

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Educational Development Center

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James Ramirez

Copy contributed by his family.



Lily Gnam and James Ramirez at Challenger Baseball

Save the Date

**1/5/21 Virtual
Transition Conference**

**1/26/21
Communication with
your ARD team virtual
training**

James (or “Jake” to his family) Ramirez is a senior at Alamo Heights High School. Despite the challenges he’s faced in his life, those who know him best know that his POSITIVITY is his SUPERPOWER. It is the key to his friendly personality, his warm smile, and his kind heart. James was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD), mild Intellectual Disability (ID), and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). He has had two open heart surgeries and continues to be monitored for his now stable heart condition. In spite of these challenges, James is unstoppable. His infectious personality energizes and



motivates people wherever he goes. This is true even in his large family, where he is the second-born. His older brother, Michael, is in college, while his younger brother, Henry, also attends AHHS. His two youngest brothers, Quinn and John John, are 5 and 2 years old. This means James gets to be both little and big brother. He loves playing with his younger brothers and also enjoys spending time with his mother, father, step-mother, and his girlfriend. You can often find him eating at his favorite restaurants (both Italian): Sorrento's and Julian's.



Henry, Grandpa Phil, Whitney, Michael and James at one of James' favorite spots, Sorrento's.

James loves to read; the Captain Underpants and Goosebumps series are probably his favorites. He also enjoys traveling. He has been able to visit California and San Miguel de Allende. The culture and surroundings of San Miguel made it a favorite for him. James has also had the privilege of traveling to Washington DC for the Unified Champion Leadership Summit as a Youth Ambassador for their Special Olympics program and was thrilled to have that experience. Another highlight of his high school career has been to prepare and deliver a speech at the Summer Special Olympic Games at Morgan's Wonderland in May 2019.

Really, James is a pretty busy guy; he actively participates in the Unified Theatre, International Thespian Society, Unified Basketball and Unified Robotics programs at school. James also enjoys playing on the Alamo Heights Little League Challenger Baseball team during the spring and visiting Camp CAMP in the summer. Now, in the first half of his final



year of high school, James is also looking towards the future. His goals include enrolling in and completing the Texas A&M University Aggie ACHIEVE (Academic Courses in Higher Inclusive Education and Vocational Experiences) program and one day, becoming a professional actor. Whatever he does and wherever he goes in life, there is no doubt that James will continue to inspire those around him to live like him- to the fullest!

Clockwise from top left: Henry, Callie, Steven, Quinn, Michael, John John and James.

HS Unified Champions

Jackson Escamilla and James Ramirez, both seniors, have been involved with Unified Champions, an extension of Special Olympics North America, for three years. James had participated in SO at the Junior School so becoming part of Unified Champions at the high school was a natural extension. The following is record of an “interview” with both young men.



James & Jackson in Washington DC

MH: Tell me how long you’ve been involved with Unified Champions. Why did you chose to become part of the organization?

James: “I’ve been involved with Unified Champions for three years now.”

Jackson: “I have been involved in Unified Champions for around three years, like James. I chose to be part of this organization because I have a twin brother with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I have a strong passion to help people who may look different or act differently because of my brother and I want to give everyone the same opportunities.”

MH: What have you learned/ how has being part of Unified Champions impacted you or those you know?

James: “I’ve learned that its good to be more inclusive with friends and family. It has impacted me by being more inclusive to everybody. I have been able to participate in events that I would not have been able to otherwise. I competed on a basketball team, I led a banner reveal at the school pep rally with the entire campus cheering me on.”

Jackson: “I have learned so many things by being part of a Unified Champions school,



Jackson, Erika Guerrero and James

but the most important would have to be learning leadership skills. I have had so many fun and unique experiences that I have lead and that has changed how I perceive being a leader. It has been an amazing experience for everyone involved.”

MH: You are Youth Ambassadors for the Midwest Region for Special Olympics North America. Tell me about some of the opportunities you have been involved in.

James: “I had an opportunity to go to Washington, D.C. for a youth ambassador meeting. I was chosen to be on a panel of student leaders from across the country as the voice providing feedback to educators and adults across the country. I told them my ideas about how they could help school be a better place during quarantine. Every month I make vlogs (video blogs) where I share my thoughts on different themes. Jackson and I have given speeches to donors. We spoke at the Breakfast of Champions at Morgan’s Wonderland for Special Olympics.”

