

# AZALAS

DECEMBER 2025



“ A great accomplishment shouldn't be the end of the road, just the starting point for the next leap forward. ”

*Harvey Mackay*



# *From the Desk of* THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



The AZALAS December Newsletter invites our members and sponsors to pause, reflect, and look ahead together. As 2025 comes to a close, we are grateful for the voices of our Executive Board, staff, members, and partners who share meaningful reflections on the year behind us and their hopes for the year ahead.

Denis Waitley reminds us:

*"Everything that is past is either a learning experience to grow on, a beautiful memory to reflect on, or a motivating factor to act upon."*

Throughout 2025, our AZALAS community experienced moments of growth, celebration, challenge, and progress. Each experience—whether uplifting or demanding—has helped shape who we are as leaders and as a collective. We carry forward the lessons learned, hold close the memories that brought us joy, and allow both to inspire our next steps.

As we plan for 2026, we do so with renewed purpose and optimism. A new year brings fresh opportunities to strengthen our impact, deepen our connections, and continue advancing educational leadership across Arizona. Whether through personal goals, professional aspirations, or shared commitments to our students and communities, we look ahead with enthusiasm, gratitude, and a belief in one another.

Thank you to our members and sponsors for walking this journey with us. Together, we step into 2026 energized, hopeful, and ready for what's next.

*Dr. Marvane Lobato*



# Martha Celia Alonso

Martha Celia Alonso, AT, MEd, Ed.S  
Bioscience Teacher  
Douglas High School  
Douglas Unified School District

***Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?***

*When I look back on 2025, one moment rises above the rest—a moment 15 years in the making. As a Bioscience teacher and HOSA advisor at Douglas High School, I have guided countless students toward state and international leadership opportunities. Many teams have qualified for the International Leadership Conference, and several have proudly reached the stage with Top 10 finishes. Yet that long-awaited international medal had always been just out of reach.*

*This past summer, that changed. Under the leadership of President Franco, our Parliamentary Procedure team—a group I have mentored for years—earned 3rd place internationally, securing the first HOSA international medal in the history of Douglas High School. Watching them shine on that stage was indescribable. It validated years of early mornings, late evenings, training sessions, travel, and unwavering belief in my students' potential.*

*What made it even more meaningful is that this team is now entering its senior year. We have one more opportunity to chase gold together, and witnessing their growth has reminded me why every sacrifice in education is worthwhile. Their accomplishment was not just a medal—it was a milestone that affirmed the power of persistence, passion, and community.*

***As you look ahead to 2026, what goals or plans—personally or professionally—are you most excited to pursue?***

*As I look toward 2026, I am most energized by my journey with the Four Corners Latinx Leadership Academy. Being selected for this cohort has been one of the greatest honors of my professional life. Like many educators, I have moments of doubt about whether I am doing enough or growing enough. Being chosen affirmed that the work I do matters—and that I have the capacity to lead beyond my classroom.*

*The first session, combined with attending AzALAS, has already been transformative. Listening to the stories of other Latinx leaders—their challenges, triumphs, and hopes for their communities—has given me a renewed sense of purpose. Their courage strengthens my own.*

*I am deeply excited for the remaining sessions and the opportunity to learn, grow, and bring those skills back to Douglas. The Academy is not just professional development; it is a pathway toward becoming the leader my students, school, and community deserve.*

***In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?***

*In the year ahead, I plan to embrace a more intentional balance between my passions, my wellness, and my work.*

*Personally, I stay grounded through traveling and geocaching—two hobbies that challenge me both mentally and physically. Planning routes, exploring new places, and reaching a cache after a long climb or hike gives me space to disconnect from stress and reconnect with curiosity and joy. These adventures remind me to slow down, breathe deeply, and appreciate the world around me.*

*Professionally, I've learned that well-being comes from reframing success. Early in my career as a HOSA advisor, I believed the outcome—scores, medals, rankings—defined the value of my work. Over time, I realized that what students need most is a guide who is both steady and compassionate. Someone who can set high expectations, but also inspire them when things get difficult.*

*That shift has transformed not only my outlook, but my students' performance. When I focus on the journey instead of the destination, I find myself more fulfilled—and interestingly, that is when my students truly began to thrive and earn top-tier international recognition.*

*In 2026, I plan to continue nurturing that balance: taking care of myself so I can be fully present for my students, and taking pride in the growth, not just the medals.*





# *Leticia I. Anaya*

Principal, San Luis High School  
Yuma Union High School District

**Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?**

One of the most meaningful moments of 2025 was witnessing our staff come together to support our students in transformational ways. From surpassing our FAFSA completion goals to earning an A letter grade, these accomplishments reflected not only the hard work of our team, but also the deep commitment we share to uplifting our Sidewinders. Seeing our community unite around student success continues to be one of the greatest honors of my role.

**As you look ahead to 2026, what goals or plans personally or professionally—are you most excited to pursue?**

In 2026, I'm excited to continue strengthening systems that protect instructional time and expand opportunities for students. Professionally, I look forward to deepening our work around postsecondary readiness and teacher support and development. Personally, I aim to be more intentional about nurturing balance by making space for family and moments of joy that fuel my work.

