



ALUMNI NEWS

BY GENOVEVA CORTES

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BRIGHT STAR SCHOOLS ALUMNI IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

NANCY LARA

SHCA ALUMNA, 2014
SANTA MONICA COLLEGE ALUMNA: AA SOCIOLOGY, 2020
UC, SANTA BARBARA ALUMNA: BA SOCIOLOGY 2022
HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION: CURRENT STUDENT



The road to success is never linear and Nancy Lara’s educational trajectory is proof. Over 4 years ago, Nancy found herself in a tough situation. We met at the Starbucks across the street from La Fayette Park to discuss her future and see how I could support her in getting back to school. After she graduated from Stella High Charter Academy (formerly BSSCA) in 2014, she took a gap year to work and then enrolled at CSUN for a year. That didn’t go so well and a while later, she was enrolled at Santa Monica College.

Having lots of family responsibilities that pulled her away from her studies, she took some time off to figure out her next move. For Nancy, it wasn’t an issue of whether she was capable of succeeding in college, it was more her mindset and setting boundaries with others so she could prioritize her health, well-being, and future.

We discussed her goals which was to transfer from SMC into a 4-yr college and earn a Bachelor’s degree. We started by creating an educational plan that outlined all the classes she would need to complete in order for this to happen. In a few years, she not only earned an Associate’s degree in Sociology, she was on her way to UC, Santa Barbara to continue the next leg of her educational journey where she earned her Bachelor’s in Sociology.

A year before she was set to graduate from UCSB, she was already planning to apply to graduate school. Having applied to USC, CSULB, UCLA and Harvard’s Graduate School of Education (HGSE), she selected Harvard. Nancy will be earning a Master’s in the Education Leadership Organization Entrepreneurship program.

She could have gone to USC and it would have been far easier because “it’s down the street” but she decided on Harvard because of the vast networking opportunities and resources available to her. “I know if I came here, I would be meeting people from everywhere.” Her classmates hail from China, Bangladesh, Morocco, and other parts of the country and world, providing her the world class education she anticipated. “I knew my own capabilities and came in with a lot of self confidence. I have no doubt I will finish strong and keep repping my communities as a 1st gen, non- traditional college student, LGBTQ, Latine, from El Salvador.”

“HGSE keeps expanding my mind set, they enable me to embrace my identity and stay true to who I am while also connecting me to others.” While Nancy has always been a leader, at HGSE she is sharpening those skills. “I am always reminded that as a leader, I shouldn’t just focus on myself. I am constantly remembering who I am serving.”

When it comes to graduate school, her advice is to plan ahead, get as much information as possible, and go straight to a counselor or the ASCS Program. At first, “I wasn’t thinking about graduate school but when I asked for help, I was able to get different perspectives and advice. Try to get involved in your major. For instance, after I earn my Master’s degree, I know I want to work in an administrative position that serves college students so I worked on getting positions in that field” as an undergraduate at UCSB.



So how is she acclimating to life on the east coast? “I have to be organized and on top of my stuff. I’ve been on the go since the moment I got here.” While she sometimes misses LA, she’s found other Salvadorans on campus among the staff, who look out for her. “The people in Boston are so diverse. I thought moving to the east coast was crazy but it wasn’t as bad as I thought. I also thought I wouldn’t find people who have the same cultural background as me but I have. If you start talking to people and you come with good intentions, they will want to talk to you. I found a community out here.”

All Bright Star School Alumni can contact G. Cortes for free graduate school and career coaching.

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

DESTINY HERRERA

SHCA ALUMNA CLASS OF 2019
HOMESTEAD SCHOOLS ALUMNA CLASS OF 2022
MAJOR: LVN DEGREE

Destiny Herrera is the oldest of four kids. All of her siblings are part of the Stella network - from elementary all the way to Stella High Charter Academy. Destiny had a challenging time during her education. Her experience in middle school was troublesome but rather than letting those moments define who she would become, Destiny took ownership of her journey by speaking up for herself and others. Her time at SHCA brought in a new wave of challenges that would test her resilience. She was placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) which created setbacks and added barriers in her journey. In order to jump over these hurdles, Destiny relied on her community, advocates, and mentors like Ms. Pineda, Mr. Johnny Gonzalez, and Mr. Mikey Escobar: all three educators, current and former, who were generous, while empowering and motivating her.

