



# ALUMNI NEWS

BY GENOVEVA CORTES

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## BRIGHT STAR SCHOOLS ALUMNI IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

### CESAR GABRIEL

SHCA ALUMNUS, 2015  
 VANGUARD UNIVERSITY ALUMNUS: BA PSYCHOLOGY, 2019  
 CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, DOMINGUEZ HILLS, MFT (IN PROGRESS)

Cesar Gabriel Vasquez was our first alumni to attend Vanguard University, a private Christian college in Orange County. When he was a student at BSSCA, now Stella High Charter Academy, he was considering moving to England to attend college but realized he wasn't ready to become that independent and be so far away from family. He decided to stay closer to home and chose a college where his religious and academic values would be supported and embraced.

At Vanguard, Cesar switched majors 3 times, a common occurrence among Freshmen and Sophomores. He started as a Business Administration major, then switched to Kinesiology, but finally decided to major in Psychology by his 2nd semester. Some students know right away what they want to major in and sometimes it takes a few semesters to figure out what you are interested in. Just keep exploring and asking questions! "I wouldn't have changed my major if it wasn't for a professor. Ask yourself, is this major something that you'll wake up everyday and be excited to learn about? I realized I was only majoring in Kinesiology because I used to play soccer."

Attending Vanguard U. was a positive experience for Cesar because he met new people who ended up becoming his good friends, he got to speak with Professors on a personal level and was exposed to people from different cultures. Whereas SHCA wasn't diverse being majority Latino, at Vanguard he met folks from all over the country who also shared his religious values. He also chose to go to chapel everyday before class.

Upon graduation, Cesar began working for Bright Star Schools on the Data team and is now in charge of students and school information for the Valor Academy schools in the San Fernando Valley. He has learned everything from how to write a professional email to developing technical skills from maintaining the system to learning how to analyze and report data. "You learn something new everyday in this role. It's a growing and learning process."

What is next for Cesar? He is training to become a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) and plans to work with teens, children, young adults, and with older adults, either through the county or in private practice. He is currently in year one of CSU, Dominguez Hills' 3 year program.

Cesar has wanted to become a therapist since he was young, always wondering how the brain works and how to help people who are neurodiverse. Having a sibling who is on the autism spectrum and another with ADHD, he was curious about people with mental disorders and wanted to learn how to support them and be of service.

In this line of work, it's very important to take care of your own mental health. Since Cesar works full time for BSS and attends school full time in the evenings, he's found ways to practice self-care. "If you serve others, how can you be of help if you don't help yourself?" He does this by spending time with family, dancing with his parents, doing activities with his siblings like walking or hiking, or going out to eat.

For our high school seniors, they need to understand that "being a high school student is different from being a college student. I had so many major options but I couldn't initially figure out which one to choose. At the end of the day, it's ok to pick a major but change direction to something different. But if you just stand there and don't pick anything, then you won't move forward with your education and career."



Cesar and Principal Garris at the BSSCA graduation



Cesar and his parents and his Vanguard University graduation.



Future mental health care practitioner

## BSSCA & VAHS CLASS OF 2018-2022 CC & CTE PATHWAYS

# HIGHLIGHTING CTE PROGRAMS

It is very common for many high school graduates to wonder about “what is next” after graduation. Some students make the decision to keep moving forward with their education; the most common options that students think about are 4yr bound or starting at their local community college. Neither of these pathways is wrong but there could be a possibility that neither of these might be the best fit for you.

What if I told you that there is an alternative option; a pathway that does not align with your traditional post-secondary/higher education journey. What if I told you that there is a Career Technical Education pathway (CTE). CTE programs offer an alternative pathway that provides personalized opportunities which are focused on a students career interest and learning needs. Over the last few months we’ve highlighted schools like Homestead Schools, National Career College, and the Emergency Medical Technician program at Glendale Community College.



NVOC - First Responders class



NVOC - Aviation class

But wait, there’s more! The Los Angeles Adult Schools, called Occupational Centers offer an array of FREE CTE programs that are anywhere from 6 months to 2 years! For those of you that live in the San Fernando area, the [North Valley Occupational Center](#) offers a wide variety of programs for **FREE**. One of their Aircraft Mechanic Technician Program, their most recognized, is being offered at **NO COST** to students! Additionally, the NVOC has Administrative, Automotive, Electrical, Graphic Design, Medical Assistant, LVN, and more! To learn more about their course offerings you can visit their website at [NVOC.ORG](#)

### What you will learn:

- Career-specific technical skills
- Career-specific vocabulary and knowledge
- Work-related reading, writing, and math skills
- Hands-on technical skills
- Test preparation for state license and industry certification exams
- Soft skills for the workplace
- Relevant skills to maintain or advance within your field

