them, Diana's mother decided to stay in Mexico. At age 18, Diana made the very difficult decision to leave her family and everything she had ever known for the small possibility of being able to get an education in the United States. When Diana arrived in California, she and her brother were alone without any guidance or support from family or friends. Neither spoke English and they barely made ends meet. However bleak things might have seemed, Diana was determined to get a job and go to school. Eventually finding a job in a retail store in San Francisco's Mission District, she worked hard, taking on the night shifts loading and unloading boxes at factories for a year. She then was able to get a job working at the San Francisco Airport, serving in various roles at the airport over seven years, always knowing she wanted to do more with her life.

During that time, Diana got married and had two daughters. It wasn't until she had her second daughter that she took advantage of her maternity leave and finally decided to enroll at an adult school. In 2007, Diana moved to San Mateo County, where she enrolled at Sequoia Adult School. Her only goal at that time was to get her GED and learn English, thinking that with those achievements, she could be promoted within the fast food restaurant where she worked. Higher education seemed impossible. She quickly started taking GED classes in Spanish; but childcare and work made attending class difficult. It wasn't until a staff member at Sequoia Adult School noticed her attendance and reached out to check in on her goals that she began to feel motivated to keep trying. After almost a year, she was finally able to get her GED.

After completing her GED, Diana was encouraged by the Transition Advisor at Sequoia Adult School to take an ESL placement test at Cañada College. Sequoia staff helped her throughout the enrollment process and guided her through applying for financial aid. It was the first time that she began to believe that higher education could be possible. In 2019, she graduated from Cañada College with an A.S. in Paralegal Studies, and in Spring 2020 she received an A.A. in Political Science. Having accomplished so much more than she ever thought possible, she knew she could not stop. In Fall 2020, in the midst of the pandemic and facing an uncertain future with her husband now having lost his job, Diana started her journey towards a bachelor's degree at San Francisco State University. Despite challenges and difficulties, she persevered and received a B.A in Political Science in May 2022.

Because of the people who helped and encouraged Diana, she values giving that same type of support to others in her community. Very early on her educational journey, despite her insecurities, Diana began working part-time as an assistant to the teachers who taught the lower ESL levels at Cañada College, eventually recruited by the college's Learning Center to become an ESL tutor. After working both jobs for a semester, she decided to stay as a tutor for the next two years. Her success in tutoring served as a great motivator for her. She loved helping other students who were once where she was. As a peer mentor, she helped students learn, gain new study skills and manage their time, teaching strategies to reach their goals. She listened to them when they were stressed and helped guide them through their struggles.

Sequoia Adult School provided Diana with a great starting point; in addition to assisting with her college applications, they also helped connect her with a private scholarship foundation, Upward Scholars. Upward Scholars offers students transitioning from adult schools money for books, transportation, laptops and free tutoring services. As a recipient of an Upward Scholar scholarship, Diana also spent many years volunteering for the organization. She helped with private fundraising events, tutoring and ESL conversation clubs. She was constantly asked to deliver speeches about her life experiences to help motivate students. Finally in July 2019, she began working for Upward Scholars as a Student Fellow and was quickly promoted to Program Coordinator and in 2022 to Program Director. She's passionate about her job, as Upward Scholars has helped over 1,000 adult immigrant students in the San Mateo County area afford textbooks and provided them with countless hours of free tutoring.

At the beginning of her journey, Diana only wanted to go to school to learn English so that she could get a higher position within the food industry, but she's now looking pursue master's and doctorate degrees. She hopes to continue helping her community through her work with Upward Scholars and her volunteer work with the Immigration Institute of the Bay Area.



Region 1

Ramiro Uribe-Arias

Anderson New Technology High School, Anderson Union HSD

Ramiro Uribe-Arias knows that nothing can prepare you for the loss of a parent. When he was wrapping up his sophomore year at Anderson New Technology High, his mother unexpectedly passed away. Devastated and unmotivated, Ramiro returned to school in the fall. His grades suffered and he failed several classes. But the community at Anderson New Technology rallied around Ramiro. He enrolled in the Administration of Justice program where he found a new sense of purpose. And in June, Ramiro fulfilled his late mother's dream by graduating from high school.

How did you react when you learned you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I was really happy. I was so humbled and appreciative of this award. Honestly, it didn't cross my mind that I would win. I just really appreciated the opportunity of being recognized in the first place on the county level. And I was really grateful.

You've been through a lot throughout your time in high school. How have you found a way to cope with everything?

It was very shocking when I lost my mother. For a while, I didn't care at all about my academics. I actually failed several classes. I needed to realize that my mother would want me to be successful. So, I would need to work hard and fix my mistakes and get back all of the credits that I was missing. That loss helped me learn that sometimes you just need to keep going.

Can you share what your mother meant to you?

She meant everything to me. I didn't realize how important she was to me until after she was gone. And it hurt me for a long time knowing that I could have been better when she was still here. That doesn't mean that I can't be better now. And I know that she would want me to be better for me. She was such an amazing person. ... She was my hero.

What role did your school community play in your journey?

One of the best things about my school, Anderson New Technology, is it's a smaller school. So there's more of a personal connection with the teachers. And it's easier to talk to them and ask them when you need help. If you're having a bad day, they'll listen to you and talk you through it. And they'll be there for you.

For students who have dealt with grief, what would your message be to them?

I would tell them to look for help because I don't know if I could have done it on my own. You need to keep going and you need to find those people in your life who are there for you and who push you in the right direction. You need to find those people who care about you and motivate you and stick with them.



Region 2

McKenna Berry

Ponderosa High School, El Dorado Union HSD

McKenna Berry never imagined her high school journey would start the way it did. The day before she was set to begin her freshman year at Ponderosa High School, doctors diagnosed McKenna with thyroid cancer. But with unflinching perseverance, McKenna soldiered on, never allowing her diagnosis to define her. She founded Pondo Pillars, a group for students struggling with medical issues. She also served as president of the Hands for Hope service club.

In the fall, McKenna will attend UC Santa Cruz where she plans to major in biology with future plans of a career in genetics.

What does it mean to you to win the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

Honestly, I felt very seen. For all of the time that I have been sick, and all these things that had been going on in my life, not really many people knew about it. And a lot of people tend to make assumptions just looking at me seeing I'm a twin. And that's one of the first things people see about me.

Can you share a little about some of the challenges you've faced?

