

Contact;
Toby Gilbert
AUSD PR
toby@tobygilbert.us
281-546-6457
www.ausd.us

November 6, 2018
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



Portraits of AUSD Game Changers: First Four Award Winners Inspire Students, Parents and Colleagues

*Alhambra Unified, the Board of Education and Schools First FCU team up to
honor winning AUSD employees*

What do the first four AUSD Game Changer Award winners all have in common? Each of them — by personality, attitude, and actions — is quietly changing the culture of their schools, and in the process, advancing outcomes for students and strengthening relationships with colleagues and parents. Without the Game Changer awards, few of us might ever know the contributions these AUSD employees are making every day. Their generosity ripples out across their campuses, inspiring those in their orbit to be their best selves. Now, with the Portraits of Game Changer Award winners, the rest of us can also learn from them.

Each month, two Game Changer award winners are selected from the pool of extraordinary Alhambra USD employees nominated by students, parents or colleagues for the Beyond the Call of Duty and Spotlight Badges program (nominate at: www.ausd.us/badges/). The Game Changer winners are chosen by a trio of judges: Tammy Scordia, ATA president, Craig Profitt, CSEA president, and Stacie Colman Hsu, AUSD Director of Human Resources. Schools First Federal Credit Union partners with Alhambra Unified to give an honorarium to each award winner which is presented by the AUSD Board of Education in a recognition ceremony.

Portraits of AUSD Game Changer Award Winners

September 2018



Joel Sanchez, Senior Custodian at Repetto Elementary, inspired principal Carin Gasca to nominate him for the Beyond the Call of Duty Badge for “always going the extra mile, whether during a summer of major construction clean up for the entire campus, the aftermath rush of getting the campus ready for the first day of school or any time during the school year. Mr. Sanchez works long hours and weekends to keep Repetto clean, safe and beautiful. At the same time, he is always a kind and welcoming presence.”

With the district for 12 years, Mr. Sanchez is new to Repetto, arriving in June. During a summer when he would have normally been getting to know the campus, its 80 employees, 825 students, and making a general plan to get the school ready for a new year, Mr. Sanchez was instead chasing construction crews as they moved through each part of the building. “It was hectic. We had to jump from one side of the campus to another depending on the situation with construction,” he explains. “With school starting in early August, we worked right up to the deadline. At 6:00 am on the first day of school, the cafeteria was not ready for the children to arrive. It was a race to finish but we did it, working together as a team.”

He says he’s committed to his colleagues because he received a lot of help when he first arrived in the district, “I always want to bend over backwards to help my co-workers.” Ms. Gasca adds, “Not only does Joel go out of his way to respond quickly to requests from staff, he is a quietly supportive presence for the students, always greeting them as he goes about his work.” Mr. Sanchez nods, “Yes, now every student tells me ‘good morning, how are you doing’ even before I can say hello.”

September 2018



Jurgio Valinhas, Alhambra High School teacher of Spanish, Honors and AP Spanish, was nominated for the Beyond the Call of Duty badge by AHS World Languages Department Head, Joshua Moreno. Mr. Moreno calls the 20-year veteran, “An extraordinary champion for our Latino students, recruiting as many as possible to take his AP/Honors courses even if they do not speak the language fluently.” AHS recently won the Gold Ribbon Award for its AP/Honors program “in great part because of the work that Mr. Valinhas put in with the students, parents and the community,” according to Mr. Moreno.

Asked about his approach to coaching his students, Mr. Valinhas will tell you he combines academic rigor with social emotional encouragement. His students — many of whom are taking an AP class for the first time — routinely achieve a high AP passing rate (between 90-100%, depending upon the year). The experience forever changes the way the students see themselves and naturally enlarges their academic and career dreams. Renaming as Honors Spanish what had been called Native Spanish, Mr. Valinhas convinced parents and students that taking an Honors/AP Spanish course and becoming truly bilingual could change the life path for the student.

A Galician by birth, Mr. Valinhas went to high school in General Franco’s Spain, which outlawed his native language. Learning Galician in secret from his grandmother, Mr. Valinhas grew up to become a strong proponent for teaching home languages and cultures, and for multilingualism. Two decades ago Mr. Valinhas came to Alhambra from Spain on a teacher recruitment program. Today, Mr. Valinhas is offering AHS students the support he wished he had gotten by giving legitimacy to learning a home language and

encouraging bilingual learning. His dream is to see Spanish offered to 7th and 8th grade students before they arrive in high school. Mr. Moreno points out that Mr. Valinhas' credentials make him a compelling candidate to persuade both Spanish home language prospective parents and any prospective parents of kindergarteners to seriously consider the Fremont Spanish Dual Immersion program for their child. Says Mr. Moreno, "Jurgio is doing so many things for our Latino students and our parents, I want to get him out in the community to talk about all he's doing and how it impacts our students before he retires."