### What is offered:

- Learn trades
- Learn technical skills
- Earn certificates (selected courses)
- Pass state license and industry certification exams
- Prepare for and enter apprenticeship programs
- Prepare for further career training
- Prepare for employment
- Start new careers

BY MIKE CARRERA

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## BSSCA CLASS OF 2018-2022

# YOSELIN RAMIREZ

SHCA ALUMNA 2021

COLBY COLLEGE

MAJOR: PSYCHOLOGY &amp; ANTHROPOLOGY

### What's your major?

When I came to Colby College I was only a Psychology major but I recently added Anthropology as my second major. I'm currently a double major and when I graduate I plan to get a Master's in Psychology. I'm also planning to become a research assistant to get experience. It's something that I'll need when I'm ready to apply to graduate school. Hopefully, I can come back to California for graduate school but I am not against staying here or going to school in a different part of the country.

### How has living in Maine been?

I've really enjoyed being here but it's definitely different. Colby College is located in Waterville, Maine which is about 100 miles away from the Canadian border. There are no freeways, only highways and there are trees everywhere. People here are welcoming and it's nice meeting individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It's eye-opening how people's perspectives are different and how they view certain topics like politics and religion. Waterville is a small town that has European and Canadian influences. I really enjoy learning about different cultures and customs. Since being here, I've only seen a handful of Mexicans which is a huge difference from Los Angeles. Overall, I've embraced Colby and I continue learning in and out of the classroom.



Getting crafty and feeling proud.



### Have you been involved on campus?

Yes, I've really made it a point in staying busy and networking while I'm here. Currently, I work as a Stagecraft Assistant working on shows hosted at the college by students and professors. I also work as a Clerical Assistant on campus. In addition, I'm the President of the Quilting Club where we donate quilts to newborn babies. We're currently working on donating quilts to the homeless community in Waterville. I joined the club last year and the opportunity presented itself after the previous leader graduated in the spring. Lastly, I also volunteer with hospice patients and I'm working toward being certified in a few weeks.

### What have you enjoyed most about your experience being away from home and living on campus?

I enjoyed having my independence. I knew coming here was going to be mentally challenging because it's something new and I am so far from home. There have been times when I've felt homesick and I've questioned my decision to come here but I remind myself that I'm here for a reason. I also enjoy being a student at Colby College because I have the opportunity to network with other students. Lastly, another benefit of living on campus is the fact that I can volunteer and give back to the community.

### What advice would you give students who are considering living on campus?

The first thing I would tell them is to prioritize what they want. When you're making your decision, there are going to be people giving their opinion but make sure you know what you're looking for. Second, do your research on the university and try to visit the campus at least once to see if you can envision yourself living there. Lastly, I believe it's a great opportunity because it allows you to get out of your comfort zone and network.

## VAHS CLASS OF 2018-2022

### MILLIE RUIZ

VAHS ALUMNA 2022  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO  
MAJOR: EDUCATION SCIENCES



#### **What skills/mindsets/attitudes did you learn while a student at Valor that have helped you during your first year in college?**

Finding study techniques that benefited my learning and performance was a skill I learned while a student at Valor. With frequent midterms and exams around the corner, developing this skill early in high school has helped me a lot. It wasn't just a matter of memorizing the content, but also of knowing how to apply it which overall makes me more confident going into an exam now in college.

#### **What do you wish you had known about college going in that could have helped you be even more successful?**

I believe that greater attention should be focused on independence and self-discipline. You are accountable for yourself the majority of the time, if not all of the time, so no one will be pressuring you to attend lectures or do your work on time. You alone are responsible for your choices. Sometimes it feels like those deadlines are simple to ignore in high school, but it's a different environment in college.

#### **What have you enjoyed most about your experience being away from home and living on campus in San Diego?**

So far, I've truly enjoyed the independence that has been given to me. It gives me a sense of reality and the real world. Also, the people I have met and the friendships I've made have made my college experience so much better. In all I've learned new things about myself while also having a good time.

#### **How has your world perspective grow or changed as a result of your time in college thus far?**

I've grown to appreciate my surroundings, whether I'm visiting home or at school, I'm grateful for what I have in front of me. Being in school feels like a tremendous opportunity for me, and having the support of my family makes me appreciate the help and opportunities I have to succeed.

#### **What is your major and what do you plan on doing with your degree in the future? This can be more schooling, OR career and/or family related.**

I am currently an Education Sciences major and with it I hope to be part of the education field as a teacher or a counselor. Teaching in any role to any age group feels like a lot of variety and all I want to do is support and educate others in whatever manner I can.