Jackson: “Being a Youth Ambassador has given me some amazing opportunities, such as being able to go to Washington, D.C. with my best friend James, talking about the change we want to see in schools, and how we’re changing the world through inclusion. Another opportunity I have had was being a panelist with youth and adult leaders form around the world about how we can be change makers in our schools and in our daily lives.

MH: Tell me about one or two of the most meaningful experiences you’ve had as a result of your work in Unified Champions. How do you think that’s impacted you?

James: “I think going to Washington, D.C. was meaningful because it was very inclusive. I got to meet other Youth Ambassadors from around the country. I made friendships and we check up on each other. We worked really hard during the day and had video game party nights. We had fun. We got a little too loud and were busted by our mentors, but it is a memory I will never forget.”

Jackson: “The most meaningful experience I have had is having been recognized around the world for our work. This tells me that the other youth ambassadors and I are doing our job



Jackson & James with fellow Youth Ambassadors in DC

and it is impacting the lives of others. Representatives from Special Olympics North America have told James and me that they had fan mail from the Philippines and Australia. I am so grateful to know that, with James and the other Youth Ambassadors, I am making a difference.”

MH: What are your plans after Senior year? How do you think you’ll take your experiences from Unified Champions into your future endeavors?

James: “After I graduate , I plan to enter the Connects program here in Alamo Heights, then I plan to apply to college. I hope to keep my friendships and to continue competing with Unified Champions at the SO College level.”

Jackson: “My senior year has been a little crazy, to say the least. My plans for the future include college and continuing to be part of Special Olympics. The experiences I have had from being an Ambassador have helped define who I am and I want to make sure my voice is heard as I work to give voice to my peers with different abilities

New Face on Campus: *Shelley White*



Shelley White

Shelley White is one of two new SST (student support team) teachers at Cambridge this year. While Shelley is a new face on the Cambridge campus, she is neither new to Alamo Heights or teaching. Shelley’s three sons have been recipients of an AH education since they moved here 7 years ago from Virginia. Shelley has been a teacher for 20 years, having worked in schools across the country including Philadelphia, Virginia Beach, Richmond and Durham before taking on this role.

Shelley has always been involved in special education to some capacity; she says she enjoys teaching to the needs of the individual child and, “I like how special education can address these specific needs.” Shelley has plenty of opportunity to do that this year as she is teaching first graders, half of whom are learning remotely through Heights at Home. Shelley enjoys seeing her students succeed, “I love to see their proud faces when independence occurs. A child who learns how to communicate with an iPad or a child who learns to write their name is becoming independent.” Shelley points out that this is “a year like none other” and concedes that it’s sometimes been a challenge, but is grateful to have supportive parents that are assisting their children in the learning process. To that end, Shelley encourages parents to take an active role in the ARD process. She reminds parents that they know their child best and teachers need their input and perspective in order to write an accurate, comprehensive IEP. Shelley welcomes conversation and questions from parents during her conference period every class day between 2:30 and 3:15.



“I love to see their proud faces when independence occurs”

On a personal note. Shelley and her husband of 23 years have made their home in Terrell Hills for seven years when they moved to Texas. Together they have three sons, ages 21, 19 and 16 and two friendly Golden Retrievers. Their oldest boys are in college and their youngest is a sophomore at the high school. The family enjoys all manner of outdoor activities but a favorite family outing is to the beach at South Padre where they enjoy spending time with extended family. Shelley is an avid runner and hiker but also enjoys unwinding with a good book. Shelley says of her teaching experience here, “I am excited to be part of the Alamo Heights community. I have worked at 8 schools and I feel the most supported here”. Please help me in continuing to make Shelley feel welcome and supported.

