

ALUMNI NEWS

BSS ALUMNI - GRADUATE SCHOOL

BY GENOVEVA CORTES

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PEDRO MENDEZ

SHCA ALUMNUS, 2016
 CSUN ALUMNUS, PUBLIC HEALTH 2020
 CSUN MASTER'S STUDENT: PUBLIC HEALTH IN APPLIED EPIDEMIOLOGY
 PROJECTED GRADUATION: 2026



Pedro has always been curious about health and the well-being of individuals. It wasn't until he became older that he started to think more deeply about how health disparities impacts the well-being of his community as well as other communities: the burden of disease, mental health issues, and lack of access to care to name a few. "Since I was a child, I was interested in the field of health promotion and educating the public on issues that may affect their well-being in the community they live in."

As the first person in his family to go to college and graduate, this CSUN alumnus has plans to expand his knowledge as a public health professional. He will return to CSUN this fall 2023 to start his Master's program in Public Health in Applied Epidemiology.

Pedro's experience at CSUN was largely positive, he made good friends mostly from his major, and enjoyed the routine of college life: going to class, studying, working on weekends at a restaurant, and socializing with his friends. Some aspects of college were hard but Pedro rose to the challenge and overcame all the obstacles that came his way. "These experiences shaped me into the person I am today."

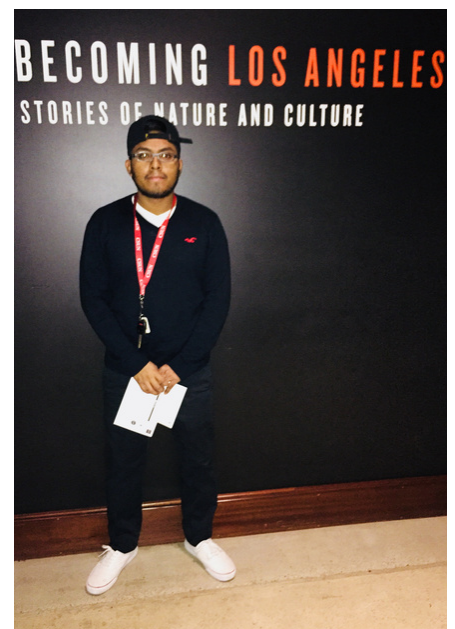
Prior to the start of the Covid pandemic in early 2020, Pedro was volunteering at SHCA's sister school in the San Fernando Valley, VAHS, for a program called Peer Health Exchange which aims to teach health education to freshmen students on health topics ranging from sexual health, advocating for your own health, as well as mental health promotion. "It was a nerve wracking experience for me to be teaching 9th graders for the first time but it taught me a valuable lesson such as how to communicate more effectively to students and to immerse myself with improving students health."

FUTURE EPIDEMIOLOGIST

During his last semester at CSUN, Pedro interned for the LA County Department of Public Health as a Contact Tracer for Covid-19. He would be assigned the challenging task of contacting people who had tested positive for Covid, gather information about them, ask about and document their symptoms, and inquire if family members were around them during their exposure. He also provided advice to them on quarantine and isolation guidelines, sent them helpful resources they would need, all while ensuring HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) compliance which protects their privacy. At the conclusion of his internship, Pedro made a collage board of what he learned and gave a formal presentation about his experience.

So what exactly does an Epidemiologist do, you might ask? They collect and analyze health data so that they can investigate health issues affecting an area. They also communicate their findings to other health professionals so that they can influence health policy. Once Pedro graduates with his Master's degree, he hopes to work for the city of LA, LA County, or the state of California as an epidemiologist. A big aspiration of his is to one day work for the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia.

On a personal note, Pedro tries to keep himself in good health by eating "clean" and exercising. "Some Mexican Americans tend to come here and overeat due to the high content of high sugar and high fat found in many foods. I want to make sure my community is healthy and lives a long time. As the saying goes, your health is your wealth!"



BY MIKE CARRERA

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SHCA CLASS OF 2018-2022

DANIELA ESTRADA

SHCA ALUMNA 2021
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

MAJOR: PUBLIC POLICY AND RACE, DIASPORA, AND INDIGENEITY

What is your major?

I'm currently a double major and I'm majoring in Public Policy and Race Diaspora and Indigeneity. Initially, I wanted to become a lawyer but that quickly changed after taking a few classes. I realized that it wasn't something I enjoyed. I'm still trying to figure out what I truly want to do but I'm leaning toward public policy. I'm passionate about education and supporting underprivileged communities. I can see myself working at the administrator level to implement new ideas that better serve students. That might be a few years down the road but I'm currently trying to learn and prepare myself when the time comes.

What is the hardest part about moving to Chicago?

When I arrived at the University of Chicago it was overwhelming because it was an environment where there are a lot of students that come from privileged backgrounds. Some people came here for fun, but I on the other hand am here to change the trajectory of my life. Initially, I did struggle socially and academically because I felt that I wasn't smart enough or I wasn't saying the right things. I definitely dealt with impostor syndrome. That changed when I started to find friends on campus. I joined clubs like the Organization of Latin American Students and the Council on the University Programming Organization. Finding a support system on campus has been helpful because I can't drive home on the weekends. In a sense, they've become my family in Chicago. In addition, I see students who have a similar background as me and I tell myself "If they can survive in rigorous academic environments, so can I."