I actually have a couple autoimmune disorders. And my family knew about them for a while, since I was 10. So, we had been monitoring, general checks, and we were doing a couple of scans. And it was a routine scan. I found out the day before I started high school that I had a papillary carcinoma, which is a thyroid cancer.

How did you maneuver through those first few weeks after the diagnosis?

In one aspect, it was like, "Oh my gosh, like I have cancer." And it's kind of terrifying. And it's kind of hard to deal with that. And then I'm at school, and nobody really knows. So, I'm just trying to have this social life with all my friends while I'm also in and out of doctors and trying to figure out this scenario when you find out you have cancer. I think my family and especially my sister were able to help me with coping because they were there for me all the time.

What type of role did your school community play in helping you?

I missed a lot of school my freshman year and going in, I had some very high ambitions. I have pretty high standards when it comes to grades. My school counselor is an amazing human being, and she was awesome in helping me communicate with my teachers. They understood that sometimes there was something I couldn't do, but I was still putting in my best work.

What message do you have for students who are facing similar challenges?

I really think I would say find your people. It's kind of hard to find people who are going to support you. You really kind of see people's true colors when you go through something so big. For me, I started a club at my school for students who were going through like different medical things. It's been very nice to be around people who can empathize with what I went through. And I can help them with the things that they're going through.



Region 3

Jose Sánchez

Washington Middle College High School, Washington USD

Jose Sánchez Paredes' cheerful disposition is contagious. And he's done it all in the face of tremendous adversity. In the fall of 2020, Jose complained of headaches and blurry vision. After suffering for two months, Jose went to the hospital where doctors diagnosed him with germinoma, a rare brain tumor. He required surgery and chemotherapy with debilitating side effects. But he kept fighting, all while maintaining exemplary grades.

Now cancer-free and with a renewed outlook on life, Jose says he wants to help others by becoming a firefighter.

Can you share a little about what you've had to overcome?

When I was in 10th grade, I started suffering from headaches. And I was thinking it was probably just from stress. My parents said the same thing that I was stressed from school. A month later, I had the same headache that lasted for a few days. I just ignored it and kept going. And then the third time when I had a really bad headache, I fell to the floor and was unconscious. I threw up. My vision started to be blurry. I couldn't move. And I was thinking, "Am I gone? Am I still here in the world?" So, we went to the hospital. And that's when we found out I had a brain tumor.

How have you persevered?

When I first had chemotherapy, I didn't want to do anything. I didn't want to get out of bed. I just wanted to stay there and sleep all day. When I had homework, my professors told me I didn't have to do all the work. I could just do some of it. They gave me the support I needed and I'm really thankful to my teachers.

How did all of this affect your emotional well-being?

At first, I was feeling really sad. I couldn't believe I was the one with the brain tumor. I felt hopeless.

Your next steps include pursuing a career as a firefighter. How did that come about?

When I was little, I saw firetrucks going by in Mexico and I said, "That's what I want to do." I want to help people. Recently, I entered the Fire Youth Academy. And when I did everything, I knew I wanted to do this. I knew that this was for me.

What would your advice be to people who are battling cancer right now?

Always think positive. This is not forever. This will pass. You have a lot of support from your family members and friends. They will help you out.



Region 4

Logan Jirout

Kelseyville High School, Kelseyville USD

While the rest of the country was dealing with a global health pandemic, Logan Jirout was facing a health battle of his own. In March 2021, Logan needed back surgery after years of debilitating scoliosis that took a toll on his physical and mental well-being. But the day after his surgery, Logan heard a loud pop while attempting to stand. After two more surgeries, he returned home and started physical therapy. Through it all, he stayed optimistic.

And in June 2021, Logan walked across the stage at his eighth grade promotion ceremony.

What did it mean to you when you found out you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

It certainly caught me off guard when I found out. It was a rush of emotions. It was surprising, and I was so happy. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. So, it just felt great. It felt amazing.

Can you share a little bit about what back surgery was like for you?

When I underwent my surgery, everything went great. But the day I was going to start my physical therapy, my spine broke into two different pieces. And I had to go into a second surgery for them to reattach those two pieces. Once I got home, I started my physical therapy. I was in a wheelchair and it was kind of hard because I couldn't walk. My left leg had been disabled for a long amount of time. But once we started the physical therapy, I relearned how to walk. And now I'm fully functioning on my own.

Mentally, how did you get past all of those hurdles?

I just thought of everything in the past that had happened to me — why I was always in pain, why it was so hard to run and walk. I always saw myself as this lazy, disrespectful, ungrateful teenager. But once I finally was able to help myself and my family helped me, I realized that I'm not that. I'm a good kid. I finally started seeing myself in a different manner than I used to.

What type of role did your school community play in you getting to where you are today?

They helped me so much, especially one of my teachers, Miss Smith. She actually would come to my house and do my schoolwork with me. And she was the reason I was able to get through eighth grade. My school community, my friends, my teachers — they were such a big support. All my friends would come over and they'd bring me gifts and they'd hang out with me. It was really uplifting, and it really got me motivated to help myself.

For students who are facing similar challenges as you did, what would your advice be for them?

Keep pushing. Don't doubt yourself and above anything else, just stay hopeful. Don't demean yourself. Keep yourself uplifted and happy.



Region 5

Deysia Teofilo

Baden High School, South San Francisco USD

When Deysia Teofilo arrived at Baden High School, she was lacking motivation. With poor attendance and low grades, Deysia knew she was in danger of not graduating unless she changed direction. Because of her teachers and counselors and a lot of hard work, Deysia made up enough credits to graduate three months early. She enrolled at Skyline Community College and took two courses: Public Health and Health Science. She hopes to pursue a career in the medical field.

What was your reaction when you learned you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I was very surprised when I first heard I won the award. And the award means a lot. It showed my family that I was actually trying in school and I was actually getting stuff done.

Can you share a little bit about your story and what you've had to overcome?

I first started in South San Francisco High School, and I had a lot of problems there. I wasn't really getting any work done. I was barely going to school. Once I transferred to Baden High School, I felt more at home. I had a lot of teachers and counselors that I felt like I could connect to and actually get stuff done. I graduated high school early and now I'm starting college early. This award really motivated me to push myself more.

What role do you think the school community played in your development and success?

