

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Educational Development Center

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On Social?

So are we!



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Live Unified!



JS Student Aiden Gamez

Though he's only 11 years old, Aiden Gamez has already had a book published, has contributed to many international art projects and has recently acted in his film debut. Aiden and his mom and dad, Kathleen Day Gomez and Joe Gomez, moved to Alamo Heights a little over a year ago. Aiden went to Cambridge Elementary for 5th grade and it was there that two of



his teachers, Ms. Kelly Masters and Ms. Karen Shellnut, befriended him. It's a friendship that is still strong; Aiden keeps up with both of them via social media. Neither Aiden nor his parents think that his diagnosis of autism is a hindrance. They celebrate and encourage Aiden's gifts and coach him through his weaknesses. Ms. Gomez helps Aiden by homeschooling him over the summers and keeping him engaged in community and international art projects. She says, "art keeps him focused, teaches social skills and boosts his confidence and self esteem."

The art also serves as creative therapy for Aiden. At school, given the opportunity, Aiden can be



"...adding visual to an area that relies so much on auditory information helps his communication grow immensely."

found doodling, drawing and dreaming up stories. In addition to his artistic talent, Aiden has a wonderful imagination. It's that lively imagination that led him to write a children's book about the adventures of a tattered ball which he names Mr. Baggish and becomes his best friend. While Aiden has much to share with the world, his biggest challenge is verbal communication. Aiden is low-verbal and that sometimes leads to frustration when he's

misunderstood; it also inhibits his ability to make friends and socialize with peers. Speech therapist Karyn Shellnut, shares the following, "When I first learned about Aiden's talents as an artist, I knew that tapping into his ability to visualize things in a unique way would help in his growth in communication. For Aiden, adding visuals to an area that relies so much on auditory information helps his communication grow immensely. Giving him two methods to express himself (i.e. drawing what he is talking about AS he is talking) increases his ability to make himself understood. Aiden is such a brilliantly talented kiddo.... I LOVE seeing the visualization of words coming to life!" The fact that Aiden has

another medium to communicate is a lifeline; he can communicate so much through his art. Aiden doesn't only work in tactile mediums, he's also very interested in animation and has taught himself how to incorporate technology. He looks to his inspiration, Jim Henson, as a role model for a possible future career. Aiden has also collaborated with family members (mom Kat Day and cousin Madyson) on a recent film for which his friend, Keith Leach, composed part of the musical score.

Being creative is a way of life for Aiden and his family. Aiden loves to cook, so his dad, who is a personal chef, guides and teaches him in the kitchen. Kat Day and Joe hope that Aiden continues to be exactly who he is and that he finds value, joy and meaning in his life. For Kat Day, that means that she hopes he is able to make a living doing all of the things he's passionate about- drawing, animating, sculpting, writing, whatever creative medium he enjoys. She wants others to know that autism is "NOT a weakness". She believes it can be a gift to others because of the new perspective it offers. With regard to Aiden, she wants people to know HIM and all of the things he's capable of and not merely see a label or diagnosis. Ms. Gomez says of her son, "I hope Aiden's story inspires folks to never judge... and appreciate [Aiden] by truly getting to know him".



Woodridge Elementary

Erika Avalos, SST Teacher

The 2021-2022 school year has brought new faces to Woodridge AND brought back the SST classroom. SST, or Student Support Team, is a class for students in Special Education who receive additional help, often one-on-one, to ensure the best educational outcomes. The curriculum is individualized and tailored to each student's academic levels and for his/her goals. The SST program was last at Woodridge during the 2016-2017 school year and has been combined on the Cambridge campus until this

school year. The district saw the growth in the program and the need to bring the SST program back to Woodridge this school year and hired Ms. Erika Avalos as the lead teacher.



