

NEWSLETTER

NOVEMBER 2025



1988
ARIZONA ASSOCIATION OF LATINO
ADMINISTRATORS AND SUPERINTENDENTS

Happy Holidays

“The best part of life is when your family become your friends and your friends become your family.”

– Robin Roberts

From the Desk of
THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Welcome to the AZALAS November newsletter!

The holiday season is here, a time of laughter, love, and the cherished family traditions that light up our homes and hearts. Whether passed down for generations or newly created, these moments are the magic that turns ordinary days into unforgettable memories.

From kitchens alive with the aroma of holiday treats to living rooms sparkling with lights, traditions bring us together, remind us of our roots, and inspire the stories we'll tell for years to come. A simple yearly ritual, a card, a favorite movie, a special recipe, can create memories that last a lifetime.

Family traditions are
the stories we write
together, written in love,
passed on with joy.

- Unknown

This month, we're thrilled to share a joyful collection of traditions from our AZALAS community. Thank you to everyone who shared your stories and photos. May they inspire you to celebrate your own special traditions and create new moments of magic with the people you love most!

Dr. Marvene Lobato

Vanessa ALEGRÍA-RIVAS

Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District

Family traditions always bring memorias especiales, and the legacies we carry forward become part of who we are. Mi familia is no different when it comes to cherishing the traditions passed down through generaciones. As the holiday season approaches, one tradition stands out above the rest—gathering around my grandmother’s table to make tamales for Christmas.

Growing up, it often felt like a huge chore, especially when we made over 40 dozen tamales so each of my grandmother’s eight children could take some home after celebrating Christmas Eve at her house. After she passed, my four aunts, my cousin, and my eldest daughter carried on the tradition. Over the years, the group has grown smaller, and now it’s usually my Aunt Dora, my two—sometimes three—daughters, and me continuing this beautiful tradición.

Each year feels a little more bittersweet as our lives get busier, making it harder to find a weekend to keep the tradition alive. Still, we gather at my Aunt Dora’s house—the home I grew up in, where the tradition began for me. We tie our hair back with a pañoleta, play music, and set up our assembly line: washing corn husks, spreading masa, adding carne and chile, and folding each tamal. The youngest counts them and packs each dozen. Some years we make strawberry or piña tamales; other years we stick to our traditional tamales de carne.

We laugh, reminisce, listen to music, and sometimes cry. It’s emotional, beautiful, and filled with love. I hope this tradition continues long after I’m gone.

¡Que siga la tradición llena de alegría y amor!

Vanessa

Vanessa Alegría-Rivas
Assistant Principal, Calabasas School
Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District



Andrea BARRERA

Cartwright School District

My partner, in his ritual devotion to all the little things that compose the essence and quality of our existence, has taught me the importance of tradition in forming our family identity. These are the expressions of love that characterize Thanksgiving in the casa de Barrera-Brown: elder-millennial movie classics like *Home for the Holidays* and *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* playing while I make the stuffed pavo for the carnivores and he roasts the Tofurkey for himself. His grandmother and I are the only ones with stomachs built for the risky (and delicious) stuffing cooked in the bird—e.coli be damned.

My corazón makes the best mashed potatoes with globs of vegan butter and sour cream. I devote myself fully to curating a magical tablescape—glinting pink glass, vintage plates, and carefully arranged linens—to elicit the oohs and ahhs from our kinfolk (a fact my beloved forgets every year when he begs for paper plates and plastic forks). All these efforts set the scene, but the real magic begins as the guests arrive: behold each loved one, exchange a long hug, smile, and just BE together.

Whether we are in Phoenix with his family, or in Los Angeles with mine, my beloved ensures that we have clear in our hearts the story of OUR things. The movies, the dichotomy of meat and non-meat vittles, the stories of our respective childhoods lovingly recounted by our elders, the unending debate of glass vs. paper table settings, and the people that inspire these little labors in the most unassuming ways. The magic is in the mundane.

Despite the colonial root of this holiday, we honor the opportunity to sit in full gratitude for all this life has given us. In the words of Chilean anti-fascist Violeta Parra, “Gracias a la vida, que nos ha dado tanto.”