When I first transferred to Baden High School, I was still slacking. But I had a good talk with my counselors and my teachers. And they told me, "If you want to be something in life, you have to push yourself." They actually motivated me. They would call me every day and tell me to come to school. They just pushed me to do better.

You mentioned you're already enrolled in college. So, what comes next for you?

I'm in college. I started two classes: Public Health and Health Science. I think I want to major in something in the medical field. I just feel like it's a fit for me.

How proud are you of the work you've put in to get to where you are today?

I'm pretty proud of myself. My freshman and sophomore year, I didn't see myself graduating high school. I just felt like I actually changed a lot.

What advice would you give to students who need motivation to keep going?

Everybody goes through stuff. But try to find that one teacher or role model. Find that somebody you know who's motivating you.



Region 6

Carmelo Santiago

LVJUSD YouthBuild, Livermore Valley Joint USD

Carmelo Santiago is proof that everybody deserves a second chance. His journey began at Livermore High with Carmelo trying to balance school and athletics while also financially supporting his family. By his junior year, he was failing his classes and, in turn, lost his spot on the football team. Things quickly unraveled as Carmelo dropped out of school and turned to a life of crime. His lowest point came when he spent a year in jail after a robbery conviction. But Carmelo's story was far from over. He found YouthBuild, a program in Livermore Valley Joint USD designed for students who want to earn their GED while also receiving job training.

What does it mean to you to win an award like this that celebrates your hard work over the years?

It's great because sometimes it's hard to know if I can ever get the kind of life I really want. It can be really hard to find a job and have the money I need each month. It means a lot to be encouraged to keep going.

Can you explain some of the challenges you've had to overcome?

Being in jail for a year was tough. There were a lot of fights and I had to keep my head down. When I got out, my family had moved. The award money, and the money I earned at YouthBuild, helped me rent a room in Livermore. Before that I was finding different places to stay each night. Now I just want to keep moving forward and find a good job and regular work.

How much did your life change as a result of joining the LVJUSD YouthBuild program?

With this program I feel like I have a place to go that will help me solve problems and find a job that will help me move forward.

If I told you when you were in jail that you'd be where you are today and working on your GED, what would you have told me?

I wouldn't have believed it. I would have said, "Stop playin'." I still have a long way to go, but I'm glad I'm not in that situation anymore.

What would your advice be to students who have faced similar challenges?

Stay out of trouble. If you didn't finish high school, you should go back and find a way to finish. Don't hang out with people who will hold you down. You never know what kind of things will show up in your life, like YouthBuild.



Region 7

Blake Schroeder

Village Oaks High School, Lincoln USD

Blake Schroeder is finally living life as her true self. After years of struggling with her identity, Blake came out as transgender. While she struggled with her transition, she found support from the caring staff at Village Oaks High School, an alternative school in Stockton. Blake became an activist and mentor on campus, including starting an LGBTQ+ club at the school. And this past May, Blake graduated from Village Oaks High.

Your childhood was far from easy. Can you share some of the challenges you've faced over the years and how you've overcome them?

In my home, it wasn't OK for me to be transgender. So I had a lot of backlash with that. The home was very unstable. There was a lack of structure and just a lack of a lot of things. I ended up moving out at the age of 16 and just couch surfing after that.

Can you describe your journey and what it's like to live life as your true self?

It was hard. Since I was little, I've always had feelings of liking feminine things and wanting to wear dresses. I felt like I was in the wrong body. I've been an educator to my family and other people who have come into my circle about trans people and their feelings. But to be honest, if it were up to me, I would not be trans because of how difficult it is on a day to day.

How did your school community support you during your transition?

They did absolutely everything in their power to be there for me through my transition. When things at home were not good because they didn't agree with me being trans, I could come talk to them about it. When I was feeling very dysphoric, I was able to have time set to deal with that. They accommodated me by allowing me to use the female restroom.

You mentioned you left your house at the age of 16. What was it like trying to balance school and homelessness?

It was very, very hard. It took a lot of drive and determination to push myself to get an education and even keeping up on my own mental and emotional health during that very unstable time in my life.

What advice would you have to other students who may be facing similar challenges?

No matter how bad it gets or how hard it gets, you can always do it. You're strong enough. You're brave enough. You're determined enough to get through anything.



Region 8

Ella Rae Rodriguez

Christopher High School, Gilroy USD

Ella Rodriguez was born with a congenital birth defect that required the amputation of her foot when she was just nine months old. But throughout the years, life with a prosthesis has never slowed her down. She's a multi-sport athlete and has set state records in shotput, but basketball is her true love. In fact, this fall, Ella will attend the University of Arizona where she will compete on the wheelchair basketball team. Off the court and off the field, Ella is an accomplished student. She was recently accepted into the WA Franke Honors College and plans to major in neuroscience and cognitive science.

What was your reaction when you found out you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I was extremely ecstatic. And I think the recognition that you offer for all students that deserve to be recognized speaks volumes about how much you all care about students in general and student athletes.

Can you share a bit about what your childhood has been like and how you've overcome those challenges?

When I was first born, I was born with a club foot and a birth defect called fibular hemimelia. And at nine months old, doctors and my parents decided to amputate my foot. And because of this, I live out my life with a prosthesis. Initially, I was a very shy kid. I always hid behind my mom or my dad or even just inanimate objects in the grocery store. Staring was something that was constant and a daily struggle in my life, and just mobility in general, comparing myself to other kids. And, you know, just feeling different in every room that I walked into.

How much did your life change when you found the Challenged Athletes Foundation?

When I found CAF, my life changed for the better. Not only was I provided grants for travel and for equipment, which is needed to live an active lifestyle, I also found a community of people that have a disability and that are adaptive athletes that I could look up to or just kind of relate to along with them.

As you navigated life with a prosthesis, how did your school community help accommodate your needs, especially from an athletics standpoint?

In middle school, it was always a struggle to just simply get a timer and just arrive at the start line and be able to race in my own division. I was essentially racing against myself in track. And in high school, I was met with a coach who I dearly love. And he was super ecstatic about having an adaptive athlete and starting this journey of adaptive athletics with me and a few of my other teammates. And eventually, we actually started an adaptive team at our school.

To students who are in the thick of it right now and not sure how they're going to get past the obstacle in front of them, what would your message be to them?

I would say that change is inevitable, and you can look at that as a good thing and a bad thing. If you're stuck in a situation that you want to get out of, change is inevitable, and you have to work for it. Additionally, the things that are meant for you will not pass you by and you just have to keep going.