What recommendations would you give students who are considering studying out of Los Angeles?

I would say do it. The world has so much to offer and one of the ways to see it is by living in different parts of California or the US. I remember being a senior at BSSCA and some of my friends would say that their parents wouldn't let them move out. At the end of the day, it's your life and it's okay to take the leap of faith. Since I've been in Chicago I've had the opportunity to meet different people from different cultural backgrounds. I recently tried some really good Cuban and Cajun food with some friends from school. I also had the opportunity to try some really good jerk chicken, which was delicious.

What was one of the reasons you decided to attend the University of Chicago?

UChicago was one of the few schools that accepted me. I also got into UCSD, but I was still going to be paying \$12,000/year out of pocket. Choosing UChicago was easy for me given it was a top-10 school and they gave me a full ride as an Odyssey Scholar. Also, since I'm interested in public policy, the Harris School of Public Policy has many resources and opportunities for me to pursue both academically and professionally. I think a major factor was me wanting to venture beyond California, which I recommend everyone should try to do if they can. Ultimately, I thought Chicago was a pretty cool place beforehand and knew that going to university here would give me newfound experiences to meet new people and explore new places.

VAHS CLASS OF 2018-2022

ASHLEY RODRIGUEZ

VAHS ALUMNA 2019
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE
MAJOR: SPEECH LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY
PROJECTED GRADUATION: MAY 2023



Ashley Rodriguez has a long history of connection to Valor Academy and the east central region of the San Fernando Valley. Her parents both immigrated to the United States before Ashley was born and settled in the Panorama City neighborhood of Los Angeles. Ashley cites her parents as one of her guiding inspirations from a very young age, "My parents are the strongest, most hard-working people. I admire them greatly for their determination and hard work to provide our family with the lives that they couldn't have."

One of the *best* decisions that Ashley's parents made came at an early age. When Ashley was 11 years old, her parents decided to send her to Valor Academy Middle School, which had only been in existence for two years prior to her enrollment in the 5th grade. Ashley has had many friendships that have persisted for over a decade since she started in Valor. Many of her classmates from Valor joined Ashley on the path to continuing their education at California State University, Northridge. Ashley matriculated to Northridge in the fall of 2019 and began her journey as an "Exploratory" major, which is CSUN's term for a person that is "undeclared."

Although initially Ashley admitted the transition from a small high school to a large university was a bit difficult, she acknowledged that the new opportunities she was exposed to were exciting as well. Academically, Ashley credits Valor's rigorous curriculum with helping to prepare her for more advanced coursework in college. "After taking several AP courses at Valor, it better prepared me for the courses I would take [while in college]."

Throughout her freshman and sophomore year, Ashley's academic trajectory was focused on completing her general education requirements. She took classes in subjects ranging from Anthropology and Biology to History and American Politics. She really hit her stride - making the Dean's List for the first time during the fall of her sophomore year. It would not be the last time that Ashley found her way onto the honor roll. Eventually Ashley would find her passion in the study of communication disorders. After her sophomore year, she decided that would be her major, and that she wanted to focus specifically on Speech Language Pathology. As a junior she took her first class that was specifically designed for her major area: Speech & Language Development.



By her senior year Ashley was really hitting her academic and social/emotional stride. In the Fall of 2022 she took a class entitled "Fluency Disorders" and credits her experience in this class with the decision that she is making to pursue a graduate degree in Speech & Language pathology. In Ashley's words, "In this class I learned about people who stutter and what kind of obstacles that creates in their everyday lives. This [class] was an eye-opener and made me more aware of the challenges they experience."

Throughout her seven years at Valor and four years at CSUN one thing has remained consistent and that is Ashley's dedication to her education. She has always been at the top of her class, and all the while remained a beacon of positivity and a model of consistency. The advice that she leaves to current Valor students echoes this sentiment: "Always push yourself to keep going; it's OK to make mistakes along the way. What is important is to know that you gave it your all."

RKHS CLASS OF 2020-2022

KENIA JURADO NAVARRETE

RKHS ALUMNA 2022
SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY
MAJOR: FORENSIC SCIENCE WITH A
CONCENTRATION IN CSI

March is an important month for many seniors as they are waiting to hear back from the colleges they applied to. Kenia remembers being one of those students last year: waiting in anticipation to hear back from colleges and finally making a decision. She is now in her first year at San Jose State University majoring in Forensic Science with a concentration in Crime Scene Investigation (CSI).

Kenia was an active student at RKHS as she was involved in a lot of sports. She had to be very disciplined with her schedule in order to keep up with her extracurricular activities and classes. She is now in her second semester in college and she continues to learn the importance of time management. She mentioned that although she is taking fewer classes than in high school, the classes are more challenging and she needs to spend more time outside of the classroom studying for them. She is taking advantage of tutoring and other resources that have helped her keep up with her assignments and those habits. Another resource she has taken advantage of is the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) which is designed to improve students' academic support of first generation students. She likes that part of the program provides her with a peer mentor who she can turn to for guidance and who also understands what she is going through.