Andrea

Mx. Andrea Barrera
Assistant Director of ELA and Social Studies
Cartwright School District



Juan CEJA

Tolleson Elementary School District

Every holiday season, my family celebrates two cherished traditions. On Christmas Eve, I gather with my mom and siblings to enjoy classic Mexican holiday dishes like tamales, buñuelos, ponches, and capirotada—a night filled with warmth, laughter, and the flavors of our heritage. Just before midnight, we all get together and pray the Rosary, led by my oldest sister, Maria. We then sing festive songs and conclude by singing “A La Rorro Niño” while the children lull the family Baby Jesus to sleep.

The night ends with a ceremonial laying of Baby Jesus on the manger and candies and fruit are given the children to take home. Then, on Christmas Day, I embrace a more traditional U.S. celebration with my wife and kids. We wake up early to discover Santa’s surprises, and my wife prepares a festive feast featuring turkey, ham, and her famous scalloped potatoes. We reminisce on the blessings from the year, and we prepare for the New Year that is soon to come. These moments remind me how blessed I am to spend the holidays surrounded by loved ones, sharing delicious food and creating lasting memories.

Juan

Juan Ceja
Administrator of Human Resources
Tolleson Elementary School District



Washington COVENA

BlueCross, Blue Shield Arizona



Every November, as the desert air shifts and the leaves begin their slow golden descent, our family packs up for our annual Autumn pilgrimage to Sedona and Prescott. It's not just a getaway it's a ritual, a rhythm we've come to rely on. For us, fall isn't just a season. It's a symbol of fortitude and renewal. A time to reflect on what's been weathered and what's still blooming beneath the surface.

We always start in Sedona, winding through Oak Creek Canyon with the windows down, letting the crisp air rush in. The red rocks glow a little softer this time of year, and the trees put on a show that never gets old. We hike, we pause, we breathe. There's always a moment when we find a quiet overlook, pour steaming mugs of spiced cider and a splash of iced bourbon for those who want it, and just sit. No phones. No agenda. Just the sound of wind through leaves and the comfort of being together. Then we head to Prescott, where the courthouse square is wrapped in amber light and the diners serve the kind of comfort food that feels like a hug. Chicken pot pie, warm sourdough, and pie, always pie. We walk the town, arm in arm, catching up on life, laughing at old stories, and sometimes sharing the hard ones too. It's in these moments that the year's weight begins to lift. We remember what we've come through. We honor the strength it took to get here.

This tradition has become our way of harvesting the year. Not just the wins, but the lessons, the resilience, the quiet courage. We don't rush to resolutions or fresh starts. We linger in the in-between. Because fall teaches us that transformation doesn't always come in bold declarations it often arrives in whispers, in the slow turning of leaves, in the shared silence between people who love each other.

As the year closes, and the trees shed what they no longer need, we do the same. We make space for what's next, but we do it with reverence for what's been. And as we drive home, hearts full and hands warm, I'm reminded that strength isn't always loud. Sometimes, it's found in the gentle act of showing up again and again.

Wishing all my AZALAS friends peace, warmth, and quiet strength as the leaves fall and the new year begins. May you find beauty in the reveal, and courage in the becoming.

Washington

Washington Covená
Staff VP, Commercial Verticals and Strategy
BlueCross, Blue Shield Arizona



Aaron N. D'OLEO

Ellevation Education

One of our favorite family traditions, especially around Christmas, centers on a simple ritual that's become deeply meaningful to us. Every Christmas Eve, my wife and I bake a cake to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

We love the gifts, the lights, and all the festive energy of the season. But since getting married, this tradition has grounded us and reminded our family of what the holiday is truly about. It's become especially powerful for our little guy—something about gathering around the table, talking about gratitude, and celebrating in this small but intentional way has sparked a spirit of generosity in him that we absolutely love to witness.

We don't have a photo of previous years' cakes, but we'll be sure to share a picture from this year's celebration once it's ready.

Aaron

Aaron N. D'Oleo
Partner Development
Ellevation Education



Jose ESTEBAN RUIZ

Mesa Public Schools

This year, our family started a brand-new tradition—one that instantly became a favorite and marked a special chapter in our lives. For the first time, Zeida and I put up our Christmas tree with our son, Leonel, who is now nine months old. What used to be a simple holiday routine suddenly felt magical, meaningful, and full of new energy.