Ms. Avalos is beginning her teaching career in AHISD but she has a lot of experience working with special populations. While finishing her last semester of high school, Ms. Avalos was part of a program called “Ready, Set, Teach,” a teaching internship for aspiring teachers. One of the students in the classroom she was assigned to had autism. When a clinician observed her interactions with the student, she invited Erika to come to the clinic to observe an ABA session; Erika was intrigued and was offered a job at the clinic. The experience with children with learning differences inspired her to change her major from general education to special education. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood through 12th grade Special Education from Texas A&M, Corpus Christi. She teaches English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR), Math, Social Studies, Life Skills and social and functional skills to her

students along with the help of a team of 5 instructional assistants. The assistants play a vital role as many of them have worked with the students for a number of years and have rapport with both the student and their respective family. They help bridge the gap for Erika by filling her in about each student. Erika wants to build a relationship with the parents of her students and works at keeping them apprised of what happens in the classroom, including putting out a monthly newsletter to highlight the activities she and her students are engaged in while at school. She also encourages parents to ask lots of questions and seek clarification on anything they're unsure about; she welcomes emails, texts and calls during her conference period. Aside from academics and social skills, Ms. Avalos is also integrating character education by giving her students the opportunity to serve their peers by distributing Snack Paks every week. Of her experience teaching so far, Erika says she enjoys being part of the "small moments when my students make strides towards their goals and independence."

On a personal note, Erika is a native San Antonian and is the youngest of 5 and has a twin brother. Her family is her biggest support and she enjoys spending time with them to unwind. She also likes to go for walks, shop and watch horror movies. Ms. Avalos is happy to speak to parents during her conference period, everyday between 2:35-3:35.

Welcome Levi Charles Melngailis

Born 11/11/21 at 6:16 AM

Weight 7 lbs, 14 oz.

Length 20.75 inches

Welcomed to the family by Noah and Emily, Eliana (5) and family dogs, Marlowe and Dash.

Emily Melngailis assumed the role of Elementary Special Education Coordinator this school year and will return after some bonding time with baby Levi.





Cambridge Elementary

Cinthia de los Santos, SST Teacher

Cinthia de los Santos loves her job. You can see the excitement and joy (even while wearing a mask) when she's working with "her" students. Working in special education is all she's ever wanted to do; she knew it when she was a sophomore in high school after she had an interaction with a peer with special needs. It was an experience that

would launch her career path. Since graduating from college, Cinthia has worked for three years in a self-contained classroom, 2 years as a resource teacher (she started at Cambridge in the fall of 2019), one year of co-teaching 3rd grade along with providing in-class support (ICS) for a handful of bilingual 2nd graders. This year, her 7th year in education, she is one of two SST (Student Support Team) teachers at Cambridge. She teaches all subjects to her students ranging from 2nd to 5th grade as well as helping them develop more social and functional skills.

Cinthia loves that even though she's working with the same students, every day is different. She says of her role, "I know that my students are not only learning from me but I am also learning from them". With each student and new goal, Cinthia has the opportunity to hone her skills as a teacher and make modifications to the curriculum in order to best reach each student. It's certainly a challenge, but it's one Cinthia gladly accepts. She is a wonderful advocate for her students and encourages families to reach out and become participants in their child's education. Her ability to speak to some of her families in their preferred language of Spanish also helps solidify her as an ally parents can trust to improve their child's educational outcomes. Cinthia's humility and demeanor immediately put people at ease; these are traits that serve her well as an educator. Cinthia encourages parents to ask clarifying questions, both at ARDs or anytime they're unclear about a goal or specific acronyms, "Our terminology

can be confusing, but feel free to ask anything. All the ARD committee [members] are there to make the best possible plan for your child,” states Cinthia. She encourages communication between home and school; the best way to reach her is by email at cdelossantos@ahisd.net. She is available by appointment for conference between 8:15 and 9:10.

On a personal note, Cinthia hales from Brownsville, Texas where she went to school in an ESL classroom beginning in the 5th grade and later graduated from UT, Rio Grande Valley (formerly UT Brownsville). She has been married for three years and along with her husband, Roberto Flores, and lab mix Sydney and Huskey Anakin will soon be welcoming a baby boy whom they will name Benjamin Adriel. She regularly returns to Brownsville to visit family and loves to bake every sort of pastry.