**In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?**

To stay grounded, I plan to continue prioritizing movement, mindfulness, and meaningful connection. Establishing small but consistent habits, like eating breakfast, unplugged evenings, and sufficient rest, helps me stay present and energized. I also hope to spend more time with my family, with my husband going on micro vacations, and time outdoors because family time and being outdoors keeps me motivated and balanced.



# *Ivan Carajal, M. Ed.*

Director of Community Education & Outreach  
Creighton Elementary School District

**Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?**

Looking back on 2025 has been both challenging and meaningful. The recently approved immigration laws had a profound impact on the families we serve, causing fear, absences from school, and significant hardships. It was difficult to witness members of our community being targeted and stripped of basic rights simply for who they are. Despite the challenges, I remind myself that change starts with showing the best of who I am—modeling resilience, empathy, and hope. I am proud of how our school community and staff rallied around families, offering protection, support, and “Know Your Rights” workshops. Witnessing our collective efforts to serve, empower, and uplift families was truly inspiring and reinforced the strength and compassion of our community.

**As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans, either personally or professionally—that you’re most excited to pursue?**

In 2026, I am excited to continue empowering families by ensuring they know their rights and have access to information that gives them agency and confidence. I plan to further showcase the value of being bicultural and bilingual—not as something to be feared, but as a strength that allows me to better support all families and community members. Professionally, I aim to continue promoting inclusion, understanding, and advocacy, helping to create a school environment where every family feels respected, supported, and empowered.

**In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?**

To support my mental and physical well-being, I plan to continue practicing CrossFit regularly and allow myself small treats, like enjoying ice cream only on weekends. Most importantly, I will focus on celebrating wins—both big and small—within our school community, state, and country. By concentrating on the positive and the progress we are making, I find motivation and hope that help me remain balanced, energized, and ready to continue serving our families with strength and compassion.



# Brandi Clarke

Learning and Professional Development Coordinator  
Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District

***Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?***

Looking back on 2025, one of the most memorable moments for me was stepping into my new role as the Learning and Professional Development Coordinator. This position has given me the opportunity to support new teachers and long-term substitutes—individuals whose work is essential to maintaining continuity and quality in our classrooms. In the midst of an ongoing teacher shortage, this work feels not only important but deeply aligned with my passion for uplifting educators. Guiding and encouraging those entering the profession reminded me why I chose this field in the first place: every student deserves committed, well-prepared adults who believe in their potential. Helping educators grow, gain confidence, and remain in this profession has been one of the most fulfilling parts of my year.

***As you look ahead to 2026, what goals or plans—personally or professionally—are you most excited to pursue?***

As I look ahead to 2026, I'm excited to continue growing in this role and expanding the ways I can support both new and experienced teachers. I hope to strengthen our systems of mentorship, develop more targeted professional learning opportunities, and foster a stronger sense of community for those joining our schools. Professionally, I am committed to building my leadership skills and deepening my understanding of effective teacher-retention practices, so our students benefit from stable, high-quality instruction. Personally, I am equally committed to staying grounded in my most important role—being a present mother. As I advance in my career, I want to ensure my family continues to feel supported, loved, and encouraged to thrive in their own journeys.

***In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?***

To stay balanced and healthy in 2026, I plan to be intentional about caring for both my mental and physical well-being. I hope to continue making time for movement, drinking more water, and creating moments for true presence. I want to be fully engaged with my loved ones and attentive to everyday moments that make life meaningful. By prioritizing these practices, I can maintain the energy and clarity needed to remain grounded, healthy, and fully invested in the roles and relationships that matter most.



# Joanne Fimbres

Chief Financial Officer  
Pendergast Elementary School District

**Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?**

As I reflect on 2025, both my professional and personal memories, I am filled with gratitude and appreciation. Professionally, this year underscored the critical importance of discipline and transparent fiscal management for my district. Advancing budget strategy, especially in a climate of competing priorities and demonstrated the value of long-range planning, resource optimization, and community-grounded fiscal decisions. The work supported organizational stability and positioned the district to better serve our students and staff. We celebrated the incorporation of not only the Dreamscape Lab at one of our campuses, but the addition of two mobile instructional Dreamscape units under the partnership with ASU.

The highlights of my personal reflections include witnessing the successes of my sons, both academically and professionally. Their accomplishments reaffirmed the value of persistence, opportunity, and the broader purpose of the work that we do within the education system. My greatest pride and joy have always been filled with the celebrations of their accomplishments, graduations, and career advancements.

Lastly, the gratitude of health and well-being is a personal milestone. Maintaining good health and reaching meaningful personal milestones provided grounding and perspective throughout the year. These successes shaped a more balanced, resilient approach to both my leadership responsibilities and personal life.



## **As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans, either personally or professionally—that you're most excited to pursue?**

As I look ahead to 2026, I seek to intentionally grow my leadership capacity by seeking out complex, high-leverage opportunities, whether through cross-functional initiatives, strategic planning efforts, and roles that allow for the influence of districtwide outcomes. The emphasis is on continuous improvement, stronger decision-making, and cultivating the kind of leadership presence that accelerates organizational performance and student successes.

On a personal level, I plan to continue my commitment to physical health and well-being that includes setting defined goals tied to experiences, growth, and milestones that matter to my family and me. This includes learning, travel, family time, and creative pursuits that bring balance and a sense of accomplishment outside of work.