As we unpacked ornaments and unraveled the lights, we quickly realized how different the moment felt. Instead of moving quickly through the steps, we slowed down and soaked in every second—every smile from Leonel, every curious stare, every squeal of excitement as he tried to make sense of all the colors and sparkle around him. Watching his eyes widen at the glow of the lights reminded us how incredible it is to experience the season through a child's eyes. It wasn't about perfect decorating; it was about being present together as a family for the very first time.

We laughed as Leonel reached for ornaments, held him close so he could touch the branches, and captured photos we'll treasure forever. What made this moment an instant classic wasn't just the activity—it was the feeling of togetherness and the realization that we were creating a memory uniquely ours.

This new tradition is more than setting up a tree. It symbolizes how much our family has grown, how blessed we feel, and how the simplest moments can become the most meaningful. From now on, putting up the Christmas tree will always be a celebration of love, family, and the joy Leonel brings into our home.

Jose

Jose Esteban Ruiz
Assistant Principal & Athletics Director
Carson Junior High
Mesa Public Schools



Ondrea ESTRADA

Douglas Unified School District

Praying in the New Year: A Tradition Close to My Heart

Every New Year's Eve, no matter what's happening in life, stepping into my Tata Papi's house reminds me what family truly feels like. The food, the noise, the love—it all hits you the moment you walk in, and suddenly everything feels lighter. It's always been one of my favorite things.

The night always starts with the food—because in our family, that's just how it is. We serve huge bowls of menudo, more birote than any of us should probably be eating, and tamales that somehow disappear faster than they're set out. Every year, we squeeze into the dining room and turn a six-chair table into a twelve-chair table, while the younger cousins take over the tiny kitchen table like it's the kids' VIP section. There's laughing, catching up, and the deep conversations we fall into without fail. It's where we reconnect, reset, and remember how blessed we are to have each other.

Right before midnight is my favorite part—the moment I look forward to the most. Even when I'm traveling, someone always FaceTimes me so I don't miss it. Tata Papi (our Pastor) would pick up his Biblia, glance around the room, and call us all in. Somehow, the whole house would settle, the noise fading as we gathered around him. His prayer always came straight from the heart—asking the Lord to bless us, guide us, protect us, and fill our hearts with the love and faith we need for whatever the new year brings. His words steadied us and reminded us that Christ is our anchor, and that with Him, we are ready for anything.

This year looks different without him standing at the center, but the faith and love he instilled in us bring so much comfort. Because of that, this tradition continues. We keep gathering, keep praying, and keep trusting the Lord the way he taught us.

From my family to yours, may your holiday season be full of grace, joy, and God's unfailing love.

Ondrea

Ondrea Estrada
Dean of Students, Douglas High School
Douglas Unified School District



Gregory FACEY

Bluum



Growing up, the holidays in my family were shaped by traditions my mother carried with her from Jamaica. She didn't have much as a child, but she always remembered the joy that simple decorations brought, balloons, ribbons, and whatever small touches they could gather to make the season feel special. When she came to the United States, we continued those traditions and blended them with American holiday customs. Our home may not have had the most elaborate décor, but it was always full of color, warmth, and gratitude.

One of the traditions I cherished most came from my oldest brother, who was a remarkably gifted artist. He could create almost anything with his hands, from drawings to clay ornaments, and each year he crafted something new for our Christmas tree. Those handmade ornaments became symbols of creativity, care, and the beauty of adding a personal touch to the season. For many years, we held onto them as reminders of what family means.

Now, as a father, I've continued these traditions in my own home. Each year, my sons and I decorate together, filling our space with light, laughter, matching pajamas, and the same spirit of togetherness that shaped my childhood. The joy on their faces reminds me of the love I grew up with and the responsibility to pass those values on to them. These moments continue to honor my mother, my brother, and the traditions that made the holidays meaningful for generations in my family.

Gregory

Gregory Facey
Account Executive, Bluum



Marisela FELIX

Sunnyside Unified School District



Ready or not, we are fully in the holiday season! The cooler weather, the smells, treats and the many gatherings with family and friends are what I look forward to the most. Thanksgiving has always been about togetherness and for many years, my abuelos were the center of it all—bringing the entire family together and ensuring there was a space for everyone. Since their passing, we’ve had to learn new ways to gather, establish our own traditions and carry out the ones that make us feel closest to them.

