

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Educational Development Center

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On Social?



So are we!

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WE 5th grader, Rene Rodriguez

Rene Rodriguez is a big brother, a car aficionado and a travel enthusiast. He also happens to have ASD, or autism spectrum disorder. Jessica, Rene's mom, sought the opinion of his pediatrician when Rene was a toddler when she became concerned about his diminished social skills and preference for ritualistic play despite meeting all significant milestones.



Jessica and her now husband, Matthew, had been single parents to their own sons and found a fully engaged partner in one another. Matthew was the perfect person to co-parent Rene because he had prior experience as a registered behavior technician (RBT) and had worked with children with ASD in his previous job in California. It was their concern that Rene receive the best education possible that led the Gomez family to purchase a home within the AHISD boundaries. Rene had previously been attending a private school for preK through 1st grade but Jessica began doing some research after friends and family members raved about the district. The Gomez family moved into their home just in time for Rene to begin the 2nd grade at Woodridge in the fall of 2019. In addition to the services that Rene receives at school, he also receives ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis), Speech and Occupational therapies as well as attends Kumon classes to help strengthen his academics.

When not in school or therapy, Rene loves spending time with his family. He's big brother to Ezra (8) and Mateo (1). Together, with their parents, they love to travel, taking many weekend trips in the family RV or bigger trips like a family vacation to Disney World. Rene also loves to do arts and crafts, puzzles, and loves to hike. Rene spends a lot of time on YouTube watching videos of cars, both old and new. Rene's mom helps him work on improving his social skills; one of their goals is to have Rene grow in confidence in approaching new people, both to initiate a conversation and to self-advocate.



When asked about their experience in Alamo Heights, Mrs. Gomez has nothing but good things to say about many of the teachers and assistants who have worked with Rene over the last few years. Ms. Felicia Pendleton played an essential role in setting Rene up for success and remained engaged with him especially during the pandemic when Rene's family opted for Heights at Home for his 3rd grade year. Teaching assistants Ms. Sosa (2nd and 3rd grade) and Ms. Maltos Acierito (4th grade) provided just the right support that Rene

and were happy to communicate and cooperate with the Gomez family. Lastly, Jessica is grateful for Ms. Erika Avalos. She confesses that initially she was concerned when she learned that Ms. A (as her students call her) was a first year teacher. Her fears were soon assuaged when she got to know her and learned that she'd also worked as an RBT while in college. Jessica shares, "As parents, we're constantly worrying, though I've learned since joining the district that we're truly blessed to have so many amazing educators working closely together for my son".

Emily Fohn

Howard Pre-K Teacher

It is a widely held opinion that Howard Early Childhood Center is *the happiest place on earth*, while Disney may take exception to that, it is most certainly the happiest place in AHISD. The reason for that distinction is because of wonderful teachers, like Emily Fohn, who work there.



Emily comes to us after teaching in Northside ISD in the Early Childhood Special Education Department where she taught and supported both kindergarten and 3 & 4 year old Pre-k students for 7 years. She has always known she wanted to be an educator; her first role model and inspiration was her Kindergarten teacher, Ms. Glendening who noticed Emily's interest and provided her with materials to foster her passion at home, even giving her worksheets to use for her "students" at home. Emily has kept a sweet note Ms. Glendening wrote to her. This special teacher has cheered and encouraged Emily through the years.

At Howard, Emily works with the youngest learners in her role as a Special Education Pre-K teacher. She facilitates the success of each of her students by ensuring that

their supports and services are implemented with fidelity as outlined in each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). For some students, that might look like providing the General Education teacher simple accommodations or strategies they can use to help their student access the Pre-K curriculum. For students who need specialized instruction, Emily plans and implements a specially designed instruction plan *for each student* that is appropriate to that specific learner. Emily is grateful to be part of a team of amazing educators who love and have high expectations of their students. Emily especially loves being able to document and communicate the growth of each student.

Emily believes that a child's parents are the most important part of the educational team. She believes that the safety and security parents provide their child is an integral piece to a student's success, both inside and outside of the classroom. Working in partnership with families and celebrating the successes of her students are just a few of Emily's favorite things about being a Special Education teacher. She is passionate about empowering parents and teaching them the tools they need to help their children be life-long learners. Emily encourages the families she works with to reach out with questions or ask for help; she's available by phone or email most weekday mornings from 8:15-9:15.

On a personal note, Emily grew up in San Antonio and graduated from UTSA with a Bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in Special Education. She and her husband have 3 dogs: Spot, a rescue who has stolen Emily's heart, and English Springer Spaniels Henry and Flip Flop. During their free time, the Fohns like to take the dogs on long hikes, cook together and spend time with friends and family. She's grateful for the warm welcome she has received from the Alamo Heights Community.