## **In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?**

In 2026, my plan is to maintain a disciplined approach to physical health by integrating regular movement, strength-building activities, and restorative practices into my weekly schedule. This includes improving my routine for exercise, nutrition, hydration, and sleep to preserve energy and improve overall functioning. Nurturing relationships and activities that contribute to personal grounding, time with family, meaningful conversations, hobbies, and environments that promote joy and connection. These touchpoints provide balance, perspective, and emotional reinforcement, to include an effective work life balance.





## ***Mary Lou Gonzales, M.Ed.***

Language Acquisition Coordinator  
Phoenix Schools

### **Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?**

Looking back on 2025, one of the most meaningful professional memories for me was witnessing the vision of the Dual Language Immersion planning committee come to life. During the previous school year, I had the opportunity to coordinate and help facilitate the committee's work to create a research-based framework for relaunching the program at Lowell Elementary, a school deeply rooted in the South Phoenix community. Collaborating with colleagues who were equally passionate about designing a high-quality, outcomes driven DLI model was both inspiring and affirming. Seeing our collective efforts implemented this year has been incredibly rewarding. Another highlight of 2025 was completing the first year of my Educational Doctorate program. The experience has challenged and expanded my thinking, giving me powerful new perspectives to strengthen and elevate my work with multilingual learners.

### **As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans, either personally or professionally—that you're most excited to pursue?**

As I look ahead to 2026, I am eager to re-engage with our DLI planning committee to deepen the implementation of our DLI program, focusing on refining the framework based on year-one data, strengthening primary instruction, and expanding family engagement structures. On the doctoral side, a key goal will be to connect my coursework and research more directly to district initiatives. On the personal side, I plan to set aside more time for my kids and be intentional about cherishing the middle school years with my son. As he enters 8th grade in the fall and begins exploring potential high schools, I want to prioritize being there to support him, share in his experiences, and enjoy this important transition together.

### **In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?**

In 2026, I want to be more mindful about slowing down and avoiding the tendency to overpack my daily schedule. I am committed to consistently incorporating exercise and healthy eating into my routine, not only for my own well-being but for my family's health as well.



# Vanessa Gonzalez

Professional Development Director  
Gadsden Elementary School District

## **Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?**

Looking back on 2025, the memory that stands out most profoundly is our district being recognized with the NIET District Award of Excellence for Educator Effectiveness. It was a moment filled with tremendous pride and emotion because it represented far more than a single accomplishment, it reflected the collective heart, dedication, and spirit of the Gadsden Elementary School District community.

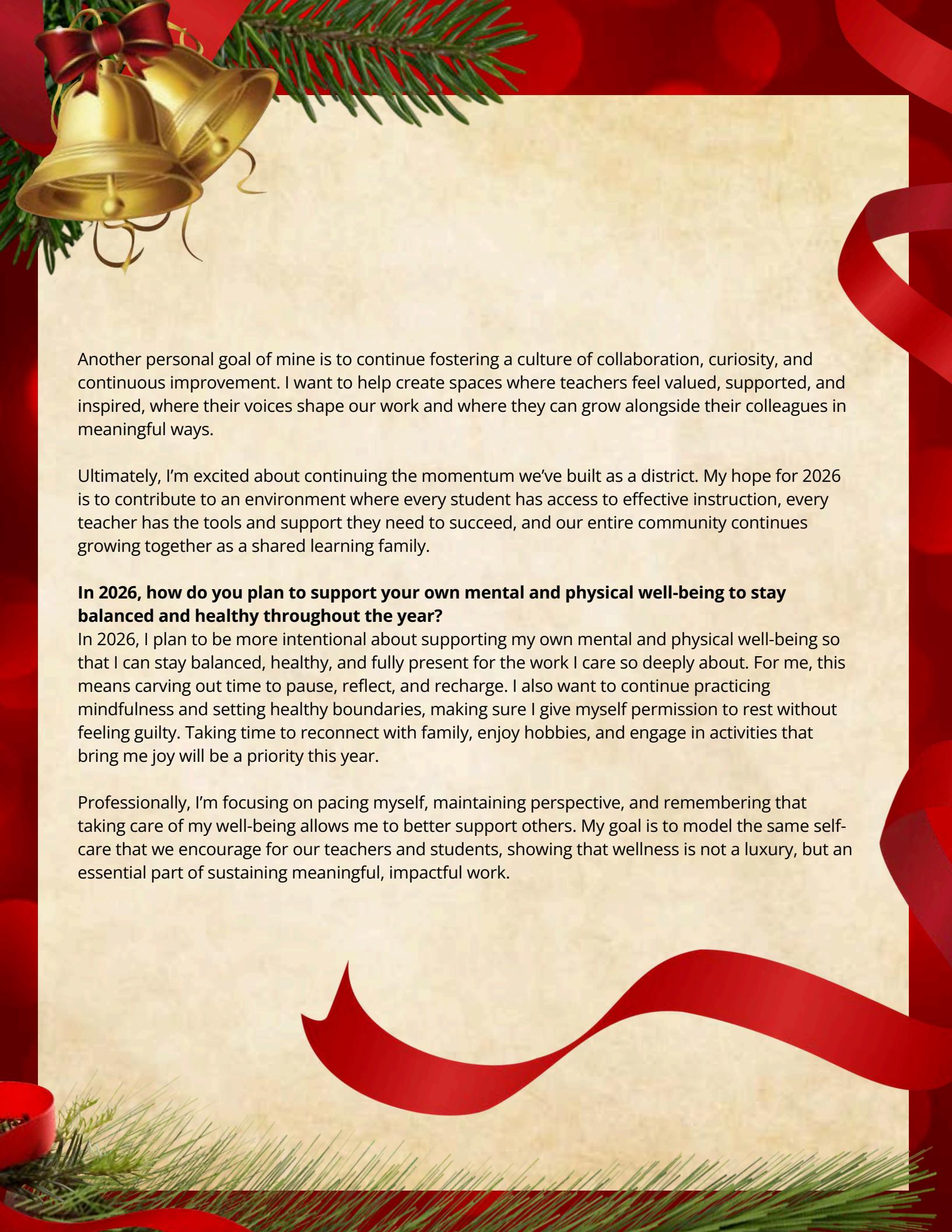
This award symbolizes who we are: a true community of learners committed to excellence, equity, and opportunity for every child. It embodies our belief that all students deserve access to high-quality instruction, meaningful learning experiences, and the support needed to develop not only academically, but socially and emotionally as well. To see our teachers, students, leaders, and families honored for the work they pour themselves into every day was both inspiring and deeply affirming.