On Thanksgiving, before the big meal begins, we make a space for the abuelos at the table because we know they are with us in spirit, we open in prayer and we enjoy a beautiful meal as a family. It’s a special moment that my husband and I get to lead as hosts to remind us that love and not location is what makes family traditions endure.

Our Latino holidays carry an extra special flair — it’s turkey alongside tamales, it’s dinner jazz while we eat and Juan Gabriel while we clean up, it’s laughter and storytelling with a mix of English and Spanish flowing in conversation.

This holiday season, I’m thankful for the collective work we do as educators — uniting around a shared purpose to strengthen our communities by preparing the next generation of leaders. Here’s to the traditions that shape us, the ones that remind us of where we came from and the ones that remind us of who we are, both at home and in our work.

Marisela

Marisela Felix
Executive Director of Communications
Sunnyside Unified School District



Anthony FIMBRES

Buckeye Union High School District



One of my favorite holiday traditions is taking a winter break trip with my family, usually somewhere near the ocean or simply out of town. Stepping away from the routine gives me a chance to reset mentally, reflect, and return refreshed. Most importantly, it's dedicated time to be present, reconnect, and enjoy the moments that matter most with the people I love.

Happy Holidays my AZ ALAS family!

Anthony

Anthony Fimbres
Business Manager
Buckeye Union High School District



Cassandra HINTON

IXL Learning

A Mystery Under the Tree

I'm delighted to share one of my favorite holiday traditions with you.

As the third of five girls, I remember my dad relishing the chance to spoil each of us. He quickly noticed, however, how eager we were to peep through the wrapping paper! To combat our nosiness and add a layer of playful suspense, he started a wonderful new tradition: he stopped putting our names on Christmas presents. Instead, he would assign us all a random category each year. One year, it might be US states, with each daughter corresponding to a specific state. The next year could be fruit, universities, or something completely different. He would only reveal which code name belonged to which daughter as we gathered in front of the tree on Christmas morning.

This clever tradition turned the gift-opening frenzy into a fun, anticipated mystery. I have since continued this tradition with my own children, and they love the delightful uncertainty of finding out who's who.

Cassandra

Cassandra Hinton
Educational Sales Consultant
IXL Learning



Alejandra ILBARRA

Agua Fria High School District

One of my favorite family traditions since I was a little girl is when it is time to set out our families altar for Día de los Muertos, a celebration that reflects both my Mexican heritage and my identity as a Mexican American. Every year, as October comes to an end, I make it point with my daughters to gather to create a beautiful ofrenda filled with color, fragrance, and memories. For us, this tradition is not only about honoring loved ones who have passed, but also about keeping our culture alive across generations.

Día de los Muertos has deep roots in Mexican traditions, especially among the Aztec, who believed that death was simply another stage in the cycle of life. Rather than mourning death, Día de los Muertos embraces remembrance through joy, food, music, and storytelling. Our altar always includes flowers, photos of our families and loved one, candles, offerings, and the foods they loved. In one of my trips to Mexico I found so many miniature items that were perfect for my altar. As we place each item, we tell stories, sometimes funny, sometimes emotional, about the people we are honoring. Building our altar reminds me that family extends beyond the living. It is a moment to pause, reflect, and feel connected to those who came before us. This tradition fills our home with love, nostalgia, and pride, and it carries the spirit of our ancestors into the present.

Alejandra

Alejandra Ilbarra

Office Manager of Operations
Agua Fria High School District



Dr. Authur JOHNSON

Pendergast Elementary School District

Finding Renewal in Mississippi: My Family Traditions

As educators, the week of Thanksgiving offers more than a break from work; it provides a sacred pause, a moment to breathe deeply and reconnect with the people and places that ground us. For me, that place has always been rural Mississippi. Each year, I travel back to my parents' home in Pinola, where the pace slows, the memories run deep, and the warmth of family fills every room.

Thanksgiving and the holiday season in Mississippi is a sensory experience; one rooted in southern soul food, laughter, and the simple joy of being together. There's nothing quite like gathering around tables filled with my mother's homemade dressing, fresh garden vegetables, and desserts that have been passed down for generations. It's a taste of home that reminds me who I am and where I come from.