Region 9

David Ramirez

Delhi High School, Delhi USD

David Ramirez Amezcua has dedicated himself to a life of service. And he's done it in spite of incredible obstacles. David is legally deaf, visually impaired and has a learning disability. But with the help of educators, he has persevered and excelled in school. As if that was not enough, David has also served as the caretaker for both of his parents. His father was permanently disabled in a work-related accident in 2013 and his mother battled colon cancer. David says providing for his parents is a great honor and he says he has them to thank for his plan to become a nurse.

What was your reaction when you learned you won this award?

I was really excited when I got the award because this was a really big opportunity for me. And I'm really grateful. It's a big accomplishment for me.

Can you share what you've gone through and how you persevered?

In 2013, my dad had an accident. It left him paralyzed, so he can barely walk or do anything. He also has some speech difficulties. I had to learn his medications. I learned to cook, wash dishes, do the laundry. My dad spent the first five years in the hospital. And that's when I fell in love with nursing. I saw the nurses taking care of him and the doctors and surgeons and all the wonderful people there.

On top of that, your mom battled colon cancer. How did you find the strength to get through all of it?

I always try to see everything as positive. I need to take care of my parents. I need to make their lives good because I truly love them. If it wasn't for my mom getting cancer or my dad having his accident, I would not want to be a nurse. I truly owe it to them because they inspired me.

How have you managed to balance taking care of your parents with academics?

As a kid, I would get bullied a lot because I needed help. I needed glasses. I can't hear. But my mom says, "Always try your best. Never let the people get to you." And I always stand by that. I'm deaf and I can't see, but I try my hardest on the work. I put in the effort.

What would your message be to people who are struggling right now?

My message is you can do anything in this world. If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything.



Region 10

Jocelyn Mexicano

Soledad High School, Soledad USD

Jocelyn Mexicano has come a long way in a short amount of time. Once a self-described "rebel," Jocelyn struggled with substance abuse as a result of being away from her mother in Mexico. With failing grades, she was in jeopardy of not graduating from high school. But thanks to the support of her counselors, Jocelyn signed up for programs that changed her life. She's now been clean for three years and is a proud graduate of Soledad High.

Can you share a little bit about your story?

It's really hard for me to talk about this stuff. I lost my parents at a very young age. And I was moving around a lot. My little sister and I went from my mom's to my grandma's, like every other year. And we were trying to spend as much time with my mom as possible. But it got to the point where things got too hard. And I had to move back to the states and live over here with my grandparents. But when I came back over here, I started acting out and I kind of became like a rebel.

Why do you think you became a rebel?

I kind of started disrespecting my grandparents a lot. And I would go out without telling them, or I would tell them I would go to a place and then not be there and go somewhere else. I started hanging out with the wrong people. And that eventually caught up to me. So that's some of the reasons why I got put on probation.

What role did your school community play in your development and success?

My counselors really helped me a lot. They helped me get into programs that would benefit me and helped me. My sophomore year, I joined this group called Xinachlti. It was a group just for girls. It helped me express more about myself and learn how to love myself more. And I was also in this group from Sun Street Center. I got clean, and I've been clean for three years. And yeah, that's really helped me a lot. And especially because I had the support of my counselors, my teachers and stuff.



Region 11

Emma Barrera

Visalia Charter Independent Study, Visalia USD

When the COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020, Emma Barrera was preparing for life as a teenage mother. She was five months pregnant with a baby girl. Two months later, Emma was in a car crash that led to an emergency C-section at 28 weeks and the premature birth of her daughter, Olivia. Thankfully, Emma and Olivia recovered, and Emma enrolled at Visalia Charter Independent Study. With the help of teachers and staff, Emma balanced motherhood and her schoolwork with incredible grace. And with little Olivia as her motivation, Emma graduated from high school a semester early.

When you found out you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award, what was your reaction?

I was super surprised. And I thought it was something so small. And then my teacher was like, 'No, you don't understand. It's a big opportunity.' And once I learned more about it, I was really grateful. And it was so unexpected.

Can you explain what it's like giving birth and raising a child in the middle of a pandemic?

I was really grateful for the people around me and my family. On May 21, 2020, I was in a car accident and we ended up going to the hospital. And I ended up having an emergency C-section. It was really traumatic and really scary. My baby was in the NICU. And that was the hardest part — seeing my baby, not by my side, but in a little machine that was taking care of her. I couldn't even hold her for the first 27 hours because of just how small she was. She was only 2 pounds 12 ounces and 15 inches long.

You recently graduated early. How did you manage the balancing act of motherhood and education?

Just being a mom in general has pushed me so much. It gives me a reason to do everything that I do. I push myself so much more to do the things that I didn't expect of myself. I wanted to graduate early. And I'm grateful for all of the support that I had around me and everyone who was willing to help me.

What role has your school community played in your success?

They played a big role in my success. During my Zoom classes, I had one teacher who would sing to my baby just so I could take a test. Teachers helped me when I was late on work. Just the whole experience with all of my teachers, everyone that has helped me and pushed me through these two years that I have been with them.

For students who are facing similar challenges, what would your advice be for them?

All of our experiences in life are all different. And anything difficult you go through in life, just know it gets better. I promise you they do get better. It may feel like the end of the world, but I promise you, you'll have better days and you'll get through it.



Region 12

Natalie Bracamontes

Hillside High School, Upland USD

Natalie Bracamontes' childhood was anything but easy. When she was a few months old, her mother was arrested for stealing baby clothes and sent to jail, leaving Natalie in the foster care system. Natalie was later adopted by her grandmother but was still able to spend time with her mother. Natalie also had a crisis of identity as she did not feel comfortable in a boy's body. She transitioned in middle school but lacked support from her peers. In September 2019, Natalie's world turned upside down when her mother was murdered. Natalie battled depression and multiple suicide attempts. But in time, she found peace with her mother's death. And this past June, she fulfilled her goal of graduating from Hillside High School.

What was your reaction when you learned you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I was definitely shocked. It meant a lot to me because I feel like I've been through a lot of trials and tribulations. So, to be recognized and get that award definitely felt really good.

Can you explain some of the challenges you faced growing up and how you overcame them?

I definitely had to get used to people walking out. There was a lot of craziness and chaos going on in my house. There were usually a lot of cops at my house. So, that was stressful.