For me personally, the recognition carried special significance. Over my 14 years in Gadsden, I've had the privilege of witnessing our evolution with NIET, from our early steps to the strong instructional systems we've built together. For the past nine years, I've been honored to help lead this partnership, supporting teachers, instructional coaches, and principals in their efforts to provide effective, impactful instruction that truly changes students' lives.

This award wasn't just a celebration of what we've accomplished; it was a reminder of our shared purpose and the incredible power of a unified community working for kids. It is a moment I will always carry with gratitude and pride.

## **As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans, either personally or professionally—that you're most excited to pursue?**

As I look ahead to 2026, I'm most excited about continuing to strengthen the support we provide for both teachers and students. My goal is to be increasingly intentional, listening closely to teacher and student needs and ensuring that the support we offer is purposeful, targeted, and truly responsive to the realities in our classrooms. I'm also looking forward to deepening our work around instructional excellence. This includes helping teams refine their practice, expanding opportunities for professional learning, and continuing to build the leadership capacity of instructional coaches and mentor teachers. I want to ensure that every educator feels equipped and empowered to provide high-quality instruction that meets the diverse needs of every learner.



Another personal goal of mine is to continue fostering a culture of collaboration, curiosity, and continuous improvement. I want to help create spaces where teachers feel valued, supported, and inspired, where their voices shape our work and where they can grow alongside their colleagues in meaningful ways.

Ultimately, I'm excited about continuing the momentum we've built as a district. My hope for 2026 is to contribute to an environment where every student has access to effective instruction, every teacher has the tools and support they need to succeed, and our entire community continues growing together as a shared learning family.

**In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?**

In 2026, I plan to be more intentional about supporting my own mental and physical well-being so that I can stay balanced, healthy, and fully present for the work I care so deeply about. For me, this means carving out time to pause, reflect, and recharge. I also want to continue practicing mindfulness and setting healthy boundaries, making sure I give myself permission to rest without feeling guilty. Taking time to reconnect with family, enjoy hobbies, and engage in activities that bring me joy will be a priority this year.

Professionally, I'm focusing on pacing myself, maintaining perspective, and remembering that taking care of my well-being allows me to better support others. My goal is to model the same self-care that we encourage for our teachers and students, showing that wellness is not a luxury, but an essential part of sustaining meaningful, impactful work.



# Andy Gutierrez

Principal

Gateway Elementary School

Creighton School District

**Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?**

In looking back at 2025, a professional memory that stands out to me is working with my school to remove our "D" status from the Arizona school report card system. When I first moved to Gateway, we were in this status, and, unfortunately, for many reasons, we went back into it. We worked hard and moved up to a "C," and our goal is to move to a "B" this year. It was a team effort, and we all worked hard to make the changes and improvements needed.

**As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans, either personally or professionally, that you're most excited to pursue?**

For 2026, my personal goal is to work hard to finish my doctoral classes and start working on my dissertation. This has always been a goal of mine; however, I just never started the program. I was provided an excellent opportunity to work with the International Successful School Principal Partnership (ISSPP), and I am happy to say that I have one more semester of classes, followed by the final step of writing my dissertation, which I hope to complete before May 2027 to earn my doctoral degree!

**In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?**

In 2026, I plan to support my own mental and physical well-being by staying balanced. It is interesting because this is part of my dissertation topic (Principal Well-being). I have been better at working on this over the past few years by golfing, playing ice hockey, indoor soccer, taking less work home, and balancing family and work time. This year, my goal is to focus on working out and sustaining this. I usually start working out for a month, then stop. A month goes by, and I begin again. I feel so much better when I work out, and I need to stay focused on this as I know it will keep me healthy and help me be a better person and a better principal.