This week has also long been a time for traditions: watching football with my brothers and cousins, taking early morning rides into the woods for the occasional deer hunt, and intentionally stepping away from the digital world. Those quiet moments in nature give me space to reflect, pray, and refocus my mind on what truly matters, because my faith plays a central role in this season as well.

Thanksgiving, for me, is a return to my roots, my faith, and my purpose; fueling the work I do for students, families, and communities in Arizona and beyond.

Authur

Dr. Authur Johnson
Director of Student Support for Climate & Culture
Pendergast Elementary School District



Jen LARSON

Litchfield Elementary School District

North Pole Breakfast

The morning after Thanksgiving marks the beginning of the Christmas season in our home with a tradition we lovingly call our North Pole Breakfast. Since my daughters were little, our family has looked forward to this special morning when our resident elf, Elfie, makes his return from the North Pole.

Each year, Elfie arrives with new Christmas pajamas for everyone to wear throughout the holiday season and sets up a festive breakfast table filled with cheerful holiday decor. The centerpiece of the morning is always a plate of “snowballs” (powdered sugar donuts) that have become a sweet symbol of the season.

As we sit together in our new pajamas, surrounded by twinkling lights and laughter, this cozy breakfast reminds us that the holidays are about togetherness, joy, and simple traditions that grow more meaningful with each passing year.

Jen

Jen Larson
Director of ELD
Litchfield Elementary School District



LITCHFIELD ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL DISTRICT



Larry MARTINEZ

A2Z Teach

Thanksgiving has always been my favorite holiday. The leaves are changing, the weather is cooling, and it is the perfect opportunity for family to experience togetherness. Our family holiday season has transformed over the years. My brothers and their families would meet at my mother's house to celebrate and reminisce. We would all bring our specialties and share a meal with turkey, beans, tortillas, pecan pie, and all the fixings. An amazing time!

Over the years, my parents and a brother have passed with my remaining brother moving to Texas. Although this was difficult for the family, during this time my daughter started her family. With my daughter who now lives in Colorado, we decided to start having Thanksgiving at her house. The busy air traffic and blizzards can cancel our flights, so we chose to do our pre-Thanksgiving the week prior to Thanksgiving weekend. This also allowed us to start a new tradition with pre-Thanksgiving along with buying a Christmas tree and starting the decorations.

We do miss our family members terribly and the joyous times we had together but it brings us great pleasure to spend Thanksgiving as a family while starting new traditions. Time does not stand still so it is important to us to share and love the time we have as a family. Which we do.

Enjoy your Thanksgiving and Happy holidays!

Larry

Larry Martinez, Ed. S.
Founder
A2Z Teach

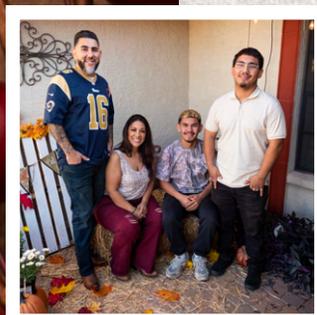


Monica MARTINEZ

CHASSE Building Team



As I reflect on years past—through my upbringing and raising my own family—I realize these things are practically written in my DNA: loud houses, last-minute chaos, and a Thanksgiving guest list long enough to qualify as a small village. Being the oldest granddaughter on my mother’s side means I’m gifted the honor of leading our Thanksgiving traditions. It isn’t a duty; it’s something rooted in generations who taught me that holidays thrive on love, tradition, and everyone pitching in.



My mother, the oldest of six, showed me early how to create warmth and welcome. Thanksgiving was the heartbeat of our home, spilling out of living rooms, kitchens, and backyards. Forty to fifty people—relatives, friends, neighbors—gathered in a celebration far bigger than any one house.

We never started on time, but eventually my Nana would call us together for a prayer of gratitude. That moment grounded us. No matter the noise or the missing cousins, we were reminded how blessed we were to be together.

Now that I host, I carry forward that spirit with touches that reflect who I am. Each September, I send a Facebook invite and ask what everyone wants to bring—embracing the art of delegation just as naturally as my elders embraced the art of welcoming. And yes, the annual turkey cook-off continues: my husband deep-fries his, and I wrap mine in bacon. I usually walk away with bragging rights.