You are transgender and made the transition in middle school. Can you describe what it's like to not feel comfortable in your own body?

It's kind of like Halloween every day, but not fun. It's like being in a costume that you don't want to be in. It doesn't feel right.

What is it like living as your true self?

It's really good. It feels a lot better. I'm more confident. I'm definitely happier than I was as a boy. I've made a lot more friends. And I feel more content with myself.

What impact did your mother have on your life and how have you coped with losing her?

At a young age, I was taken away from my mom. But we were still really close. I was her carbon copy. I definitely saw her as more of a best friend than a mom. We had a good relationship and she taught me how to be a good person. It definitely was not easy when she died. I was looking for an escape. I tried to commit suicide twice which landed me in a mental hospital. It was not a pretty process and not my proudest moment. But I got better.

What would your advice be to people struggling with their identity?

There's a lot of challenges with it. But I still feel like it's worth it to live your truth than to hide who you are.



Region 13

Israel Diaz Salazar

Cabrillo Middle School, Ventura USD

Israel Diaz Salazar has overcome a great deal in a very short time. Born in Oaxaca, Mexico, with profound deafness, Israel moved to the United States and enrolled at Cabrillo Middle School in March 2020. He joined the school's Deaf and Hard of Hearing program where teachers quickly realized he needed extra support. He could not hear his parents' Mixteco language and his school in Mexico did not teach sign language. The COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges for Israel as he missed out on in-person instruction.

But thanks to the relentless efforts of his DHH teacher Marcie Ball and his principal Lorelle Dawes, Israel started online classes. By April 2021, he was back at Cabrillo Middle with in-person instruction. Today, Israel continues to make great strides in his development and has gained confidence through his daily interactions with his classmates and teachers.

What does it mean to you to win the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

It's really exciting to win the award.

You've had to go through a lot in your young life. Can you explain some of the challenges of moving to a new country at such a young age?

I liked growing up in Mexico and then moving here to Ventura I also enjoyed and liked.

Can you talk to me about what it was like moving from Mexico learning American Sign Language?

To be honest, moving here was a little scary and having to learn ASL was also equally scary for me.

How did your teachers help you learn American Sign Language? And how have they helped you adjust to life in Ventura?

My teacher in my DHH classroom, she's the one that helped me learn my vocabulary and learn to begin to sign.

You've gone through so much in your childhood, can you explain to me just how proud you are of yourself?

I'm really proud of myself for being able to learn how to read and write while I'm here. I'm really proud of myself for the things that I have been able to accomplish in math as well.

What would your advice be to students who are facing similar challenges to what you have faced?

I think one of the biggest things I would tell them is to be respectful to each other when you're learning new things and in this kind of environment.



Region 14

Ashlynn Smith-Asharri

Cerritos High School, ABC USD

Ashlynn Smith-Asharri is proof that adversity is no match for perseverance. She has found ways to succeed at Cerritos High while experiencing homelessness. From shelters to motels to nights in the family car, Ashlynn has lacked a stable place to call home. Teachers describe her as a "model student" and this fall, she's headed to Cal State Long Beach where she plans to major in marine biology.

What was your reaction when you learned you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I was very surprised. I had no idea that I won an award for anything. I wasn't expecting it at all. I thought it was funny because I was homeless at the time. And I wasn't expecting anything great to happen. I think it was a bit of a blessing. I was really grateful that I got a chance and the opportunity to win this award.

Can you share a little bit about some of the challenges that you faced?

Our situation with homelessness began in June of 2021. We were staying in a low-income apartment complex. But there were some weird circumstances and we ended up staying in our car for a bit. It was just an old little silver Ford car. We stayed in it for the summer. And when school started, my mom was able to afford a hotel room. We would stay there some nights just to shower and stuff because that was the only place we could shower since we were living in a car.

How much did all of this impact you emotionally?

I think I did go through a bit of depression or maybe anxiety during the time when we were dealing with the homeless situation. Some of my grades did plummet at first. But I picked my grades back up. And even though it was hard, and I did cry a lot, I tried my best. And mainly, I wasn't really thinking about myself. I was just more concerned about my mom because she had been previously hospitalized in the summer with osteoarthritis. It was hard for her to walk and hard for her to breathe. I had a lot to think about besides myself.

For people who have gone through some of the challenges that you have faced, what would your advice be to them?

I would say that you're extremely strong for even just existing. Just because you're in a bad situation now, it doesn't mean that it's permanent. Suffering is temporary. I know it gets hard, and I almost gave up too. I think you should keep persevering and just keep going. I really think that something greater is going to happen for you.



Region 15

Ximena Mendez

Baldwin Park High, Baldwin Park USD

Ximena Mendez exemplifies hard work and perseverance. The child of immigrant parents from Guanajuato, Mexico, Ximena faced not only language barriers but financial challenges as well. From an early age, she was asked to help out her family, most notably as her parents' translator. It took a toll on Ximena, but school quickly became her safe haven. She joined the soccer team and also found success in the classroom. She graduated in June and plans to major in criminology at Cal State LA.

Can you share some of the challenges you faced growing up?

I had to translate important documents to my parents. Sometimes not being able to translate properly was frustrating on both parts because our parents expected us to be very good translators at a young age. And we were not.

Were there times where it just felt like too much?

There were definitely times where it did feel too much. And it felt like I showed that out at school with acting out and trying to get my mom's attention. And I felt like it was the only way to do that. They would have to call her, and she would have to come down to the school and sit down with me and my teachers and just have a conversation about my behavior. It felt like that was the only time I was able to see her and actually spend some time with her.

Was there a turning point for you where things started to change?

It was in middle school when I started to realize my mother was doing everything she was doing to help us. And at that time, I started playing soccer. My grades started improving. I just started becoming a better overall student.

What role has your school community played in your success and you getting to where you are today?

The school administrators and the teachers did a very good job with helping me. They showed me that I could trust them, and I could definitely come and talk to them whenever I needed help. And if there were any issues, I could come to them as well. They showed that they cared and that really meant a lot to me.

What would your message be to students who have faced similar challenges?

I would say things get better. You need to find your groove and you need to find your people. Sometimes your parents don't understand what they're putting you through. And that's why having people who you can talk to is something that can take a lot of weight off your shoulders.