# *Bianca Hernandez*

Douglas High School-Secondary Curriculum  
Coordinator  
Douglas Unified School District

***Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?***

The year 2025 has been my first full year with neither of my children at home, and the quiet has become something I'm learning to embrace. For 27 years, my identity has been rooted in caring for children: my students and my own. Guiding, loving, and helping them build foundations for their own futures. And while I still pour myself into my students every day, the part of me that spent decades nurturing my own two children is beginning to shift towards unknown ground. For so long, my husband and I functioned in a world that revolved around raising our family together. We were partners in the chaos—sharing late nights, school events, responsibilities, and the countless small moments that made up the rhythm of our home. Now the house is quiet, and we find ourselves pausing a little more often, reflecting silently, adjusting to this space that feels both unfamiliar and full of memory.

***As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans—personally or professionally—that you're most excited to pursue?***

There is pride in seeing my children step confidently into their own lives. But there is also an ache that sits beneath the pride; a longing for the ordinary days I once took for granted. And as this new year unfolds, I'm realizing that this transition is asking something new of me. It's asking not just for acceptance, but for transformation.

***In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being?***

This reflection naturally leads me to my goal for 2026: to find my new sense of purpose. I recognize that stepping into this next chapter requires attention not only to my personal growth but also to my mental and physical well-being. After years of prioritizing others, I need to intentionally create space to nurture myself, stay balanced, and sustain the energy and clarity necessary to fully embrace this chapter. By caring for my mind, body, and spirit, I aim to enter 2026 not only ready to find a renewed sense of purpose but also to thrive in it. This intentional focus on well-being will allow me to embrace growth, strengthen my relationships, and fully step into the life that awaits my husband and me in this new chapter.



# ***Martha L. Hernandez M.Ed.***

**Larry C. Kennedy Principal  
Creighton Elementary School District**

***Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?***

2025 was a year of deep reflection and growth as I stepped into the principalship at Larry C. Kennedy Elementary. One especially meaningful experience was participating in a Farm to School Retreat alongside our garden teacher, Ms. Layshock. Learning from local farmers and educators across Arizona, and then visiting my childhood school to see a thriving student-led garden and kitchen, was a powerful full-circle moment. It reminded me that learning, wellness, culture, and community are deeply connected, and that when we invest in sustainable, place-based experiences, we honor both where our students come from and where they are headed.

***As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans—personally or professionally—that you’re most excited to pursue?***

In 2026, I am most excited to fully bring our vision at Kennedy to life, particularly our Outdoor Learning Model. We are currently in the novice stage, and that comes with both challenges and incredible opportunities. With the commitment of our teachers and the support of our families and community partners, our goal is to intentionally design outdoor spaces as extensions of the classroom—places where rigorous learning, sustainability, wellness, and leadership intersect. This next phase is about deepening practice, aligning instruction and culture, and ensuring that our outdoor learning vision is not an add-on, but an authentic expression of who we are as a school community.

***In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being?***

Supporting my own well-being has become an essential part of my leadership. At LCK, we explicitly teach students how to use calm spaces and calm corners, and each quarter our teachers focus on a self-regulation strategy to help students manage big emotions. I am honest in sharing that I practice these same strategies myself. School leadership is emotional work, and modeling wellness matters.

Our campus environment supports this beautifully. After heavy conversations or challenging days, I often take a short nature walk along our outdoor trails. Being surrounded by green spaces helps me reset and re-ground so I can lead with clarity and care. I plan to protect time for movement, reflection, nature, and meaningful connection—knowing that caring for myself allows me to show up fully for the students, staff, and community I serve.



# Drew Keil

Business Development Manager  
CORE Construction | Arizona

**Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?**

A personal Milestone would be laying down roots. The most profoundly impactful personal memory of 2025 was the purchase of our first home. Getting the keys marked the realization of a long-held dream to establish a "forever home," allowing us to lay down permanent roots and actively plan to start our family in a neighborhood that brings us immense pride and belonging.

**Professional Impact: Investing in People**

Professionally, the standout memory was the company's intentional and increased valuing of professional development across all the states we serve. Our enhanced presence at national events, including the ALAS conference, powerfully demonstrated CORE's commitment to:

- Reinvestment in our own employees.
- Genuine investment in the continuous professional development of our K-12 clients.

**As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans, either personally or professionally—that you're most excited to pursue?**

**Personal Horizon: Marriage and Family**

Looking ahead, I am most excited about two major personal milestones: marrying my fiancée in our backyard and immediately focusing on starting our family. This is the core foundation for the next chapter of our lives.



### Professional Focus: Deepening Connections

My primary professional goal is to move beyond transactions and establish genuine, durable connections with our local K-12 schools. I plan to actively achieve this by:

1. Joining more local school committees to offer CORE's insights.
2. Presenting and sharing resources specifically tailored to help our more rural communities feel heard and supported.
3. Getting our great team out of the office to meet clients where they are—at community events, conferences, and informal gatherings—truly highlighting that our people are the primary value-add of CORE.

### **In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?**

#### Balancing Major Life Milestones

Maintaining personal well-being will be a significant focus, especially given the major life milestones ahead (wedding and starting a family). My strategy centers on being hyper-aware of my health to ensure I can be an active, present, and energetic father and husband.

#### Cross-Pollinating Life and Work

To support balance, I plan to strategically cross-pollinate my personal and professional lives. I intend to bring my future wife to more work functions where appropriate. This helps integrate the two most important spheres of my life—my family and my work—fostering greater understanding and support for a healthy, holistic lifestyle.