Just like DNA, these traditions live in me. My hope is that my family grows through them—rooted in community, strengthened by connection, and always guided by love.

Monica

Monica Martinez
CHASSE Building Team



Jorge MORENO

Tolleson Union High School District

One of the things I enjoy most about Thanksgiving is that it's a full day of traditions that bring together the people I care about. The morning starts with a friendly softball game at Mission Manor, the community park where I grew up playing baseball. Being back on that field brings a sense of nostalgia—memories of childhood games, neighborhood friends, and the place where many of my lifelong friendships were formed.

After the game, we head to my parents' home for an early Thanksgiving dinner. It's a meaningful gathering, especially at this stage in life when we reflect on the blessings of having our parents, siblings, and extended family with us. We take time to think about those who are no longer with us, those who are ill, and those who may need extra support.

Whenever someone shares that they don't have plans, our family makes sure to create a welcoming space. There is always room at the table, and without fail, we end up with a full house. And of course, nothing beats my mom's cooking.

After giving grace, we spend the afternoon playing games, sharing memories, and laughing together. Later in the day, we visit my in-laws to continue the celebration, and in the evening I get to wind down with my immediate family—my wife, my boys, and my grandson. It's a long day filled with warmth, food, and moments that remind us how fortunate we are.

Bendiciones.
Happy Thanksgiving!

Jorge

Jorge Moreno
CTE Director
Tolleson Union High School District



Pamela ORTIZ

Roosevelt School District



One of my favorite family traditions is the Matachines dance from Ciudad Juárez, a vibrant blend of faith, rhythm, and heritage that has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. The Matachines dance is believed to have originated from a fusion of Indigenous ceremonial dances and Spanish religious influences, creating a uniquely meaningful form of devotion. My family brought this tradition to the United States in 1995, carrying with them the deep sense of community and spirituality that comes with it. Every year, when we gather to dance, the sound of the drums and rattles reconnects us to our roots. The bright costumes, carefully practiced choreography, and the symbolism in every movement remind us of where we come from and what our family values.

What I love most is how the Matachines bring generations together. Elders teach younger family members the steps, the stories, and the purpose behind the dance, passing down far more than a performance—they pass down identity. Even after moving across the border, this tradition remains unchanged in its spirit: to honor our culture, our faith, and our shared history. Participating in the Matachines each year reminds me that traditions can travel, adapt, and still stay firmly rooted in who we are.

Pamela

Pamela Ortiz
Finance and Operations Specialist
Roosevelt School District



Aneela PRADHAM

Nogales Unified School District



Rangoli



Chakli



karanji / gujiya



Rose Cookies



Plum Cake



A Tradition of and Giving

For me, the holidays in my small Indian town were always about the art, sweets and savory. We'd kick off December by making "Rangoli"—gorgeous, intricate art drawn right on the floor. This wasn't a solo gig; it was a full-blown neighborhood production, with ladies joining in for hours. It was not just the colorful art, but the vibrant festive feeling that made this tradition so special.

But my favorite tradition? That was the Great Christmas Sweet and Savory Distribution. In our town, Christians are a tiny minority, but everyone was ready to celebrate Christmas with us. Funny how that works when delicious, once-a-year treats are involved.

After church, it was my job as the youngest girl to make the rounds with trays of homemade goodies. We were strategic—we knew exactly who loved which item, so everyone got the good stuff. Our neighbors, most from different faiths, would literally give us "do not forget" warnings if they were going out of town. The mailman, the milkman—nobody was safe from our festive treats. They'd even remind us if we forgot!

As a kid, I just loved the chance to dress up and visit the homes in the neighborhood. As an adult, I realized what it was really about: sharing love (and calories) with everyone, no barriers. Now that I'm in the US, my husband and I still keep the tradition going. It's a little piece of home, and frankly, who doesn't love homemade delicacies?

Aneela

Aneela Pradham
8th Grade Language Arts Teacher
SEI School Coordinator
Middle School Mentor-Protégé Coordinator
Nogales Unified School District



Rosalinda RODRIGUEZ

Tucson Unified School District

Thanksgiving for the Rodriguez family is a deeply traditional and heartfelt occasion. It's a special time to reflect on the many blessings we've received throughout the year. Our celebration begins the day before Thanksgiving when we gather in the kitchen to bake our favorite desserts. The warm aroma of homemade treats fills our home as we prepare everything from scratch—rolling out dough, making our famous sticky pecan bars, and baking fresh rolls.