Ginger Cunningham

Cambridge 5th Grade Resource & In Class Support Teacher



Ginger Cunningham hasn't always been a teacher, at least not one in the traditional sense. In her own words, Ginger "came to the education game a little late" but in fact, was a teacher to her own children as she focused on her family as a military wife. She and her family have been living on Ft. Sam Houston for 10 years while her husband serves in the Army. Ginger realized her calling when she was serving as a substitute teacher at Ft. Sam Houston ISD, her children's district. She was working on her degree and teaching certification and spent a great amount of time in the special education classrooms; the experience, along with her affinity for the differently-abled peers she'd gone

to school with growing up, cemented her resolve to work with this population. Once she began teaching, she requested to be the inclusion teacher for her grade level. Of her 8 years in education, 5 of them have been in special education.

At Cambridge, Mrs. Cunningham is a 5th grade special education teacher and supports all content areas: reading, ELA, math, science and social studies.

Depending on her students and the subject, she either pushes in (supports in the general education classroom) or pulls students to work in a small group setting in her own class. When asked about her favorite thing about her current role, Mrs.

Cunningham had no shortage of things to share: "I love the personalities of all the kids and connecting with them. Relationships with students are always important but building trust with my kids is hands-down one of the biggest joys I have. As students get older, they are often more aware that they need extra help and it can create difficulties with their confidence, stigmatization, etc.. When I know that my kids feel safe to share with me, ask me questions, laugh, and receive feedback, I know I have done my job".

Ginger's advice to parents is to fill out a parent input form for the special education teacher prior to the Annual Review and Dismissal (ARD) meeting - and if the teacher doesn't send one home, ask for one. She also recommends requesting a draft of their child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) prior to the ARD meeting so that they have a chance to review prior to the meeting. The ARD committee is just that; the parent along with the team at school, work together for the most favorable student outcome. Ginger points out that as a parent, you know your child better than anyone and your input is invaluable but also suggests that parents be receptive to the advice and expertise of the team working with their child in the school setting. Ginger says, "Being honest, open and transparent with their case manager helps everyone. Go to your child's case manager with concerns first, always". Ginger is happy to discuss concerns by appointment during her conference but email is the quickest way to communicate with her. She can be reached at her district email, gcunningham@ahisd.net.

Originally from Topeka, KS, Ginger and her family have been stationed in San Antonio for almost 10 years. Her husband serves our country in the US Army. Together they have 4 children ranging in ages from 16-22, as well as a dog, a fish and a hedgehog. Ginger holds a BS in Health and Wellness with a minor in child development and a Masters in Educational Administration. When not teaching, Ginger enjoys traveling, painting and restoring furniture. Ginger also loves being outdoors and enjoys hiking, rafting, kayaking, camping and watching professional soccer.

22-23 Teacher of the Year Nominees

Michele Johnson, Kindergarten Teacher, HECC

Courtney Crane, 4th Grade Teacher, Cambridge

Felicia Pendleton, Special Education Resource & Class Support Teacher, Woodridge

Charley Gilbert, Student Support Team Teacher & Soccer Coach, Alamo Heights Junior School

Ben Keenan, ELAR Teacher, Alamo Heights High School.

Elroy Hendricks

Cambridge SST Teacher

When Elroy Hendricks was studying history at the University of Texas at Austin, he thought his degree would lead him to teach and maybe eventually to become a counselor. As he advanced towards graduation, Elroy realized that he enjoyed learning about history much more than he enjoyed teaching it. As is sometimes the case, Elroy tried a few different jobs while he decided what career to pursue. One of the jobs he took was teaching reproductive health to 6-12 grade students in a charter school in Austin through a non-profit, global organization. This experience taught Elroy a lot about himself, namely it broke down barriers that previously inhibited open communication with others; Elroy didn't know it, but this experience was laying the groundwork for the future.



Elroy moved to San Antonio with his son, Beau, just in time for him to start kindergarten in the fall of 2019. Father and son were getting settled in their new city and Elroy was just about to take a job teaching AP History with IDEA schools when Covid-19 forced all schools to shut down in March of 2020. Elroy, like so many other parents, found himself in the role of teacher to his own son, helping Beau with online school through the end of 2020. As the fear of Covid lessened and Beau was ready to return to the classroom, Elroy took a job as a substitute in Alamo Heights. His first assignment was in the SST (Student Support Team) class at the Junior School in John "Charley" Gilbert's classroom. What was intended to be a part-time substitute role quickly became a long-term assignment when Elroy was asked to take a position as a one-on-one teaching assistant for a new student. After just a short amount of

time, Elroy knew he'd found the right job. Though he'd never considered being a Special Education teacher before, he was exactly where he wanted to be.