Region 16

Israel Tavera

Public Service Community School, Los Angeles USD

Israel Tavera grew up in a violent neighborhood filled with gangs, crime and drugs. That alone would be enough to create feelings of anxiety. But when a global pandemic was added to the mix, Israel realized he needed support. Overcoming the stigma that surrounds mental health, he turned to the counselors at Public Service Community School in Los Angeles Unified School District.

With their guidance, Israel was able to take advantage of the resources available to him and changed his trajectory in life. Now, he is paying it forward by helping others who are struggling with their own mental health battles.

What does it mean to you to win the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

It means a lot, actually, because people in this community don't really get much support. And never once did I think I would be a person to get that type of support. So, you know, I kind of do realize that the things I went through, weren't, you know, just for nothing. Now, that I'm actually being celebrated for it, and actually getting some type of support for it, it means a lot.

You grew up in what you have described as a tough community. How much did that shape who you are today?

In my community, it's almost like a given fact of life that it's going to be hard. And not hard in the way like, "Oh, life is just sad." No, life is difficult. It can be violent. It can be very unforgiving. You kind of grow up in this community with like, just a basic level anxiety. It's really weird. Because growing up, you just kind of know, things are dangerous around your area. There's a lot of gangs in this neighborhood. But it is also definitely a place where a lot of strong people come from. And I'm kind of proud to say I'm one of those people now.

What role did your school community play for you finding your success and helping you overcome that adversity?

Growing up in the school that I went to, that support was kind of always there. And maybe it's just the mindset everyone has here. Mental health resources were kind of stigmatized or seen as like, "If you reach out, you're just weak mentally." But I kind of argue the point that it takes a pretty strong person to reach out for help. So those resources were always there. In elementary school, they were there. In middle school, they were there. But it took me up until high school to really just, you know, reluctantly accept that help. And it was one of the best decisions I made.

For students who are dealing with challenges, especially some form of anxiety or depression, what would your advice be to them?

I wouldn't say I overcame everything. I still go through these very difficult phases in my life. I feel like some people kind of look up to me. And it's a weird feeling because I still see them as like I'm one of them. So, I don't really feel like I'm at a point to really give advice. But I have given advice to people. And it's not really about how difficult things get because it's always going to be difficult. It's always about how you get up from those things. If you fall 1,000 times, you better get up 1,001 times.



Region 17

Aisha De Roux

Loara High School, Anaheim Union HSD

Aisha De Roux has faced challenges her entire life. She was born with drugs in her system and to a mother who could not take care of her. Her junior year of high school, Aisha's adoptive mother died from stage four ovarian cancer. She found herself alone and struggling to cope with such a massive loss. Aisha found a safe haven at Loara High as a member of the women's basketball team. She describes the sport as her therapy and thanks her teammates for being the siblings she never had.

Can you explain some of the challenges you've faced growing up?

I grew up with an adopted mother. It was just me and her. And growing up, it was very lonely because I did not have any siblings. Towards the end of my freshman year, my mom got sick. And she moved into the hospital for quite some time. My grades started to go down. I started to fail a couple of classes. And the month before school ended, my mom passed away from stage four ovarian cancer. Going through this alone, without sharing this grief with anyone, it's been a challenge. But I've overcome it. And honestly, me from three years ago would be really proud because I honestly wouldn't believe that I would still be here, graduating and pushing forward.

After you lost your mother to cancer, how did you cope with that grief?

That feeling is just something that kind of never goes away. You grew up with this one person. And for them to just not be there anymore, it's definitely something that you have to try to get used to — that feeling of emptiness and loneliness. It's definitely made me learn how to grow up faster, because I feel like I've had to learn how to take care of myself.

What role did basketball play for you in finding that support system?

Throughout all the sports that I've done, basketball has made me feel completely different than any of the other sports. And I think basketball, just talking about it, it makes me smile. It's just this feeling of happiness that comes with the sport that I can't really explain. But it's been my therapy throughout everything.

What advice would you give to other students who have suffered a loss?

It will always be tough. But you just have to keep moving forward and try to stay positive. Even though you have all these people around you, at the end of the day, all you're going to have is yourself. And you have to be the one to push yourself forward. You have to be the one that thinks positively.



Region 18

Mario Rader

San Pasqual Academy, San Diego COE/JCCS

Mario Rader's story is one of great perseverance and triumph. The product of a broken home, Mario spent many nights homeless, often wondering when and where he would get his next meal. He entered foster care at the age of 11. But his life truly changed when he enrolled in San Pasqual Academy, a school for students in the foster care system. Mario found the family he had always wanted, excelling on both the football and basketball teams. In June, he graduated salutatorian from San Pasqual Academy and plans to attend Cal State San Marcos in the fall.

What was your reaction when you learned you won the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I was shocked. I was sitting in my counselor's office. He said, "Mario, look." I looked and we just started hugging and dancing. Good news is always the best news.

Can you explain what you've had to deal with throughout your childhood?

When you're moving home to home, you never unpack your bag because you don't know where you're going to be the next night or the night after that. I slept at a park a lot. And then sometimes people would come and just hand out food. We were sleeping in a five-seater car as a family of six. It was a struggle. When it came to eating, you ate at the church, you ate at school. It's really the only time you ate. And on the weekends, you really suffer.

How did the foster care system and your time at San Pasqual Academy change your trajectory?

It changed a lot of things. It allowed me to be a kid again. I went into this one foster home and they put me in flag football and from there, I fell in love with sports. A couple years later, I had the opportunity to go to San Pasqual Academy. I walked through those doors and there were three people waiting for me saying, "Welcome, Mario. This is San Pasqual Academy and we're going to be here to support you."



Region 19

Tiyani Ragoschke

Glen View High School, Beaumont USD

Tiyani Ragoschke has battled adversity her entire life. At the age of 15, she ran away from home to escape a physically abusive household. She turned to drugs and alcohol to escape the pain from her home environment. Tiyani arrived at Glen View High School in need of a fresh start and a way to recover credits. Thanks to a supportive staff and a loving foster mother, she forged a new path toward success. And in June, Tiyani graduated from high school with future plans to become a photographer.

What does it mean to you to win the ACSA Every Student Succeeding award?

I was very shocked when I won the award. I had no idea I had been nominated. When I found out, I was excited to tell my parents. Winning the award made me feel really proud of myself.

For the people who don't know your story, can you share some of the challenges you faced throughout your childhood and how you overcame them?