Avery Spellmann

Cambridge SST Teacher

Avery Spellmann comes from a long line of educators; her grandfather was a professor at Texas State (formerly known as Southwest Texas State) and her mom was a special education teacher for many years, so it's no surprise that this bright new face at Cambridge came into the profession so naturally. Avery, along with Shelley White, is one of two new SST (Student Support Team) teachers at Cambridge. Avery's class consists of eight 2nd through 5th grade students whose families chose Face-to-Face instruction for their children. Avery says she's always known she wanted to work in the special education field, but didn't know in what capacity. Her own experience in inclusion classes taught her that there was really no difference between her and her peers. Once in college, she realized her love for children and classroom teaching and decided that specializing in Special Education would satisfy that passion. While this is Avery's first year as a certified teacher, she has had the opportunity to hone her skills in a variety of classroom settings through practicum courses. While at UT Austin, Avery worked in both Austin ISD and Pflugerville ISD in both general and Special education classrooms. She says of her experience, "Out of all my practicum classes I taught in, Life Skills (SST) quickly became one of my favorite populations to teach".

Avery takes great joy in celebrating the victories of her students. She feels strongly about setting her students up with a strong foundation in not just academic but functional areas as well



Avery Spellmann

since that is the determining factor of one's independence. Avery wants to assure parents that her goal is to work in partnership with you and welcomes questions and requests. She wants to be part of celebrating her student's achievements not just in the classroom, but out of school as well. She encourages parents to bring any skills they'd like their child to learn to her attention, as this is something that can be added to a child's goals. To that end, Avery welcomes email, calls or texts with students' families. Her conference hour is from 7:55 to 8:40 daily and can be reached at aspellmann@ahisd.net to set an appointment.

Outside of school, Avery enjoys spending time with her family. Her younger brother is a senior in high school, her dad manages the family travel agency and her mom is Gerrie Spellmann, principal at Woodridge Elementary. Together, the family enjoys traveling together, specifically to the beach. Avery also enjoys watching movies and spending time with friends and family.

Teacher Spotlight: *Felicia Pendleton*



Felicia Pendleton, aka Ms. P

Just a short 5 semesters ago, Felicia Pendleton was settling into her role at Woodridge Elementary as an in-class support teacher for multiple classes spanning from 2nd to 5th grade, standing in the gap where her students needed the most support and encouragement. Last year, she and Kaylee Bell piloted a collaborative teaching

model in Mrs. Bell's 2nd grade classroom. Together, the teachers, who have 19 years combined teaching experience, implemented a multi-modal teaching strategy to reach students who have diverse learning styles. The goal was to implement a model that included collaboration of both a General education and special education teachers' expertise from the planning stage through fruition of the implementation of instruction. By all accounts, the year was a successful one, with Felicia and Kaylee collaborating on lesson plans as a student-centered team. Then Spring Break came around and the then novel Corona Virus-19 became something that wasn't just a problem "somewhere else", it had found its way to Alamo Heights. Like every teacher across the country, Felicia had to pivot; but unlike most teachers in the district who saw their students in the morning and then had the afternoon to plan their lessons, Felicia, and all other special education teachers, saw their students all day. Felicia and Kaylee still employed a team mindset. When the governor shuttered schools across the state, they called each of their 21 students' families to detail how they would continue to teach each child. Kaylee helped Felicia as much as she could, but Felicia would spend hours teaching herself a new platform to create scaffolded material to meet each child's unique needs. Mrs. P, as the students call her, would see the class along with Mrs. Bell every morning and then check in with her students to ensure that each student had their needs met. This meant that what were previously 9 to 10 hour work days for Felicia, had now become 16+ hour days. In Felicia's words, "this was unprecedented teaching for unprecedented times."

This school year, Ms. P is teaching Heights at Home students remotely, from her own home. This is a decision she made to protect

both her own health and that of others, but it has made teaching all the more difficult as she has less access to resources she'd otherwise have if she were on campus. Ms. P is also supporting heights at home students in grades 2-4 which makes planning all the more time consuming and labor intensive. Rather than modifying the same curriculum for 11 students, Ms. P has to work across three grade levels with 4 teachers on both elementary campuses to ensure she's adequately supporting all of the students on her caseload.

Just as in the past, Felicia continues to find creative ways to support her students. When students expressed difficulty turning in completed work to their general education teachers, Ms. P suggested they take and send screen shots of their work. She creates and updates visual planners to help her students better understand expectations, provide consistent, predictable routines and decrease stress and increase confidence and she continuously adjusts and modifies lessons to help set students up for success. The families she supports can see the quality and quantity of work that Ms. P puts in for her students. Parent Noelle Butler-Lightner offered an anecdote about how Ms. P helped motivate her daughter in the spring, "she became a full-time cheerleader for our daughter and a huge support to us as parents. There were days when we just didn't know what to do because my daughter wasn't getting any work done and we were at our wits' end...Ms. P. would kindly, yet firmly remind Autumn of what was expected of her". Noelle



Air hug between Autumn and Ms. P

adds that she knows that Felicia was working with many kids in every subject but “she never made us feel like she didn’t have time for us, even though I know she was completely swamped. If she wasn’t able to get back to us or resolve something during the school day, she’d get back to me in the evening. She is ALWAYS working!”.