Community Partners

Alamo Assistive Technology and Cambridge Elementary

Alamo Heights Speech-Language Pathologist, Karyn Shelnutz and Alamo AT (Assistive Technology) presented Cambridge Elementary's Jackson Bartlett with a brand new "talker" earlier this semester. Mrs. Shelnutz helped Jackson's family by applying for a grant through the Texas STAP program (Specialized Telecommunications Assistance Program) to provide Jackson with a

personalized, speech-generating Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) device. Jackson's friends at school love to talk with him using his device and his mom, Leata shared how much they depend on his "talker" at home, with other family members, friends and especially at H-E-B where he loves showing everyone what a great shopper he is! Our school is proud of the collaboration between Jackson's family, our staff and local businesses to help our students to become better communicators!



Alamo Heights Junior School

Karla Stanford; Unified PE Coach

If you had asked Laura Williamson what she thought her daughter's career would one day be, she would have probably given any number of professions *EXCEPT* an educator. Coach Stanford never enjoyed school, so the irony that she is now a teacher and coach is not lost on her. Upon reflection, she says that probably has much to do with the fact that none of her teachers took particular interest in her as a person or as a student. No one would say that about the type of teacher and coach Karla Stanford is. "Coach" knows each of her students by name and strives to have meaningful relationships with them.

Because of her outlook and disposition, it was a natural progression that coach Stanford was chosen to lead adaptive PE at her previous school in Cedar Hill ISD. Karla calls it a "happy accident". Happy accident indeed! Karla moved to San Antonio and began coaching at the JS three years ago, just at the time that the Unified Champions Club was forming under the guidance of Naomi Salcedo and Isabel Arranaga. The two had big dreams for the new club and when they learned that Coach Stanford had coached adaptive PE at her former middle school, they enlisted her to lead it at AHJS.

Exactly what is the big deal about adaptive PE, you may be asking. According to Special Olympics Northern California, Adaptive or Unified PE is "a unique opportunity for students of varying ability levels and backgrounds to come together on equal terms through ongoing fitness, sports, leadership and wellness activities". But Coach Stanford would have you know it's so much more. She believes that it's about bringing together students and teaching and practicing empathy and having true excitement each time they come together. Coach Stanford is a no-nonsense type of person, she'll tell you that "kids are kids" and she believes "*everyone* should have a chance to participate in activities designed to meet their unique abilities". With that in mind, she runs the adaptive PE class at the Junior School in parallel to the Special Olympic sport that is in season and adapts and modifies equipment and rules to best

meet the needs of the students. Students participate in bowling, basketball, tennis, soccer, track and lifetime games like ladder golf, washers and corn hole.

Coach Stanford's excitement about physical education is contagious. The mutual respect that the students have for one another is evident when you step into the Unified gym. Coach Stanford reflects, "I am amazed at not only my SST students but also the general education partners who treat their partners like they are the only person in the room". After visiting the class as a substitute on several occasions, I noticed that Coach Stanford ended every class by having the students sit in a large circle and share what their favorite part of class was. This seemingly small interaction empowers the students by letting them know that their opinion matters, and more importantly, that they matter. It comes as little surprise that Coach Stanford has been nominated as Teacher of the Year for the Junior School. The district TOTY will be announced at the next regularly scheduled board of trustees meeting on January 20th. Good luck to Coach Stanford!



Principal Laura Ancira congratulating Coach Stanford on Campus TOTY award.

2021-2022

Teacher of the Year Nominees

Patty Cruz, Kindergarten Teacher, HECC

Alejandra Martinez, 5th Grade Teacher, Cambridge

Kathy Caudill, Interventionist Teacher, Woodridge

Karla Stanford, Girls Athletic Coordinator and Coach, Alamo Heights Junior School

Isabella Martinez, Special Education Teacher, Alamo Heights High School.

Living UNIFIED

Alamo Heights HS has been a Unified Champions School since 2013 and became a Banner School in 2018, one of the first two schools in Texas, when it received the award from Special Olympics North America. Since then, the group has made many strides to educate typical students, teachers and staff about the importance of inclusion in *every* aspect of campus life and beyond. The members of Unified have forged genuine friendships and have had a lot of fun doing it. Below are a few of the highlights as submitted by members of the club.