#### **Is there anything else you'd like to share or advice you would give to current students/staff at Valor?**

Some advice I would like to give students is that feeling out of place is normal, any new environment may be difficult to adjust to but that won't determine your success in the environment. Trying new things can be frightening, but it is also super beneficial and exciting throughout the process.

## RKHS CLASS OF 2020-2022

### ANZIE PYO

**RKHS ALUMNA 2021**  
**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE**  
**MAJOR: BIOLOGY**



#### **How was your transition from RKHS to UCR?**

I finished high school online because of the COVID pandemic, so transitioning to college was a little difficult at first. Classes were still being offered online but I was fortunate to be able to move in to the dorms. I enjoyed being able to live in my own space but did miss home at times. I also contemplated transferring to a different school closer to home, but decided to give UCR a fair chance before doing so. After my first year, I felt more comfortable with the university so I decided it would be better to just stay and finish my degree here. It definitely was not the smoothest transition, but I learned a lot about myself.

#### **How did you pick your major?**

I originally started school as an engineering major and then after taking some classes, decided to switch over to the sciences. I was always interested in STEM majors, but instead of focusing on engineering, I felt like I enjoyed Biology more and had different opportunities to get involved in research. Since switching over, I was able to get more involved in a research lab where I assist a professor with their work.

#### **How did you get involved in the research lab you work in?**

At a school like UCR, which is considered a research institution just like all of the other UC campuses, all of the professors conduct research in their respective fields. Since I was taking a science class with this professor, I learned about the opportunity to become a research assistant and work in the lab. Each lab is very different and depending on the type of research the professor is doing there could be labs where you experiment with live creatures like rats/mice or where you are experimenting with chemicals. As a research assistant I am able to go into the lab and work on experiments, evaluate results to hopefully move science forward. The research process is really eye-opening, and I am thankful to have the opportunity to work hands on in a lab.

#### **What advice do you have for students getting ready to go to college?**

One big piece of advice that I have is to be open minded to new opportunities. Even if you end up going to a school that maybe isn't your dream school, you can open doors for yourself and learn to enjoy the environment. Every school will have something great to offer you as long as you are open to learn and adapt to the environment. I could have easily given up on myself for not transitioning smoothly into my school. With the right support and preparation, I was able to push through and gain a new perspective about where I am at and what goals I want to accomplish. Just keep pushing through and believe in yourself to be able to do it. There's so much to learn when you keep an open mind.

# BRIGHT STAR SCHOOLS

## ALUMNI SUPPORT & COLLEGE SUCCESS TEAM

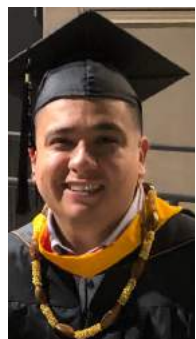
All Bright Star Schools Alums, high school graduates, will be supported in graduating from college for up to 6 years. Our goal is for our Alumni to earn a Bachelor's, Associate's, Career Technical Education degree, or workforce development certificate from an accredited college or program. If you are 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.

### STEPHANIE CALDERON

BA, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES  
M.ED. CSU, LONG BEACH COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Stephanie Calderon has over 6 years of experience supporting students and their families in college access and success programs. She currently serves as the Alumni Support and College Success Coordinator for Rise Kohyang High School. Her goal is to support all RKHS Alumni with their post-secondary plans to ensure they accomplish their goals and aspirations for the future. She is a first-generation college graduate. She obtained her bachelors in 2014 from UCLA in Women Studies. Upon graduating college she decided she wanted to help facilitate the process for applying and earning a degree for youth in her community of Los Angeles.

RKHS ASCS COORDINATOR  
SUPPORTING CLASS OF 2020 - 2022  
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### MIKE CARRERA

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

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 BSSCA Alums in navigating higher education and in contributing to students' success in college and career.

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### DAVID SOLIS

BA, CSU, NORTHRIDGE

David Solis is a graduate from California State University, Northridge where he majored in Chicana/o & Central American Studies. He is joining the ASCS team as the Community College & CTE Coordinator. He will focus on supporting students at BSSCA and VAHS who are interested in pursuing a post-secondary education at community college or earning a certificate/vocational degree. As a first-generation graduate he uses the power of 'storytelling' to share relatable experiences with his students to promote higher education as an option for growth. He has spent the last ten years supporting first-generation students through college access programs that focus on college & financial aid applications, community college experience, workforce development, and financial literacy. He believes education is one powerful tool, of many, that can shape and/or change our lives.

BSSCA & VAHS CC & CTE ASCS COORDINATOR  
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### KYLE PETRIE

BA, BOWDOIN COLLEGE

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.

VAHS ASCS COORDINATOR  
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### GENOVEVA CORTES

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

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.

ASCS DIRECTOR  
SUPPORTING BSSCA & VAHS CLASS OF 2017  
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