# Jimmy March

Regional Sales Manager  
Otus

**Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?**

There's no need to weigh options when considering my most meaningful 2025 experience. That one's easy: I married my wife, Shealeen, on August 30th. Surrounded by family and friends in Maryville, TN to share in our vows—from the Catholic wedding mass in a little chapel on Maryville College's campus to the dance floor packed closing the reception with 75 people jumping to "Shout"—I can confidently say, that was the best wedding I ever attended and one of the best days of my life.



**As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans, either personally or professionally—that you're most excited to pursue?**

It'd be easy to say my main goals for 2026 are to start a family and finish my MBA from the University of Illinois. Those are certainly two big-picture goals. But the real objective? To be better in all the things I'm already doing. How can I be more effective—as a husband, brother, friend, business partner—and be of maximum service to the people around me? How can I show up for others? Almost every school I worked at had a Mother Teresa quote posted somewhere in the building: "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." Feels like I understand it a little better with each passing year.



***In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?***

*You can't pour from an empty cup. We've all heard that old saying. I know what it means to get burnt out, and how much less I have to offer when it happens. Taking care of myself mentally, physically and spiritually is essential to showing up as my best self.*

*Four goals help me in those areas:*

- 1.) Move my body 3 times a week: lifting weights, running, bike riding, yoga, doesn't matter, just make sure to break a sweat.*
- 2.) Rest is best: getting 8 hours of sleep every night is the goal.*
- 3.) Keep learning: read at least one new book every month*
  
- 4.) Reset weekly: The two places I find a reset are in church and out in nature hiking with my wife and dogs. Ideally, I'll make time for both every week.*

*Wishing all my ALAS friends a happy and healthy holiday season and reinvigorated start to 2026!*

*Jimmy*





# *Dr. Cherryl Paul*

Assistant Vice President of Strategic Alliances  
K-12 Educational Development  
Grand Canyon University

***Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?***

Looking back on 2025, I am filled with gratitude for the relationships and partnerships that have continued to grow and flourish. Some of my most meaningful moments were spent walking alongside superintendents, principals, and educational leaders who care deeply about students. Hosting leaders on campus, expanding our Superintendent Collaborative Network, and witnessing the collective impact of our shared efforts felt both humbling and inspiring. I am thankful for the trust, collaboration, and kindness that so many have extended throughout the year.

On a personal note, the time spent with my grandchildren, seeing life, hope, and joy through their eyes, has been one of my greatest blessings. Those moments ground me and remind me why serving the PK-12 ecosystem is both an honor and a calling.

***As you look ahead to 2026, what goals or plans, personally or professionally are you most excited to pursue?***

As I look ahead to 2026, I'm excited to continue elevating the work we're doing with superintendents, principals, and educational leaders across Arizona and beyond. Strengthening our advisories, expanding learn-and-return opportunities for students, and enhancing the visibility of GCU's commitment to serving the PK-12 community are key priorities. Personally, I'm looking forward to creating more intentional time with my family and completing a few meaningful projects that have been on my heart, including documenting cherished family moments for my grandchildren.

***In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?***

In 2026, I plan to care for my mental and physical well-being with greater intention and gratitude. I recognize how blessed I am to do work that I love, and carve out moments for reflection, prayer, and stay active through walking and spending time outdoors. I am also grateful to be celebrating 42 years of marriage to Remo, whose love, support, and companionship continue to enrich my life. I've learned the importance of surrounding myself with people who bring light, encouragement, and positivity. By honoring moments of rest and embracing joy wherever I can, I hope to show up each day with clarity, gratitude, and a heart full of appreciation for the incredible people and opportunities in my life.



# Elda Pena

Principal, Santa Clara Elementary School  
Sunnyside Unified School District

**Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?**

Looking back on 2025, one memory that stands out as especially meaningful is the journey of perseverance and resilience that defined our school community. Learning that Santa Clara rose from a D grade in 2022, to a C in 2023, and then to a B in 2024 was a powerful reminder that intentional goal-setting, believing deeply in our students, and trusting in the dedication of our staff truly leads to positive outcomes. This progress wasn't accidental; it was the result of collective commitment, steady effort, and an unwavering belief in what our students are capable of achieving.

**As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans, either personally or professionally—that you're most excited to pursue?**

As I look ahead to 2026, I'm excited about the goals and possibilities that lie before us. Personally, I hope to find greater balance and prioritize my own well-being so that I can continue giving my very best to both my family and the community I serve. Professionally, I'm energized by the opportunity to continue growing in my leadership skills and supporting our students, staff, and families as we work toward ambitious goals. The path we choose is not always easy, as it requires creativity, hard work, and thinking beyond what's comfortable. But I look forward to witnessing the continued academic and social leaps our students will make as they build the confidence they need to strive for excellence.

**In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?**

In 2026, I plan to support my own mental and physical well-being by setting healthy boundaries and carving out time intentionally for self-care. I hope to stay grounded by finding activities that bring joy, both inside and outside the school day, so that I can keep my cup half full and remain present, balanced, and strong for those I serve.



## *Dr. Gerry Petersen-Incorvaia*

Assistant Superintendent for Educational Services  
Glendale Elementary School District

***Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?***

Throughout the 2025 calendar year, I have memories of various celebrations that were meaningful and still impact my life today and well into the future. A professional memory that stands out is celebrating our achievement data during our yearly data dig. GESD saw that not only are we living and breathing our All in for All Kids motto, but we are seeing a positive trajectory of not just one grade level or one school, but many schools, more grade level teams, and increased numbers of students gaining academically. This led to our theme of Bring It On: Clarity, Capacity, and Coherence for the 2025-2026 school year which has helped to ensure the entire district is continuing the upward trajectory.