College life can be different than when in high school. For many students, especially as a first generation college student, it can be challenging to adjust to the college environment, meeting new people, taking rigorous courses and figuring yourself out. For Kenia she has had time to adjust to a new environment that she is enjoying. She loves living at the dorms and meeting new people. Building a community has been important. She also joined a sorority that has helped her find a home away from home. However, not everything has been great and there have been a couple of hiccups on the roads that she wishes she knew about while in high school to better prepare herself. Lectures have a lot more students than her classes at RKHS, and professors are no longer reminding her about due assignments that are coming up. She has taken it on herself to ask questions to ensure she is doing better.

One of her favorite spots on campus is the library on the 8th floor because she is able to see the entire city of San Jose. It is a space where she likes to go study and can reserve study rooms to study with others. College has reshaped her perspective about her future. She thinks carefully about every decision she makes whether it is choosing classes, the professors she is taking, or passing an exam.

A piece of advice Kenia has is "time management is a big thing and everyone needs to learn to manage their time." She has learned a lot through her college journey thus far and wants to continue learning.



BRIGHT STAR SCHOOLS

ALUMNI SUPPORT & COLLEGE SUCCESS TEAM

All Bright Star Schools Alums, high school graduates, will be supported in graduating from college for up to 6 years. Our goal is for our Alumni to earn a Bachelor's, Associate's, Career Technical Education degree, or workforce development certificate from an accredited college or program. If you are a BSS Alumni from the class of 2016-2021, we will be there to help you navigate, thrive, and succeed in graduating from higher education.



MIKE CARRERA

BA, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE
M.ED. AND PPS, UNIVERSITY OF LA VERNE

SHCA ASCS COORDINATOR
SUPPORTING CLASS OF 2018 - 2022
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Mike Carrera has worked in education for over seven years, five of which have been at Bright Star Schools. Mike is a first-generation college graduate and earned his Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of California, Riverside in Latin American Studies and History. He also earned his Pupil Personnel Services credential and Master's in Education degree in 2019 in Education Counseling from the University of La Verne. Throughout the years, Mike has held various roles at BSSCA and has assisted students and families on multiple levels. He is passionate about supporting the student body at BSSCA and is a firm believer that higher education can positively shift a student's life and career choices. As the new ASCS Coordinator, Mike is determined to assist all SHCA Alums in navigating higher education and in contributing to students' success in college and career.

We will be hiring Dominique Romero in mid March to serve as our ASCS CC & CTE Coordinator. More details to come...



KYLE PETRIE

BA, BOWDOIN COLLEGE

VAHS ASCS COORDINATOR
SUPPORTING CLASS OF 2018 - 2022
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As the ASCS Coordinator at Valor Academy High School, Kyle's primary responsibilities revolve around ensuring that all Valor alumni receive adequate support with the financial, academic, and social-emotional concerns that they face while pursuing higher education. Kyle is primarily motivated by the belief that higher education is the foundation that will allow our students to be successful and happy in both their careers and personal lives. He has worked in urban public education for over 13 years. He initially entered the field as a high school history teacher in the Bronx, NY, as part of Teach For America. After his time in New York, Kyle spent seven years as an AP teacher, advisor, coach, and Director of Alumni Support at Gary Comer College Prep on Chicago's south side.



KIMBERLY ARTEAGA

BA, UC SAN DIEGO

RKHS ACSC COORDINATOR
SUPPORTING CLASS OF 2020-2022
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Kimberly Arteaga received her B.A. in Human Development and minor in Chicana/o studies from UC San Diego. She was born and raised in LA and the first one in her family to go to college and graduate. She has been supporting students in higher education, college access and retention programs for over 7 years. Part of her passion for working with students comes from her own-lived experiences. Through her multiple roles she has supported and guided high school and college students attaining a higher education and beyond. She has also worked with community members and parents in supporting students achieving their hopes and dreams. Kimberly is excited to continue working with students in her current role as the RKHS Alumni Support and College Success Coordinator.

GENOVEVA CORTES

BA, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES
M.ED. HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

ASCS DIRECTOR
SUPPORTING SHCA & VAHS CLASS OF 2017
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Geno developed and launched Bright Star's ASCS Program to support the organization's alumni to persist in and graduate from higher education. ASCS tracks, supports, and coaches Bright Star Schools' alumni to get to and through higher education, with a goal of 55% of Bright Star Schools alumni graduating with a bachelor's or associate's degree, vocational certificate, or from a workplace development program within six years of high school graduation. She has over two decades of experience working as an elementary and middle school teacher, K-12 and college administrator, and program coordinator. She was Bright Star Schools' founding math teacher for Stella Middle Charter Academy in 2003, and currently serves as the Director of the Alumni Support and College Success (ASCS) Program for the organization.