In the short time since April of 2021, Elroy has been a teaching assistant in SST at the Junior School, a behavior specialist at Woodridge Elementary and is now one of the lead teachers in SST at Cambridge Elementary. He works alongside Cinthia de los Santos, teaching math and science. Elroy likes to focus on the functional side of academics, such as handling money and telling time. The fact that every day with his students is a new day, is something Elroy really appreciates. He loves testing the resilience of his students and watching them grow in their capabilities and then hearing how those skills translate to the home setting. Skills that students learn in the classroom which don't generalize to other settings are not truly mastered skills. To that end, Elroy stresses that "communication and reinforcement (of emergent skills) would be the best advice I could give. This allows for everyone to track our students' progress". Elroy welcomes communication with the families of his students and is available by text and email, but for urgent issues, encourages a phone call.

Outside of work, Elroy enjoys fixing cars and riding motorcycles cross country. He enjoys doing almost anything outdoors- fishing, camping and hiking. An ordinary day that brings him happiness includes cooking, a strong cup of coffee, cheering on the Texas Longhorns (Hook 'Em) and spending time with family and friends. Elroy comes from a richly varied background; he was born on the Apsáalooke (Crow) Reservation, just south east of Billings, Montana and can trace family members from black and German descent as well. He is grateful for the variety of cultures he's experienced from his family. Alamo Heights is fortunate to have caring teachers like Elroy. He is another example of why there is #NoPlaceLikeAlamoHeights.

Did you know?

Special Education Department has various resources on the AHISD website including staff contact info, frequent terms and definitions and information about the ARD process. Find all of this and more @<https://www.ahisd.net/cms/one.aspx?portalid=8146&pageid=36147>

Algeria Antoine

Behavior Support Specialist, Woodridge Elementary



Algeria Antoine is the new behavior teacher at Woodridge Elementary. While her initial trajectory wasn't in special education; she was a Public Health Sciences Major with minors in both biology and mathematics), she became interested in teaching during her senior year of college. Knowing that it was too late to change her major, she decided to find an Alternative Certification Program. She completed her coursework and became a certified teacher in August of 2020 and has found her professional calling in

special education. Algeria has primarily focused on social communication and social-emotional learning beginning with her first teaching job in Leander ISD. When her husband's promotion brought them back to San Antonio earlier this year, the vacancy at Woodridge was the perfect fit for her.

As the Behavior Support Specialist, Algeria's role is to support her students in their general education classrooms. Each day looks different for each student, but essentially, Algeria gets to know her students and builds rapport with them to better understand how to motivate them to elicit their best work. Algeria ensures that each student's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) is carried out and that BIPs (Behavior Intervention Plan) are in place and followed to ensure successful outcomes. She further helps with any accommodations a student may need and monitors their behavior. She incorporates pull-out sessions for social skills lessons wherein she focuses on social-emotional learning. Students know how to identify and label what they're feeling and learn self-regulating techniques to employ when emotions begin to run high. Social skills lessons also include lessons on personal space/boundaries and healthy interactions with peers. They might read a social story, engage in role-playing or practice turn taking in a board game. Finally, Algeria is also the point of

contact between home and school. She communicates with both parents and teachers and fields questions and concerns on both ends with the goal that all parties are working towards the student's overall success.

Of her many responsibilities, Algeria most enjoys being able to celebrate with her students when they reach their daily goals. She loves building relationships with her students because she knows it makes them feel seen and heard and gives them a sense of belonging. She says, "When you build those relationships, students are more willing to impress you with their success".

Algeria's best advice to parents in preparing for ARDs (Annual Review and Dismissal) is to ask questions during the school year. You can learn a lot about your student's progress by discussing and/or requesting a student's DBRC (Daily Behavior Report Card). Good, consistent data is the best way to evaluate a student's current level and evaluate how a given plan (whether an ARD goal or a behavior intervention plan) is working. Algeria puts much time into sending parents weekly updates about what she's covering in social skills class.

Algeria is originally from Philadelphia and attended Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she graduated in 2018. She is married and has beautiful identical twin daughters who recently turned 3 and are now attending Howard in the mini Mules class. She likes to spend weekends and breaks with her young family (swimming, visiting the aquarium and zoo are favorite pastimes) and during down time, Algeria enjoys listening to podcasts, binge watching crime shows and DIY projects (she makes body butters, scrubs and hair products which she and her girls use).