On Thanksgiving Day, we come together once again as a family to prepare our entire feast. The time, effort, and love we invest in cooking our meal reflect the commitment and care we share as a family all year long. We take pride in crafting each dish—from the turkey and stuffing to the mashed potatoes and green bean casserole—ensuring our feast is the best of the year.

Our Thanksgiving is very traditional, and what matters most to us is simply being home, sharing this special day with loved ones. We cherish doing everything together—cooking, eating, playing board games, and doing puzzles, filling the house with laughter and joy.

Our Thanksgiving celebrations extend into the day after, when we gather once more to decorate our home for Christmas. We also enjoy turkey sandwiches made from the delicious leftovers, keeping the holiday spirit alive and well. As we gather around the table, we thank God for His many blessings, sharing what we're most grateful for. For the Rodriguez family, Thanksgiving is a treasured time of love, gratitude, and togetherness.

HAPPY THANKSGIVING AZALAS FAMILIA!

Rosalinda

Rosalinda Rodriguez
Director, Multicultural Curriculum Department
Tucson Unified School District

TUCSON UNIFIED
SCHOOL DISTRICT



GLORIA *Sanchez* MCDOWELL

Buckeye Elementary School District



Our Family Tradition: Sanchez Familia Brings Love and Hope

In our familia, the holidays have always meant one thing: being home together. No matter how busy life gets, we always make our way back to our Ma and Dad. But as our Ma navigates diabetes, dialysis, congestive heart failure, and her recent leg amputation, those traditions have taken on a deeper meaning. Every moment feels more precious. Every gathering feels like a gift; and every smile from her reminds us to slow down, be present, and treasure the time we're given.

These photos were taken shortly after Ma returned home from the hospital in 2024. She was still recovering, but her smile lit up the room—as it always does. Seeing her surrounded by familia and warm holiday lights reminded us of who we are at our core: strong, united, and grounded in faith, love, and tradition. Even during the toughest seasons, we show up for one another.

For our Sanchez familia, these traditions are everything. They anchor us. They keep us close, and they remind us to stay grateful, even when life gets heavy. To us, the holiday lights aren't just decorations—they're symbols of hope. They shine for our Ma, our true warrior, whose strength inspires us every single day. We look forward to celebrating the upcoming holidays with our Ma and Dad; because they are our everything.

Whatever challenges come our way, we face them together with unconditional Love and Hope. From our familia to yours, Happy Holidays. May your season be filled with the beauty of traditions that matter most.

Gloria

Gloria Sanchez McDowell, MPA
Director of Communications and Community Engagement
Buckeye Elementary School District



Nick UNDERWOOD

Discovery Education

Family Traditions...Holiday Edition:

Upland Lights: Every year, one of our favorite holiday traditions begins on a completely ordinary weeknight that suddenly becomes magical. We pile into the car, the boys giddy with excitement, with both of our dogs in tow, and head straight to Starbucks for hot cocoa. Armed with a warm drink (and a couple of "pup cups"), we drive to Upland Avenue in Chandler, where the incredible Christmas light display transforms the whole street into a glowing wonderland. It's a simple ritual, but doing this every year together for as long as I can remember simply makes it unforgettable every time!

Mass & Pizza: Then, for the past seven or eight years, Christmas Eve has followed its own cherished rhythm. We attend the early 4:30p Mass at St. Andrew's, a peaceful pause that sets the tone for the night. Afterward, we keep our long-standing 6:00p reservation at Grimaldi's, where we enjoy a relaxed, delicious meal as a family. By the time we head home, the boys are already filled with anticipation, eager to get to bed so Christmas morning can finally arrive. These traditions, both spontaneous and scheduled, have become the heart of our holiday season, providing moments that bring us closer & create memories we treasure year after year.

Nick

Nick Underwood
Director, Education Partnerships
Discovery Education



Miguel ZULUETA

Subject

In my family, Christmas Eve has always been the main event. My parents got married that night, so the date has basically been treated like a family holiday from the beginning. No matter how spread out we all are the rest of the year, December 24th is the one day nobody misses.