I didn't have the best childhood. And because of that, I ended up turning to drugs and alcohol for an escape from reality. I overcame that with a lot of help. I got into foster care. And my foster mom helped me with everything. My principal helped me with everything. And I have a bunch of brand-new friends who have helped me a lot, too.

How much did your foster mom and foster family help change your trajectory in life?

My mom just told me that I was loved and that sometimes not everything was going to go my way. But I just needed to trust her and know that I was loved and safe with her.

What role did your school community play in helping you find success?

When I first came to Glen View High, I wasn't really happy about it. But my principal, Dr. Carr, helped me a lot just by talking to me and being there for me. My teachers helped me a lot, too, by letting me know I could graduate early and all the things I could do at Glen View.

What advice would you give to students facing similar challenges? What's your message to them?

Change will come eventually. It might not come right away, but slowly and surely, it will come. It's just going to take some time to get there.

2023

Adult Ed

Ri'Keishia Seward

Highlands Community Charter and Technical Schools

Ri'Keishia Seward is a learner and student with HCCTS California Innovative Career Academy. Focused, persistent, and bright are just a few words to best describe her. She enrolled in Highlands Community Charter in July 2022 with transfer credits and has since added an impressive 35 credits to her academic record.

Ri'Keishia faced a number of challenges as a teenager, including helping to parent her younger siblings and becoming pregnant at the age of 16. She was forced to drop out of school, overwhelmed with raising her brothers and now a son of her own. By age 19, through hard work and family support, she was able to secure her first apartment, but the thought of completing her high school education lingered.

Over the years, she worked unfavorable jobs to support her now two sons, brothers and herself. She deferred her hopes of completing school to ensure her sons graduated from high school. Her efforts paid off and she watched her sons graduate and secure employment. She then decided it was her turn.

Ri'Keishia is looking forward to pursuing a career as a Medical Assistant/CNA.



Adult Ed

Cecilia Delgado

LAUSD/DACE – Harbor Occupational Center

Cecilia Delgado has faced and overcome many obstacles in her career as a student. Leaving her family in Mexico and coming to California was one of the most difficult challenges in Cecilia's life. Particularly challenging was the language barrier — the frustration and isolation of not speaking English. She was finally able to enroll in an ESL program at the Harbor Occupational Center in San Pedro. She received her U.S. Citizenship thanks to a citizenship class she took at Banning Adult School in Wilmington, and found steady work as a hotel housekeeper.

As Cecilia became more fluent in English, she was promoted first to Housekeeping Supervisor and then to assistant manager of the hotel. Because her writing skills improved, she was given more responsibility, including processing payroll for the hotel employees. Undaunted by a pandemic layoff, Cecilia took online courses to expand her computer skills and found other work until she was finally rehired back to her assistant manager position.

In March 2023, Cecilia completed ESL Level Six. When she started working at her hotel job over 20 years ago, she couldn't understand anything at the staff meetings. Now, she translates for her manager. She is currently enrolled in the Hi Set Prep Class at Harbor Occupational Center. After she gets her High School Diploma, she plans to take management classes in college. Her goal is to one day become a hotel manager.



Region 1

Claire DeLoge

Foothill High School, Shasta Union High School District

Claire DeLoge's childhood was anything but stable. Growing up in a tumultuous environment, Claire says she felt ashamed and embarrassed about her home life. She battled anxiety and depression, often blaming herself for her upbringing. But with the support of friends and a determination to break free from the cycle, Claire found hope in the classroom. School became her sanctuary, providing a respite from the chaos at home. She graduated in June and plans to enroll at Shasta College.



Region 2

Jacqueline Casanova

Roseville Adult School, Roseville Joint Union High School District

Jacqueline Casanova's journey is a testament to her resilience and fortitude. Her life has been marked by challenges, from foster care at 13 to becoming a teenage mother and taking custody of her siblings. In 2019, Jacqueline was in a car accident and was later diagnosed with syringomyelia, a rare spinal disorder. Unfazed, she pursued her diploma at Roseville Adult School while battling health issues and navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. Jacqueline is now working on a degree in psychology from Southern New Hampshire University. Her goal is to help support at-risk youth and their families.



Region 3

Emanuel Reyes

SAVA Power Inn, Gateway Community Charters

Emanuel Reyes has transformed his life from a path filled with darkness and danger to one of purpose and growth. Despite a troubled upbringing surrounded by drugs and violence, "Rey" discovered his love for boxing and found solace in the ring. Through self-reflection and sheer determination, he has embraced his new life and now serves as a mentor for others. He credits his younger sister, Evelyn, for motivating him to get his life together. Rey plans to attend American River College in the fall and hopes to pursue a professional career in boxing.



Region 4

Jadyn Diaz

Ukiah High School, Ukiah Unified School District

Jadyn Diaz has shown tremendous strength in the face of adversity. An avid basketball player, Jadyn faced setbacks when she was diagnosed with multiple hereditary exostoses (MHE), a rare genetic bone disease. Despite multiple surgeries, she always found a way to return to the court as a member of the Ukiah girls basketball team. Tragedy struck in June of 2021 when Jadyn's mother passed away after a battle with breast cancer. Her mother's selflessness left an indelible mark as Jadyn carries on her legacy. She will attend UC Santa Cruz in the fall and hopes to pursue a career as a radiologist.



Region 5

Reem Rahmaoui

Lowell High School, San Francisco Unified School District

Reem Rahmaoui is the product of two countries and two unique cultures. She was born in San Francisco but moved to Morocco at an early age. Reem lived with her grandparents in what she described as a close-knit community. In 2017, she returned to the United States but struggled adjusting to her new life. One year later, Reem’s father died from a heart attack. But with the help of her mother and her school community, Reem persevered through her tragic loss. She plans to honor her father’s memory by becoming a surgeon.



Region 7

Cayla Harang

Mountain House High School, Lammersville Unified School District

Cayla Harang’s indomitable spirit drives her against all odds. When she was just 14 years old, she learned she was pregnant with her daughter, Royalty. With unwavering strength, she embraced the role of a young mother while refusing to let go of her passion for basketball. She starred at Mountain House High and earned a coveted spot on Jason Kidd’s Select AAU team. With Royalty as her guiding light, Cayla shattered expectations. This fall, she’ll take her talents to the University of La Verne to play basketball for the Leopards.