This amount of work seems daunting; when I asked Felicia what she does to keep a positive attitude, she replied that she “counts her blessings”. She’s grateful to be healthy and to work in a district that places a priority on the health of staff and students. What struck me most about Felicia after talking with her is how much value she places on the relationships she has with her students and their families. It’s a quality that the families she works with clearly appreciate as well.

High School Happenings

Mrs. Guerrero's Career Prep classes have taken a pivot to provide vocational training under new Co-VID restrictions. The class has begun a new campus-based enterprise. They are making and selling Freshies! Freshies are custom made car fresheners that can be purchased through their class Instagram account @MulesSkills. The students are in charge of



Adam Lopes with peer tutor, Thea Carter

researching products, purchasing supplies, accounting, creating products, marketing, and many other pieces of running a business model. The business model is constantly being tweaked and changed to meet the variety of needs of the learners and the changing demand of their customers. All funds raised are invested back into the classroom as students research and order new scents, colors, shapes, and products. Orders are placed on their instagram. Products can be

sent home with students, ponied between campuses, or you can schedule a pick up time outside of the high school by sending a direct message on their Instagram account. Mules up!



A sampling of freshies the students have made

Follow the Career Prep class
on IG @MulesSkills

JS UNIFIED

The Beautification Club partnered with the Unified Champions Club recently to weed and clean up ‘Everybody’s Garden’, a project created last year through a grant awarded to the Junior School through David’s Legacy Foundation. Check Remind 101 and Google Classroom for details on the next workday.



Julia Hyche & Caroline Hebert working in
Everyone’s Garden

Shout Outs!

“Over the summer we moved not only to a new school, but to a totally new district. **Mr. Mario Garza** has made our transition to middle school in a new district as seamless as possible for our 6th grader. **“Mr. M”** definitely provides academic support, but is also a friendly and safe adult my son can turn to at school!”
-parent of 6th grader

“Mr. M is an amazing teacher. If you need help, he will help you and make sure you are doing ok.”
-6th grade student

“The high school is such an inclusive environment. My daughter is dancing with the dance team and **coach Sanchez** and girls go out of their way to make it work for Mya. **Ms. (Bella) Martinez** is one of her teachers and really gets how to meet each student where they are... truly knowing they all need something different and adapting for each student. We love her!!
-Mary Gonzales, mom to Mya, 9th grade



Mya Gonzales with fellow Spurs



Daisy Flores

“AH High School has done an amazing job being inclusive to ALL. My daughter Daisy LOVES going to school every day. **Ms. Bella Martinez and Ms. Rossi** have challenged her and guided her when necessary. Daisy feels like she is seen and heard every day. Daisy is also part of the Spirit Squad led by Ms. Sanchez. I love how **Ms. Sanchez** has high expectations of ALL her girls. Daisy feels excited, proud and safe every time she gets to cheer.

Another activity that Daisy is involved in is theater. **Mr. Stanton** does an amazing job to make sure that the show goes on. From virtual to drive thru, he has been creative to ensure that the kids have an opportunity to participate in the many activities theatre offers.

I am grateful for the education, the love and the respect my daughter gets daily at the high school. Go Mules!”

-Leica Flores, mom to Daisy, 9th grade

“We moved from Westchester County, NY, where the special needs services and programs were quite generous. We weren’t as happy when we moved to San Antonio. With the realization that our son was transitioning to middle school, we took the time to tour multiple schools, districts, and programs. After the AHJS tour, we breathed a sigh of relief and haven’t been disappointed thus far. We’ve found a thoughtful, well-executed program in AHJS SST and feel the teachers, aides, and student peers have provided a stable, nurturing, and encouraging environment for our son. Most importantly, there’s an atmosphere of caring and a belief that our children can learn and thrive and that’s brought us such peace of mind. We’re so happy that we made the move and thank the staff and students at AHJS.”