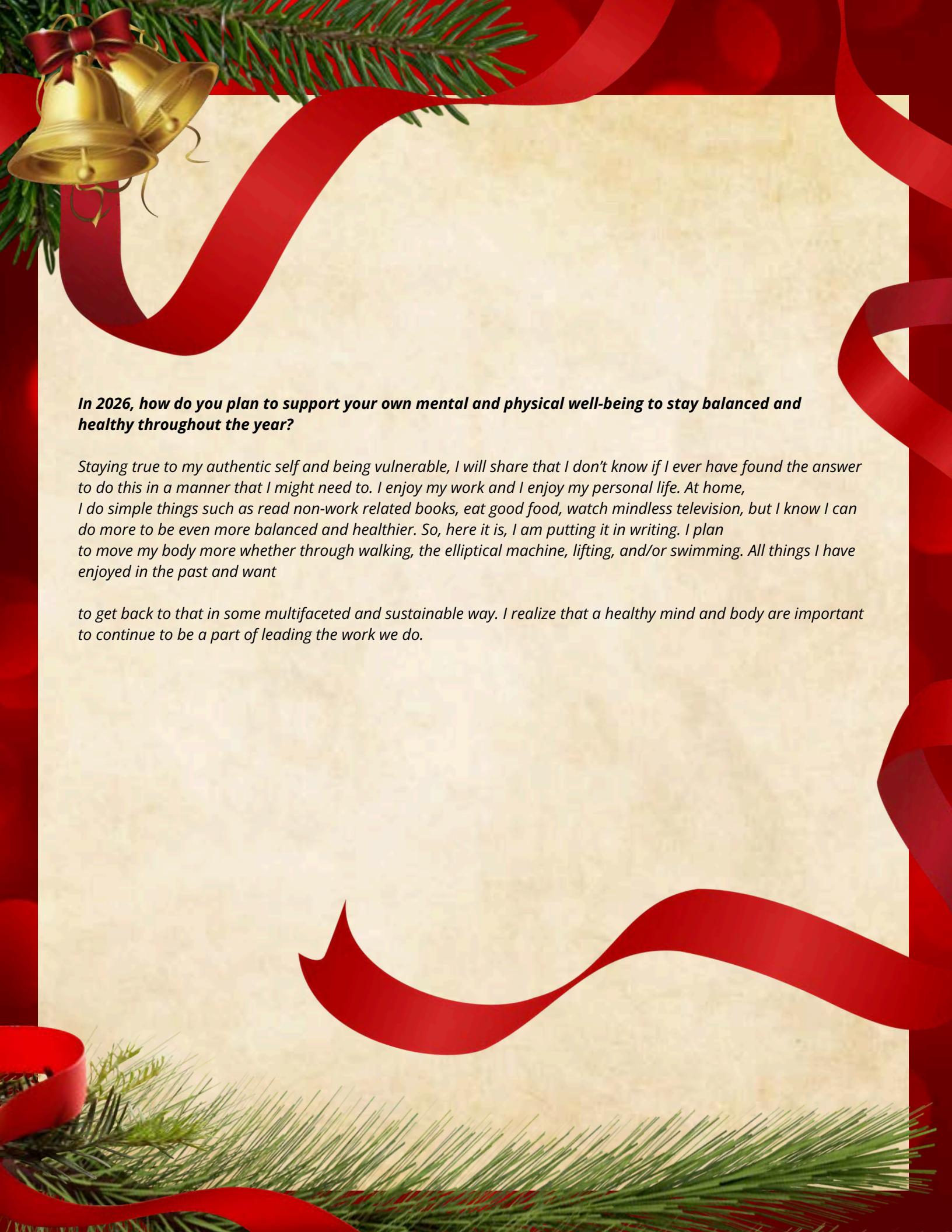
Moreover, seeing school sites that have exemplified the phrase Trust in the Journey, Stay the Course, as our Superintendent coined and emphasizes with GESD and consistently iterates, has been particularly meaningful.

We have not reached the summit, but we have A LOT of progress towards it. Celebrating not only outcomes, but the collaborative work that has lifted us all up, has helped build and sustain a positive climate and culture of continuous improvement. THIS is what has impacted my professional life during the past, present and into the future.

***As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans, either personally or professionally—that you're most excited to pursue?***

Professionally, I have celebrated that I am a lifelong learner and have constantly pushed myself to learn content and processes that are outside of my realm of expertise. Not only working in site leadership positions and educational services, but in student services, risk management and other departments has given me more opportunities to "live in the arena" as Brené Brown advocates. Doing new things, being vulnerable, delving into new content, and exploring new and diverse solutions to situations I have not had before has not only grown me professionally, but personally as well.

So, in 2026, I am excited to continue this work; stay in the arena, learn new things, put myself in a place of reflection, ensure continuous growth, and always stay humble to become an even better authentic leader for those I serve. My goal is to always exemplify this way of leading for the teams with which I work.