Alamo Heights HS Unified Champions Friendsgiving

Alamo Heights Unified Champions is a club for students of all abilities, skills, and mindsets with the granted gift of inclusion and life-lasting friendships.

At Friendsgiving, we gathered together playing badminton, board games, coloring and even having an exhilarating dance party to the *Mamma Mia* soundtrack. In the backyard, some enjoyed bouncing on the trampoline and making their favorite animal sounds. When it was time for dinner, we sat around a table together sharing silly jokes and our excitement for Thanksgiving break.

Being a part of Unified is like being a part of a family. Everyone is so inclusive and loves one another. It brings me so much joy to see everyone and see such bright smiles on their faces. My favorite thing about Friendsgiving was being able to spend time with everyone, making new friends and memories and celebrating the giving of thanks with everyone I am very, very thankful for.

- Nyssa Salcedo



Christmas Cookie Party

By Mary Margaret Doggett

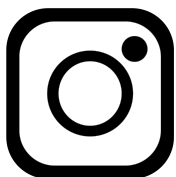
As the host of the Christmas party, I learned how to better understand how to make friends and share with those friends. As a leadership board, we planned a cookie swap for the party. I was very helpful with the cookies, but most of all decorating the ornaments. That is a great way of making good friends. My favorite time at the party was seeing everyone getting along with each other. I enjoyed hosting the Unified Christmas party for the first time.



On Thursday, November 4, the Alamo Heights High School Unified Theater program performed the play *James and the Giant Peach* by Roahl Dahl. Combining assistive technology with theater technology, microphones were linked to iPads for all the actors that utilize speech assistive technology. Pre-recorded lines were then instantly



projected to the speakers in the auditorium. Peer tutors and actors worked hand in hand to create this amazing show, working on enunciation, memorization of lines, and character movements. The production was a huge success, and it marks the longest production ever performed in our Unified Theater program.



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AHJS Unified Champions

The AHJS Unified Champions Club came together to spend some holiday fun and to spread some cheer. We decorated ornaments, ate yummy treats and signed holiday cards for children in need as our community service project. Here are some words from some of our members.

Ava Lopez, 8th grade (Co-President) - What are some of the things you have done in Unified that have been special to you?

I have enjoyed spending time with people that I know and meeting new friends like Ben Evans, my Co-President.

We have fun getting to know more people. Today we worked on a Community Service project signing cards for children who may not have a lot. We also made ornaments together where everyone added their own design. Unified is a great place for everyone to come together in a safe and comfortable way. Everyone is welcome.

Olivia Martinez 6th grade- I like the Unified Champions Club because we get to do activities with new friends. We are all unique and can learn so much from each other.

Matthew Roa 6th grade - I like being a part of Unified Champions Club. We do so many things together. It is a safe place to learn about each other and how we can help one another do better. Everyone is kind and wants to help. Our club is inclusive which means we can be ourselves in a safe environment.



New Faces at Robbins Academy



Carla Acosta is one of two new transition teachers at the 18+ program at Robbins this school year. Ms. Acosta is the Connects Special Education Teacher. The Connects program teaches vocational skills to students who have completed high school but can still profit from instruction in skills that will lead to employment. Carla has been a special educator for a total of 28 years and returns to San Antonio to teach in AHISD after working in the transition program in Ft. Worth ISD for 21 years. She says of her new position, “I’ve done transition for many years, but this is somewhat of a different role.”

Ms. Acosta first became interested in becoming a special education teacher as a ninth grader. She remembers that when she was in high school, the special education classrooms were in portable buildings, away from the general population. She felt the desire to help her peers and include them. This desire was solidified when she worked at Denton State School in college. Carla’s compassion is the force behind her continued dedication to her students. At Connects, she sees her job as “helping students explore the world of work, identify career pathways and build career development skills.” She enjoys providing opportunities for students to gain employability skills while partnering with businesses in the community to help prepare students for an easier transition- it’s a win-win for both the student and the businesses in our community. Carla says that the best reward is seeing her students becoming increasingly more independent.