Mr. Valinhas, when asked about his mentoring efforts, says, "I only wish I could do more. I always think I am not doing enough. To watch my students' confidence grow when they see what they are able to achieve is a great gift to me. They just needed someone to believe in them and to show them how capable they are. They were always able to do great things. Now they know it, too."

October 2018



Nicole Manalang, San Gabriel High's Business and Technology Academy (BTA) Lead, who also teaches 12th grade AP government, and three classes of 10th grade world history, was nominated for the Beyond the Call of Duty badge by BTA science teacher, Jennifer Wright, for her leadership in school-wide technology implementation, work that is in addition to Ms. Manalang's many teaching responsibilities. Ms. Wright hired Ms. Manalang 12 years ago when she worked as an administrator, and now works along side her.

"Nicole is very positive, very outgoing, always looking to see what she can do to improve things, always looking for a way to move things forward for students and for teachers," says Ms. Wright. "She gives up a lot of her time for students, for new and even veteran teachers — she wears lots of different hats. The nomination was a cool way to say thank you for all she does for everyone." She points as examples, to Ms. Manalang's efforts to create shared department files to make department collaboration easier and to the tutorials she creates for various technology products to assist teachers.

Armed with a Master's in technology education from Cal State LA, her talents in the field and love of educational instructional design, Ms. Manalang is a particularly able BTA Lead. She explains the BTA program, which has a Career Technical Education (CTE) focus, by saying it is a cohort of 20-30 students in each grade who learn core subjects like government, science, math and English through the lens of digital literacy. They learn computer skills, website design, Photoshop, video editing, and global business finance. "SGHS is the only AUSD high school with a Business and Technology Academy," says Ms. Manalang. "The students get the training they need to succeed in future careers and to become lifelong learners. We also seek out community business partners to expand opportunities for our students. The BTA program prepares students for the future and for a digital life."

When asked what she loves best about what she does, Ms Manalang, an AUSD alum, says, “It was the teachers I encountered at Garfield and Alhambra High who inspired me to love learning. I always tell students there are many paths to college. There are multiple ways to a career you want to get into. It was my teachers who sparked what I call ‘light bulb moments,’ who showed me there are many learning styles. I wanted to be that kind of teacher for my kids.”

She says that rather tell her students ‘this is the way to get a good grade,’ she instead challenges them to decide what they feel is a valued achievement for them and work toward that goal. “I want to inspire students to see the possibilities and then really dig in to explore how they can get what they want. Self-motivated learning changes everything.”

October 2018



Agustin Ramos, Safety and Security Guard at the District office, was nominated for the Beyond the Call of Duty badge by colleagues in the office of risk management, Elaine Laroya and Eva Garcia, who both commented on his signature “warmth, kindness, his morning greeting that starts everyone’s day off right and for his ability to see that you need help before you ever ask.”

One of the first security guards hired to monitor the district during daytime hours, Mr. Ramos has been with the district since 2014. Working with AUSD student/employee welfare, under the direction of the safety coordinator, Micheal Barbara, Mr. Ramos is part of a team providing 24/7 coverage to all 20 school sites. Mr. Ramos says he stays flexible about schedules and pitches in whenever needed, “I think of myself as a team player. I want to help out however I can.”

Asked about his approach to his long hours at work, Mr. Ramos says, “Honestly, I’ve always been motivated by the desire to do a good job in whatever position I have. I believe in teamwork. I stay positive and optimistic, That’s what keeps me going,”

"You can always count on Agustin," Ms. Laroya says."He is a fabulous co-worker, always smiling, immaculately uniformed, all his gear polished." Ms. Garcia agrees,"His good spirits make everyone feel better. He is fair, professional and honest in everything he does. Agustin really steps up to the plate in any situation and is an excellent role model."

NOTE: Anyone can thank or recognize any Alhambra Unified employee by nominating them for the Beyond the Call of Duty or Spotlight badges program by visiting www.ausd.us/badges/. Out of that pool of nominees, two Game Changer award winners are chosen each month. Take a moment to thank someone today.

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