After graduating in 2019 she went on to study at Santa Monica College and later El Camino College. During her first two years in community college she found herself missing school too often, lacking the commitment to complete a program, and misusing the financial aid award available to her. In Spring 2021 Destiny spoke with Mr. Carrera about her goals and aspirations; they worked together to find the proper campus & academic pathway. Destiny was admitted into Homestead Schools in the Summer of 2021. After years of navigating through a rocky road and dealing with the challenges life had to bring, she graduated in Summer 2022 earning her LVN degree. Destiny doesn't give up and she is proof that if you are determined, work hard, and get support, nothing can stop you from accomplishing your goals.



Why Homestead Schools?

Destiny had initially chosen to pursue a degree in the medical field to support her grandmother, Maria. Unfortunately, in 2021 Destiny experienced the loss of her beloved grandmother. "It was my grandmother's dream for me to become a Nurse. I can't be there for her but I figured, why can't I go on to help other people?"



How did you manage to stay consistent?

"My grandmother's passing had a significant impact on my mental health and well-being. I was no longer going to be able to share my success with the most important person in my life." However, as in years prior, Destiny developed the courage to transform this experience into a reason to stay motivated and focused. "I would have my grandmother's picture saved on my desktop. Every day when I opened my laptop, I kept telling myself, I'm doing this for you."

What advice would you give to students?

"Before putting yourself down, do it, don't give up at that instant. Keep pushing yourself. Life is difficult but you have control on how to overcome these obstacles."

What about students who are interested in Nursing?

"Nursing school starts with less challenging assignments and classes but becomes more difficult as you're moving along. Give yourself some time before you begin your Nursing program. The programs are more challenging, rigorous, structured, and demanding. If you fail one assignment do not let that hold you back. You have plenty of assignments throughout your journey. Don't focus only on your grades, but focus on understanding the material that is being given to you by the instructor."

Lastly, what is your definition of success?

"To me success is being able to achieve the goals you have in life. Do not worry about what other people think of you. Once you develop a growth mindset, you will be open to learning and accomplishing all your goals. Focus on yourself and accomplish your goals."

BSSCA CLASS OF 2018-2022

DIANNE REYES

SHCA ALUMNA 2021
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE,
BACHELOR OF ARTS DEGREE: EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

What is your major and why?

I'm currently majoring in Early Childhood Development. My goal is to be a Physical Therapist or Occupational Therapist. In high school, I didn't know what I wanted to be but I knew that I enjoyed helping people, especially children. While I was a student at BSSCA, (now SHCA), I participated in Link Crew, Bring Change to Mind, and Showcase of the Arts. They were great opportunities to work with students and staff. Those experiences really confirmed that I wanted to serve the community, especially young children.

What are the benefits of living on campus?

Living on campus has been a great experience thus far and I would recommend other students to take advantage of the opportunity if it is financially possible. Since I live on campus, I can participate in different campus activities and also take advantage of some of the resources at CSUN. At the moment, I participate in The Women United Club and The Gamers Club and when I need a quiet place to study, I go to the Pride Center. In addition, I also work for the Disability Resources and Educational Services center which is another way that I help students on campus. If I didn't live on campus it would be very difficult to be active because the commute would be very time-consuming. I also enjoy the fact that I get my independence which also forces me to be accountable for my things. Next school year I plan to study abroad in Denmark. I feel more comfortable with moving abroad because I'm currently living on my own.



How did your world perspective grow or change as a result of your time in college?

It has definitely changed because there's no one constantly reminding you when things are due. That was something I had to learn quickly because at BSSCA my teachers and counselor would always remind us about certain deadlines. At CSUN your syllabus is your best friend because it tells you when all your assignments are due. I also took a few Chicano Studies classes that have opened my eyes and helped me understand how fortunate I am to have the opportunity to attend college. There was a point in our history when your gender and the color of your skin determined if you were eligible to attend college.

What is something you wish you would've known before starting college?

That it's okay if you attend a college that none of your friends are attending. Initially, I was a little scared about attending CSUN because all my friends were going to different universities. I was overwhelmed about who was I going to hang out with or who were going to be my friends at school. But once school started my freshmen year, all those questions were being answered little by little. In all honesty, if I would've let my doubts and fears influence my decision, I would probably be working and not going to college.

How was starting school during the pandemic and how are things now?

During my first semester, the campus was a ghost town because there were hardly any students on campus. Now that most students are taking classes in person, the campus feels more alive and it feels that I'm a college student. Not only are there more students on campus but more events are happening and clubs are more active. It was also difficult starting school during the pandemic. I know there are a few students who graduated with me from BSSCA in 2021 who ended up dropping out after a semester or two. I was fortunate enough to keep in touch with other students who were also dealing with similar issues and I wasn't alone. Knowing that I wasn't the only person dealing with online classes and trying to stay motivated when you're on a computer all day is what kept me going. I also reminded myself that I worked hard during my 4 years at BSSCA to have the opportunity to be here and I wasn't going to waste it.