Region 8

Caleb Barefield

SVCTE & Santa Teresa High School, MetroEd & ESUHSD

Caleb Barefield’s love for baking started at a young age. Despite facing challenges due to his autism diagnosis, Caleb enrolled in the culinary program at Silicon Valley Career Technical Education. In the chaotic and bustling kitchen, he initially struggled to adjust to his new environment. But with the support of his educators and classmates, he gained confidence and independence. Through hard work and perseverance, Caleb accomplished his goal of passing the food safety certification. His dream is to pursue a career in the culinary industry.



Region 9

Joshua Jones

Kerman High School, Kerman Unified School District

Joshua Jones has defied expectations his entire life. Born in China, he lived in an orphanage with 300 other children from the ages of 6 to 11. When Charlie and Toni Jones adopted Joshua on Dec. 8, 2014, they brought him home to the United States. He overcame the language barrier and underwent surgeries on his legs so he could use a walker. Joshua’s greatest passion is basketball and he’s an active member of his wheelchair basketball team. He says the sport has given him a newfound sense of confidence. Supported by his loving Kerman community, Joshua’s resilience and determination continue to fuel his remarkable journey.



Region 10

Julia Magdei

Hollister High School, San Benito High School District

Julia Magdei is a walking miracle. On September 18, 2021, Julia suffered a ruptured brain aneurysm at a friend's party. During surgery, doctors discovered a life-threatening and inoperable AVM (arteriovenous malformation). Despite the setbacks, her determination shone through as she regained her abilities to speak, walk, read, write and perform everyday tasks. While she has a long road ahead in her recovery, Julia's journey showcases her unwavering spirit, reminding everyone that no obstacle is insurmountable.



Region 11

Ramiro Martin

Tulare Union High School, Tulare Joint Union High School District

Ramiro Martin lives his life with purpose. In May 2022, he lost his mother to liver cancer. But before she died, he made his mother one last promise: that he would graduate from high school. This past June, Ramiro stayed true to his word by earning his diploma from Tulare Union High School. He plans to attend Victor Valley College in the fall where he hopes to pursue a career in construction management.



Region 12

Gilbert Lievanos

Hillside High School, Upland Unified School District

When Gilbert Lievanos arrived at Hillside High, he was in danger of not graduating. Faced with a challenging childhood and a lack of motivation at his old school, he transferred to Hillside High, a credit recovery school for struggling students. But Gilbert found much more than that thanks to the small school environment filled with supportive educators. On June 8, Gilbert accomplished his goal when he earned his diploma from Hillside High. He already has a new goal in his sights as he plans to pursue a career in engineering.



Region 13

Destiny Hernandez

Santa Barbara High School, Santa Barbara Unified School District

Destiny Hernandez is proof that it's never too late to change your path for the better. In junior high, Destiny acknowledged she was not making the most of her potential. But thanks to the support and guidance of Hope Elementary School District superintendent Anne Hubbard, Destiny embraced a fresh start at Santa Barbara High. She also realized the importance of setting a positive example for her younger siblings. Determined to provide them with a better future, Destiny has thrived in her new environment and now has her sights set on college where she plans to major in criminology.



Region 14

Aria Wilson

Ernie Pyle Elementary School, Bellflower Unified School District

Aria Wilson’s story of heroism is nothing short of spectacular. In the summer of 2021, her little brother was playing outside near the family’s apartment complex and ran into the parking lot. Aria selflessly darted towards danger, prioritizing her brother’s safety above all else. Unfortunately, Aria was hit by a car and broke her hip so severely she needed a metal plate and screws inserted so she could walk again. Despite her challenges, her enthusiasm persisted, thanks in part to her friends and educators at Ernie Pyle Elementary. Aria’s act of courage showcases the strength and bravery residing within even the youngest among us.



Region 15

Fabian Llanes

Workman High School, Hacienda La Puente Unified School District

Fabian Llanes is proof that if you have a dream and want it badly enough, you can make it happen. Born in Sinaloa, Mexico, Fabian quickly developed a love of basketball. The United States is the birthplace of the sport and Fabian had his sights set on competing against the best. In 2021, in the middle of a global pandemic, he packed his bags and moved to California. Amid housing insecurities, he found stability from Workman High basketball coach/counselor Martin Flores. Fabian credits his coach for not only finding him a home, but also becoming a part of his family.



Region 16

Hector Ceballos

Ben Franklin Senior High School, Los Angeles Unified School District

Hector Ceballos grew up in a tough neighborhood in northeast Los Angeles. His childhood was filled with neglect as both of his parents were not present in his life. But Hector found a family through football. It provided an escape from his struggles at home. Hector excelled at wide receiver for the Franklin High Panthers. In 2021, he set a City Section record with 27 receptions in a game. He finished the season with 111 catches for more than 1,500 yards and 19 touchdowns. Hector credits his teammates, coaches and educators at Franklin High for keeping him in the classroom and off the streets.



Region 17

Samantha Runge

Cypress High School, Anaheim Union High School District

Samantha Runge has suffered too much for a young woman her age. In 2013, her father tragically died after a long battle with addiction. Samantha found stability with her new guardians. But in 2020, tragedy struck again when her brother suffered a life-altering brain injury after a skateboarding accident. Samantha persevered thanks in part to the educators at Cypress High. Through it all, her spirit never wavered. In May, she fulfilled her dream and earned her high school diploma.



Region 18

Karla Machado

Meadows Union Elementary, Meadows Union School District

Karla Machado knows what it is like to suffer immense loss. In 2020, Karla's 5-year-old brother, Marco, was diagnosed with a brain tumor. A year later, Marco lost his battle with cancer. Despite the devastating loss of her brother, Karla found solace in the support of her community and the belief that he is now in a better place. Through this hardship, Karla says she learned to appreciate even the smallest blessings in life, and she constantly reminds herself to cherish every moment here on earth.



Region 19

Christinie Spears

Palm Springs High, Palm Springs Unified School District

Christinie Spears' childhood was filled with immense loss. She suffered through the deaths of both her father and mother. And in October 2020, her older brother, Nicholas, passed away in a car crash. But Christinie would not allow these tragedies to define her life. She wants to make her family proud and uses their memories to keep moving forward. Christinie plans to attend UC Berkeley in the fall and major in psychology. She wants to become a clinical psychologist so she can help young teens and adolescents who do not have the best support systems. She sees this profession as a calling.