-Katrena Shipp, parent of a 6th grader

We moved here from Ohio in June. My son's case manager, **Brett Robinson**, has been instrumental in making my son's transition to middle school as smooth as possible. He has challenged Brayden to be more independent and encouraged him to be more confident. Mr. Robinson noticed Brayden was struggling with his schedule. He recommended changes and my son is much happier. He comes home happy and excited from school. Mr. Robinson cares about his students and makes my son feel accepted! Our transition to Texas has been better than I thought it would be and that's thanks for Mr. Robinson and everyone else on Brayden's team! We are so glad we chose such a great school district!

-Lori Schumacher

Know someone who should be featured or do you have an idea about a topic for a future newsletter article? Email mharrison@ahisd.net with your suggestions!

Parent Liaison

Michelle Harrison

This time of year always provides a time for reflection; to look back not just on the events of the year but on how we responded to those events. We've all heard the cliches used to describe 2020: "a year like no other" or "unprecedented times" or even the phrases used to describe what life was like before, "pre-Covid" or after, "new normal." It has recently dawned on me that it's not very different from what many parents go through when they learn of a child's learning difference or their child receives a diagnosis. Like with all big events, we mark



our time "before" and "after" that watershed moment. Our days both seem to crawl by and slip through our hands, often leaving us feeling unaccomplished and exhausted (hello, Netflix!). A diagnosis can leave us feeling alone and isolated, without anyone who understands or "gets us." And just like dealing with a pandemic, dealing with a diagnosis is a marathon, not a sprint. There are no easy answers, no quick fixes. Progress is sometimes imperceptibly and painstakingly slow.

I assume that it's the end of year perspective, because I think of myself more a realist than an optimist, but another connection I'm making is one of hope and gratitude. I look back on what remote learning looked like in the spring and what H@H looks like now, and I am awed at the creativity, passion and determination I've seen teachers pour into their teaching. And I'm grateful. I look back at my own son's growth, increased confidence, increased flexibility and decreased anxiety. And I'm inspired. I look ahead to the spring and the new challenges he'll face, the new goals he'll master and the new connections he'll make. And I'm hopeful.

My hope for every parent in our AH Special Education community is that you know you are not alone. There are teachers who love their work and love the students they teach. There are administrators who work diligently to offer our students the best education possible. There are parents who are willing to listen, offer encouragement and share their personal experiences. Like another often heard phrase in this year of pandemic, "We are in this together." May you see the hope all around you as together we look forward to 2021.

LOOKING FORWARD:
TRANSITION CONFERENCE

1-DAY VIRTUAL CONFERENCE



Join us for our very first Transition Conference from the comfort of your own home. Open to teens and adults with Down syndrome (or any disability) and all family, friends and professionals interested in the area of Transition.

Date: Friday, January 15, 2021

Time: 8:30am-3:30pm

Zoom Link will be emailed prior to the event!

Two Keynote Speakers!
Breakout Sessions!
Panel Discussion on "Independent Living"!

[REGISTER HERE](#)

For questions, email Oralia Lara-Vargas at olarav@dsastx.org

Collaboration with the Down Syndrome Association of South Texas (DSASTX)
and Parent Resource Network (PRN)



Partners Resource Network

Empowerment Through Education



Partners Resource Network TEAM Project's COMMUNICATION SKILLS

JAN

26

12:00PM

Partners Resource Network (PRN) TEAM Project is one of three federally funded Parent Training and Information Centers (PTI) serving Texas parents of children and youth with disabilities ages 0-26. We are funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

We provide parents with training, information and referral, and individual assistance in obtaining appropriate services for children with disabilities.

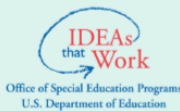
Magaly Diaz REGION 20 COORDINATOR

E: mdiazprnteam@gmail.com

P: 210-632-4045

Communicating effectively with professionals that provide services to your child is key to obtaining and maintaining services. Workshop participants will learn the three components of communication, verbal, nonverbal and preverbal, in order to communicate more effectively with others. We will also explore how to effectively receive messages from others and discuss the barriers to effective communication.

REGISTER HERE: https://us02web.zoom.us/join/wn_wA5M1NBPTU2Fe_nXJ_LP7Q



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