***In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?***

*Staying true to my authentic self and being vulnerable, I will share that I don't know if I ever have found the answer to do this in a manner that I might need to. I enjoy my work and I enjoy my personal life. At home, I do simple things such as read non-work related books, eat good food, watch mindless television, but I know I can do more to be even more balanced and healthier. So, here it is, I am putting it in writing. I plan to move my body more whether through walking, the elliptical machine, lifting, and/or swimming. All things I have enjoyed in the past and want*

*to get back to that in some multifaceted and sustainable way. I realize that a healthy mind and body are important to continue to be a part of leading the work we do.*



# *Dr. Carlos F. Perez*

Director, Safe Schools & Social and  
Emotional Learning  
Cartwright School District

***Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?***

As we close out 2025 and prepare to welcome a new year, I find myself reflecting on the incredible people who have supported and guided me throughout my life and career. A memory that stands out as especially meaningful is the reminder that tomorrow is never promised. We can map out our careers and imagine exactly where we'll be, yet life has a way of surprising us. Sometimes a moment, an event, or a single person can shift our entire direction. This year, I've learned to appreciate each step of the journey and every person who enters my life, even briefly.

***As you look ahead to 2026, what are your goals or plans—personally or professionally—that you're most excited to pursue?***

Looking ahead to 2026, one of my personal goals is to begin drawing and painting; either with watercolors or acrylics. I've felt some creative energy stirring, and I'm excited to explore a new artistic outlet and see what unfolds.

In my role as Director of Social Emotional Learning, I've spent years helping others care for their emotional and mental wellbeing. At the same time, I've been doing my own internal work, and I'm deeply grateful for my amazing wife, Jamie, who has taught me so much on this path. In the coming year, I want to prioritize movement without pressure; walking, stretching, or simply anything that makes my body feel alive again. I also plan to continue strengthening my spiritual grounding, staying curious, remaining open, and deepening the inner work Jamie and I have started together. And just as importantly, I hope to keep nurturing the relationships that feed the soul and gently let go of the ones that drain it.

***In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being?***

As I move into 2026 with gratitude and renewed purpose, I hope each of you also finds space to reflect, recharge, and reconnect with what matters most. Here's to a year of growth, wellness, and meaningful impact, for ourselves and for the communities we serve. Happy holidays, and may the new year bring you abundance in every form.



# *Briana Rodriguez*

*Parent Liaison*

*Mountain View Elementary School*

*Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District*

***Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?***

Reflecting back on 2025 the most meaningful memory I have was winning the award of classified staff of the year for the 24/25 school year. Being the first year I had ever worked for a school district much less in a school environment I was so nervous to come out of my comfort zone and do everything in my power to help the families in my community. The beautiful connections and heartfelt comments from community members have truly uplifted me to continue to do what I love.

***As you look ahead to 2026, what goals or plans—personally or professionally—are you most excited to pursue?***

As I look ahead to 2026, I am most excited about continuing to deepen my connections within our school community. My goals include engaging with more community members, strengthening relationships with our parents and students, and fostering even stronger collaboration with district colleagues. I look forward to building meaningful partnerships that support our shared mission and contribute to a positive, supportive environment for all.

***In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?***

In 2026, I plan to prioritize my mental and physical well-being by intentionally building healthy habits into my daily routine. I am committed to staying active through regular exercise and by taking on coaching roles in sports such as soccer and softball, which not only help me remain physically engaged but also bring me joy through teamwork and supporting students. Additionally, I plan to incorporate consistent self-care practices, maintain a balanced schedule, and create time for activities that help me recharge. These efforts will allow me to stay grounded, energized, and fully present throughout the year.



# *Gabriela Ramos*

Principal, William T. Machan Elementary School  
Creighton Elementary School District

**Looking back on 2025, what personal or professional memory stands out as especially meaningful or impactful for you?**

This year has been especially meaningful for me. Although this is my fourth year as Principal at Machan, I previously spent nine years here—three as a reading interventionist and six as a behavior interventionist. During that time, I built deep relationships with students, teachers, and families. I celebrated birthdays with them, attended quinceañeras, and truly became part of the community.

Coming back as a school principal has been an honor, and one of the highlights of 2025 has been seeing how many families remain connected to Machan. We now have two former students working here—one as a teacher and another as a teacher's assistant. Even more special, at least five former students have returned this year to enroll their own children. It is incredibly rewarding to serve a community that continues to trust and value our school across generations.

**As you look ahead to 2026, what goals or plans—personally or professionally—are you most excited to pursue?**

Looking ahead to 2026, I am excited to continue working closely with my team with the same dedication, care, and intentionality as always. My goal is to maintain and strengthen the well-being of our school community while continuing to grow academically. Last year, we improved our state letter grade from a C to a B, and my plan is to sustain that momentum so our students have every opportunity to succeed and access a high-quality education. I look forward to building on this progress together.

**In 2026, how do you plan to support your own mental and physical well-being to stay balanced and healthy throughout the year?**

To support my mental and physical well-being in 2026, I plan to continue practicing the hobbies that ground and energize me. This includes hiking our local mountain trails, practicing yoga and meditation, and enjoying quality time with my family—especially with my first grandson, who brings so much joy and balance to my life. These moments help me stay centered and ready to lead with clarity and purpose.



May your days be merry and bright  
this season and throughout  
the new year!

Make it a great day!

*Tracy Harris*