Another transition-related topic that Carla is passionate about is the Medicaid Waiver interest lists. She’s a big proponent of getting individuals on the list as early as possible; these programs assist parents with transition planning for life after high school. She encourages parents to contact Alamo Area Council of Governments

(AACOG) and Alamo Local Authority for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (ALA) to go through the enrollment and eligibility process. (Parent Liaison, [Michelle Harrison](#) would be happy to get the applications to you as well.)

On a personal note, Carla and her family recently moved back to San Antonio (she taught in Northside ISD and San Antonio ISD previously). She has three children ranging in ages from 19-7. Her youngest child has autism and she feels fortunate that she can share what she's learned with her own son. She spends her free time with her family; therapy and camps for her son, shopping with her daughter and enjoying down time together. Summers offer an opportunity for family vacations and camps for her children.

Carla is happy to meet with parents who want more information about the transition process during her conference. She can be reached by email at cacosta@ahisd.net.

'09 Academy

The second "new face" at the Robbins Academy belongs to Louis Guerrero who is the new '09 Academy Teacher. The '09 Academy is housed at the Robbins Academy and is one of two programs offered for students who have completed high school but require more support and skill acquisition to improve their chances of success (see article above about Carla Acosta). The '09 Academy focuses on independent living and employability skills.

Before coming to Alamo Heights, Louis taught in Austin ISD, Northside ISD and Judson ISD. In addition to working in special education, he has been a computer and technical education teacher (CTE). This role combines his experiences from both areas and enables Louis to help his students gain real world



experience in order to hold a job. Louis is enjoying getting to know his students and watching them grow and progress. He invites parents to reach out with any questions they may have or to schedule a conference after 2:30 any day of the week.

Louis is originally from Austin, but he and his family (his wife Erika teaches at AHHS) have lived in San Antonio for 8 years. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Spanish from Texas State University and is a carpenter by trade. In his spare time he enjoys woodworking, fishing, listening to live music and traveling.

Congratulations, Graduate!

Long overdue congratulations to our very own Dr. Elizabeth Rokowski, who defended her doctoral thesis, “Understanding the Complexities of the IEP Goal Writing Process: A Case Study of Special Education Teachers” in the midst of the pandemic (over Zoom!) last fall, while expecting her 3rd child, Scott (it seems double congratulations are in order). “Rokowski” as her students know her, is now a Doctor of Education with a concentration in Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Leadership. Both her extended family and her school family are so proud of her accomplishments and grateful she chooses to serve students in our district.

Baby Scott was born to Libby and Alex on April 18, 2021 weighing 7 lbs, 6 oz. and measuring 21”. Big brother Jack and big sister Kate love their sweet brother.



Fall 2021

Parent Liaison

Michelle Harrison

As we wrap up the fall semester and close out the calendar, I can't help but reflect on the past year. The last 22 months since Covid-19 entered our everyday vocabulary have been both excruciatingly slow *and* a blur. The amount of time we've spent sitting in the unknown or in sadness has passed at a snail's pace as we've waited for an end to Covid. It's also been a time that seems to have slipped through our fingers, (I keep asking myself how I could possibly have a senior and a freshman). Our world, nation and even communities have experienced divisiveness but, at least in my small circle, I believe we are beginning to see more compassion, more desire to understand and respect one another, in spite of our differences.

I've had the opportunity to learn from parents who celebrate their children as unique and talented individuals, despite diagnoses. I have seen young people dedicate themselves to advocate for those with physical and developmental disabilities. I have had the joy of seeing respect and empathy modeled by so many teachers and students in our district. It has been my sincere privilege to bear witness to the relationships that are unfolding between students with varying abilities in both the Junior and High Schools. I see in those students what I hope will be future teachers, therapists, artists, writers, scientists but more importantly compassionate *people*, regardless of their "success". I hope that the friendships that are being formed in the Unified Champion Clubs and in the peer tutor program are the beginning of life-long friendships. I hope that every partner takes with them a sense that their life is better because of knowing someone who, though they may look a little different on the surface, is just like them. In all, I'm encouraged by the compassion of the people in our district who genuinely care for the well being and success of our kids; I hope this newsletter shines a light on some of them.

Grace and Peace,

Michelle