We've celebrated everywhere — at home, in random cities, squeezed into restaurants where we definitely over-order. The location changes, the chaos doesn't.

A few things that always happen:

- Everyone shows up. Doesn't matter what's going on — Christmas Eve is non-negotiable.
- We act like we won't order too much food, and then immediately do.
- Someone says "we should do this more often." We all nod. We won't.
- My parents get extra cute because it's their anniversary. We pretend not to notice.
- And now that they're grandparents, the night ends with the kids ripping open presents like tiny tornadoes. Wrapping paper everywhere. Zero chill. Honestly the best part.
- It's loud, it's messy, and it's the tradition that somehow keeps getting better as our family grows.

Christmas is great. But Christmas Eve? That one's ours.

Miguel

Miguel Zulueta
Educational Partnerships
Subject

Subject



CELEBRATING



Santa Cruz Valley Unified
School District Superintendent

David Verdugo!



We are thrilled to recognize Superintendent David Verdugo for an extraordinary achievement: being named both the AZALAS Superintendent of the Year and the ASA State Superintendent of the Year—making him the first Arizona superintendent ever to receive both honors in the same year!

This remarkable recognition reflects Superintendent Verdugo's unwavering dedication, visionary leadership, and tireless commitment to students, staff, and the broader community. His leadership inspires excellence, fosters equity, and strengthens the connections that make our schools a place where every student can thrive.

Please join us in congratulating Superintendent Verdugo on this historic milestone—an achievement that not only honors his outstanding work but also shines a bright spotlight on Arizona education!



Superintendent David Verdugo Named Arizona Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (AZALAS) Superintendent of the Year

Rio Rico, Arizona – **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

The Arizona Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (AZALAS) has named Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District No. 35 Superintendent David Verdugo as the 2025 Superintendent of the Year, recognizing his visionary leadership, dedication to equity, and transformative impact on education in southern Arizona.

Mr. Verdugo has led Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District (SCV35) for more than a decade, guiding a district where more than 90% of students are Latino. Throughout his tenure, he has championed a mission of community collaboration, academic innovation, and student-centered learning.

Under Mr. Verdugo’s leadership, SCV35 has undergone a remarkable transformation - modernizing facilities, expanding opportunities for students, and redefining instructional practices to better support every learner. Through successful bond and override initiatives totaling more than \$25 million, the district has constructed a state-of-the-art Performing Arts Center, a modern Aquatic Center, upgraded athletic and academic facilities, and created welcoming community spaces that serve as the heart of Rio Rico.

“Our schools are more than classrooms - they’re gathering places for families and symbols of what is possible when a community works together,” said Mr. Verdugo. “This award reflects the hard work of our teachers, staff, students, and families who believe in the power of education to change lives.”

Superintendent Verdugo has also led SCV35’s transition to a Personalized Competency-Based Learning model, moving away from traditional grading to a

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PRESS RELEASE
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Standards-Based Learning and Reporting system that allows students to learn at their own pace with targeted support. This shift has made instruction more equitable and inclusive - especially for Latino students who have historically been underrepresented in advanced academic programs.

A lifelong educator, Mr. Verdugo began his career as a physical education teacher and coach before becoming a principal and, ultimately, superintendent. His leadership has earned both state and national recognition, including being named Arizona School Administrators Superintendent of the Year (2018–2019) and National Association of Secondary School Principals Middle School Principal of the Year (2012).

Under his direction, SCV35 has received national honors such as College Board’s AP District of the Year and Cambridge District of the Year, recognizing the district’s commitment to academic rigor and opportunity. He also serves on several influential boards, including WestEd, the Arizona Interscholastic Association Executive Board, and the AZALAS Executive Board.

“David Verdugo’s leadership is deeply rooted in service, integrity, and opportunity,” said Dagoberto Lopez, Rio Rico High School Principal and Mr. Verdugo’s nominator for the award. “He’s not only transformed our schools but also inspired countless educators, parents, and students to believe in their potential.”

Superintendent Verdugo’s lasting legacy is one of empowerment - creating pathways for students and staff alike to grow, lead, and succeed. “Our goal has always been simple,” he said. “To make SCV35 the best district in the state of Arizona. Every decision we make starts with what’s best for our students.”

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FELIZ *Vacaciones*

Make it a great day!

Tracy Harris