Algeria is available by appointment during her planning period, daily between 9:25-10:30 and by email @ aantoine@ahisd.net. Because she's usually with a student, email is the best way to reach her.

Kandi Caveda

HS SST Teacher

Stasia Caveda is the new SST (Student Support Team) teacher at Alamo Heights High School, but she isn't new to the Special Education world. This is Ms. Caveda's 13th year as an educator in Special Education; she comes to us after working at MacArthur HS in NEISD as an ALE (Alternative Learning Environment) teacher the entirety of her career. Stasia, or Kandi, as she's better known, had a connection to AHHS before being hired on; Bella Martinez, who previously held the SST teacher role, did her student teaching under Kandi as she finished up her degree.



Kandi was led to work with the Special Education population after raising her three sons, two of whom are on the spectrum (Autism Spectrum Disorder) and one who has ADHD (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). She knows first hand the challenges of raising children with learning disabilities and the feeling of being overwhelmed with the amount of information parents receive.

Kandi is one half of the teaching team at the high school. Her co-teacher, Brandi Rehtorvic, teaches English and writing while Kandi teaches Math, Science and Social Studies. Academics are only part of the curriculum that is taught in the SST classroom. Kandi facilitates the instruction of a student's daily goals, life skills, appropriate behavior and social awareness either through direct instruction or by supervising the implementation via a teaching assistant. Because each of her 19 students is different, each with their own strengths and areas for growth, each learning plan is carefully thought out and created for that particular student. When a plan needs tweaking, Kandi does that, and when a student masters a goal, Kandi celebrates that accomplishment and starts working on the next goal. In her role as a case manager, Kandi likes to build a strong relationship with families from the very

start so that everyone feels comfortable. Kandi wants families to know that they're all on the same team when it comes to their child's education and ultimate success which is why she feels strongly that clear channels of communication are the key to building a solid relationship. Kandi also works hard to advocate for her students since many of them can't express themselves in traditional ways.

Kandi loves her job and loves her students even more. She takes much joy from seeing everyday things through their eyes or the excitement they experience doing things that most of us take for granted. Kandi says, "Being a Life Skills Teacher has changed my life in so many ways, making me a better person, giving me patience along the way and becoming very flexible in my daily life". When asked about any advice she'd offer parents, it comes back to communication: "Keeping in touch with their case manager is key to a successful year and having a successful ARD (Annual Review and Dismissal)" [meeting]. She also recommends that parents get connected to as many agencies early on and continue to stay connected stressing that since the waitlists are long, early connection results in more resources for their child. Kandi also recommends that parents start thinking about transition early, much earlier than most parents begin the process and encourages them to seek out as many opportunities as possible for their student.

"I absolutely love what I do. It is not a job to me, it is my passion and I love your children."

When she's not in the classroom, Kandi shares her life and home with her one of her three adult sons and their Golden Retriever, Miss Betty. She grew up in San Antonio, graduating from Madison HS and aside from the time she and her then husband were an active military

family, has spent most of her life here. While part of an active military household, Kandi and her family were stationed in several cities, including Wiesbaden, Germany for three years. Once back in the US, Kandi completed her degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in Special Education from Texas A&M, Corpus Christi. After being away for almost 20 years, Kandi moved back to San Antonio with her

sons in 2009. She spends most of her downtime with her sons and close friends, two of whom she will be taking a cruise with next summer. Most of the time, Kandi stays close to home. She loves to create crafts on her Cricut or complete home improvement projects. She wants families to know, "I absolutely love what I do. It is not a job to me, it is my passion and I love your children."

Kandi is happy to discuss your child's progress or any concerns during her conference periods (2:30-4:00 on blue days and 10:20-11:55 on gold days). You may also email her at scaveda@ahisd.net.

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 pictorial highlights of the semester along with an update from Co-President Meriden Black.



Follow AHHS Unified @ahunified
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22-23 Leadership Team

Co-Presidents:

Caroline Tichy & Daisy Flores

Vice Presidents:

Meriden Black & Rafa Diaz

Treasurers:

Charlotte Hermann & Alden Jonas

Secretaries:

Isaac Garza & Nathaniel Garza

Bulletin Board:

Holly Nash & Grace Crocker

Webmasters:

Adlyh Meza & Evan Williams



Howdy Parade

Daisy Flores, Caroline Tichy, Evan Williams, Katelyn Duncoe



Kate Stepan, Ashlyn Donohue, Nyssa Salcedo & Wyatt Harrison

HoCo PreParty



Rafa Diez, Harrison Peacock, Adam Lopez, Noah Puento, Ben Evans & Nathalie Lopez

Dear Parents and guardians,

I wanted to just update you all on what has been going on in the Unified Club this semester. We have had a blast celebrating everyone's accomplishments and learning everyone's unique abilities!