VAHS CLASS OF 2018-2022

SKY MEDINA

VAHS ALUMNA 2021
AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY
MAJOR: REGISTERED NURSE (RN)



What skills/mindsets/attitudes did you learn while a student at Valor that helped you during your four years in college?

The specific type of skill that I learned while I was a student at Valor was to prioritize my schoolwork before I did anything else. I've also learned to have the mindset of working for a better future for myself and learning to do things that make me happy.

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

I think making it intentional for high school students to really know how independent we are in this certain college environment is very important. When I went to college for the first time it really shocked me how separated everyone was and the way professors are towards students. Also, the importance of connections depends on your career or life because it does help in the long run.

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

The things that I have enjoyed while being away from home are meeting new people and creating a sense of community at Azusa Pacific University. I've made a solid friend group here. It definitely gives me more time to study by living on campus because there are less distractions around me.

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

I've learned that I have the ability to grow and improve my level of knowledge. That I don't need to rely on others for help on certain assignments or tests. Of course, it's good to have your own study groups but I've learned that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be alone and independent. My world perspective has changed knowing that no one is there to cater to me and there's more to life than we see during our high school years.

What is your major and what do you plan on doing with your degree in the future?

My major right now is RN (Registered Nurse) and I plan on just doing four years of school to be an ER Nurse or a Pediatric Nurse, but I'm still indecisive about being a Nurse Practitioner and opening my own clinic. It honestly just depends on how I'm feeling after my four years of college if I want to continue schooling or if I'm satisfied with where I am when I get to it.

Is there anything else you'd like to share or advice you would give to current students and/or staff who are back at Valor Academy High School?

The advice I would like to give to the staff at Valor is to be patient with newcomers, even though I know it can be hard but to just keep in mind that everything in life takes time. Also, for current students I would say to invest in your friendships because you'll never know who will be there for you in the future. Get involved. Failure is common so don't worry too much about it, don't let it overflow in your mind where it creates unnecessary stress.

RKHS CLASS OF 2020-2021

LITZY MARTINEZ

RKHS ALUMNA 2020
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE
MAJOR: JOURNALISM



Litzy is an alumna from RKHS' founding class and is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Journalism at CSUN. She is a 3rd year student with senior standing, and recently petitioned for graduation, so she will be walking the stage to get her degree this May! Litzy will be the first in her family to graduate from college as well as the very first RKHS alumni to earn a bachelor's degree, a feat she accomplished in 3 years! Learn more about her unique experience in college from the interview below. Litzy, we are so proud of you and can't wait to see what the future has in store for you!

How was your transition from RKHS to CSUN?

In my senior year of high school, we got to finish online because that's when COVID was barely starting, (in March 2020). The transition to college was difficult in the beginning because pretty much my whole freshman and sophomore experience was online. Although it was a different way to start college, it allowed me to focus on my classes and save money since I wouldn't have to be on campus physically. As a result, I did really well academically and was on the dean's list for two semesters.

How has your experience as a journalism major been at CSUN?

My professors have been really great and have so many different experiences to share. I've learned about different areas of journalism because they work for some major networks and news reporting outlets, so it's been really great to learn from them. One of the coolest things I've gotten to do is create my own podcast for a class. It started out as an assignment, but it's been fun to continue recording and putting out content for listeners. The podcast discusses sibling relationships and their complexities.

What are you looking forward to in this last year at CSUN?

I am trying to make the most out of my junior/senior year because I feel like my experience at CSUN has been so brief. Since the majority of my time in school has been spent online, I haven't gotten the full "college experience." This year I was intentional about joining organizations and getting involved on campus. I recently got to go on a trip with one of the organizations to Catalina Island which was a really fun experience.

What are your goals for after graduation?

I am still unsure about what exactly comes next for me, but I have a general idea of my goals. I know for sure I want to gain some work experience and build up my resume in journalism, so I'm going to focus on finding a job/internship in the field with the help of Ms. Calderon. Once I have some experience in the field, I would like to pursue graduate school and further my education. I'm not in a rush to go to grad school, but definitely have it in my future plans. For now, I want to begin building my career in journalism.



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.

BSSCA ASCS COORDINATOR
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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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