First starting off with The Thanksgiving Party hosted by Co-Secretary Charlotte Herman. This party was a potluck which meant everyone signed up to bring their favorite Thanksgiving dish. We decorated tables, did some relays, and hula hooped. Many of our athletes and partners participated and it was really fun to see everyone come together and celebrate how thankful we are for each other.

Most recently we did the Holiday Party which was hosted by Co-President Caroline Tichy. This party was a hit. The athletes and partners teamed up and decorated gingerbread houses and even demolished them at the end! There was Chick-fil-A nuggets and fruit provided by Co- Vice-President Meriden Black and lots of candy contributed by everyone who came! It was a great way to get everyone together to celebrate what the holidays are all about!

There is much more to come next semester, so make sure to check your emails! Thank you all very much and hope you have a great holiday break with your kiddos out of school!

Meriden Black

Friendsgiving



Caroline Tichy, Ben Evans, Olivia Thompson



Foreground: Adam Lopez, Harrison Peacock & Mya Gonzales; Background: Noah Punte

Gingerbread Party



Wyatt Harrison, Meriden Black & Scarlett Hew



Tito Newby & Holly Nash



Sebastian Robelo



Adlyh Meza, Daisy Floes, Evan Williams, Charlotte Hermann
(standing) Holly Nash, Alden Jonas

Thank you and Congratulations

Cindy Mayorga, secretary to the director of Special Education, is retiring this month after *fifteen years* of service to Alamo Heights students and staff. Cindy is the first voice a parent hears when they call our department and the first face they see when visiting our office at the Education Development Center, but she is so much more than that. Cindy is an invaluable resource to all of us who work with her. Below are a few snippets from some coworkers:

“Cindy is the ‘braintrust’ of the AHISD Special Education Department. There literally is no problem too complex that Cindy can’t solve. What a well deserved retirement Cindy has earned! Dedicating her career to education and helping countless hundreds, if not thousands, of colleagues, children and families.” **David R. Sadlers, LSSP, AHHS**

“Cindy is a true SuperHero, as she has saved all of us in one situation or another and does so with a warm smile and a kind heart. Cindy’s hard work, dedication, and positivity have been appreciated over the years and will truly be missed.” **Ann Beuhler, LSSP, Howard**

“Cindy is an amazing and thoughtful person who always has a smile on her face. She lights up the room when she walks in and her laugh is contagious. She is dedicated and passionate about her job and makes all of our lives so much easier. She will be truly missed by all of us.”

Stephanie Hargrove, Special Education Coordinator, Howard ECC

“Cindy has been a wonderful asset to the department and AHISD. She is always available to help others in any manner necessary. She has a kind heart and is often looked upon to give advice or just listen with no judgement. She will be missed.” **Melissa Benavides, Director of Special Education**

“Cindy was the always smiling, friendly, helpful face of our special education department. If you had a question, she had the answer. Needed supplies/materials? She was on it! Out sick? She had your back. She was like our office “mama bear,” and we will miss her knowledge, kindness, humor and gentle spirit. Cindy is simply irreplaceable.” **Shannon Stepan, M.A., Licensed Specialist of School Psychology, AHJS**

In getting to know the new staff for this newsletter, I have become even more convinced that this year's slogan, "No Place Like AHISD" is more than a tagline. It points to the dedicated staff members, including Career and Technical Education teacher, Erika Guerrero who has worked with youth leaders to make Alamo Heights a more inclusive district and is soon leaving the classroom.



While Erika is leaving Alamo Heights, she is expanding her reach by taking a job with Region 20 to work with the 59 school districts which are served by the regional education agency. She, and many teachers and staff before her, have made our district what it is. It's a quality that is difficult to explain when all one has ever experienced is the culture of excellence that defines Alamo Heights. None of this happens by accident- it is intentional and starts at the top. Our trustees and superintendent listen to what is important to families, staff and students. Teachers know they have agency and support from their administrative team and feel empowered to think creatively and work collaboratively across departments for the benefit of the students they teach. And perhaps most importantly, parents feel heard by staff and administrators alike. Parents know that their opinions and ideas for their student's success matter. "No Place Like AHISD" points to administrators, staff and teachers who care about students as whole individuals and every aspect of their life: academic, home and social-emotional. "No Place Like AHISD" points to peers who form *genuine friendships* with one another regardless of their abilities. For these reasons, and many more, I'm grateful and proud to be both an employee and a parent in AHISD.

Happy Holidays,

Michelle Harrison

Alamo Heights ISD

Special Education Parent Liaison/Enlace de padres de educación especial