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Piner Prom King and Queen Say They Were Honored to Be Chosen But Will Most Treasure Memories of Dancing with Their Friends

By Adriana Trujillo, Marcela Urbina and Eduardo Lojas



Queen Alexia and King Pablo

Pablo Leon and Alexia Mora, who were elected king and queen of the **2025 Piner High School Prom**, said being elected by their classmates was an honor but that the memories they will take with them after high school will be busting moves on the dance floor with their friends.

The theme song of the 2025 Piner Senior Prom was “La La Land, City of the Stars,” from the movie of the same name starring **Emma Stone** and **Ryan Gosling**.

The song’s lyrics go like this – “City of Stars/Are you shining just for me?/ City of Stars/ There’s so much that I can’t see/ Who knows/ Is this the start of something wonderful or new?/ Or one more dream/ That I cannot make true?”

For Leon and Mora it was definitely a dream come true to be named Prom King and Queen and dance with their friends on their special day.

“The feeling I had when I got nominated for Prom King was amazing,” Leon said in an email. “I felt honored and proud that those around me really supported me to become closer to being the king of the night.”

Leon said he never realized how much support he had from his friends “that helped me experience something new that I thought would never have happened.”

Leon said it “felt crazy to know that so many people had voted for me.”

He said “it felt even crazier that my friend [Alexia] had won Prom Queen.”

Leon said sharing the moment with Mora is something he will always remember.

Another thing he said he'll remember is “seeing all my friends laugh, cheer, and show their dance moves to prove that they were having a great time like me.”

For her part, Mora said being elected Prom Queen was “something special to me because I would've never thought I would do something like this and actually win.”

Mora said she “will always cherish this and remember how happy I was that day.”

“It's like an end of the year big party to celebrate,” Mora said.

To be sure, Senior Prom is a ritual and cultural event across America and it's much more than just a dance at Piner High School.

For seniors it's a celebration of memories, friendships and milestones that define the high school journey. It's the night when seniors come together and dress their best to honor the end of one chapter and the beginning of another and at the heart of that tradition is something special: the crowning of Prom King and Queen.

“It was very special to me because these are the last moments that we are going to have with each other,” Leon said. “If I didn't have those friends with me that day there wouldn't have been more special memories to make.”

Mora said it was very special to be part of the cultural experience of a high school prom. “This was such a special thing to me,” she said.

Girls Flag Football Is Already Catching on at Piner High Thanks To the Efforts of VP and District Athletic Director Ryan Thompson

By Eva Escamilla, Scarlet Velasquez, Joelle Rose and Adriana Ramirez

Piner High School's newest sport, Girls Flag Football, will start in August 2025 after a surge in interest from athletes and thanks to the efforts of Vice Principal and District Athletic Director **Ryan Thompson**.

Mr. Thompson led the effort on bringing the proposal to the district cabinet and the board in order to get it approved for all five of the high schools.

"I gathered the information and presented it to the district office," Mr. Thompson said in an interview.

Mr. Thompson said Assistant Superintendent of Education Services **Roderick Castro** helped him present the information and a proposal to the board to bring Girls Flag Football to the district.

"It was an unusual thing to happen at school," said **Yamiley Alcazar Hernandez**, a sophomore. "I never expected Piner to have a girls flag football team, never thought that there would be one within our district."



Yamiley Alcazar



Aliah Iannone



Jackie Rodriguez

Girls flag football was officially recognized as a high school sport in 2024 by the **California Interscholastic Federation**.

Girls flag football has its origins in women's flag football starting in the late 1970s. **Diane Beruldsen** founded the first women's flag football team in Brooklyn, New York, called the **Brooklyn Untouchables** in 1979.

"I played flag football in 8th grade and it was really challenging because it was an all boys team and I was always doubted by adults around me and even my own teammates," said **Aliah Iannone**, a junior "They always told me I wasn't meant to play football or I'm just a girl and wasn't as good as everybody else."

Over the last four or five years girls flag football has become "the fastest growing sport in America," Mr. Thompson said. Indeed he noted that womens' flag football will be one of the sports played in the 2028 Olympics.

In California, there has been a rapidly growing number of high schools that have started girls flag football teams. A 105% increase in high school participation from 2022-2024 has been reported according to **California Interscholastic Federation**.

"I think it's important to remember that you're not playing for anyone else—you're doing the sport because you enjoy it, not because of what others think." said **Jackie Rodriguez**, a freshman.

Piner had a meeting on April 4th with approximately 20 girls attending for a new flag football team. "It just seemed like a very unknown thing to do and not a lot of girls would actually want to play" said Hernandez "It would be a fun thing to do and try something new."

"Girls who desire to play football hear things like that all the time and the fact that the school board is giving the girls a flag football team is truly an honor," said Iannone.

"It gives us girls a chance to play the sport we love without someone telling us what we can and can't play or without someone saying 'girls can't play football they won't be able to.'"

How do you play Girls Flag Football?

Girls flag football is a non-contact sport, meaning players cannot tackle or make physical contact with each other. Players wear flags (usually belts with flags attached) that are pulled to stop the play. All passes must be forward and received beyond the line of scrimmage. There are no linemen or blocking is not permitted in flag football. Each team has four downs to advance the ball past midfield.

Ryan Riddle, Piner's athletic director, said the district is committed to the sport and has already ordered the flags and uniforms for the teams.

Mr. Thompson said Piner and other Santa Rosa high schools have started advertising for coaches for the sport next year. He said several potential candidates have expressed interest. He said the schools hope to announce a new coach before the end of May.

"There are many expressions of interest since it is a rapidly growing sport" said Riddle "So I don't think recruiting will be a problem."

Once they have hired a coach, they will work on getting the word out there to interested athletes. Girls flag football will be in the fall so it will join Cross Country, Volleyball, Football, Girls Tennis, and Girls Golf.

Interest appears to be high among the girls who have shown up at the two meetings including the open field event on Wednesday, April 23.



Alondra Bautista



Angel Ochoa



Crystal Villalobos

If the open field day is any indication, Piner is likely to field a very athletic team including **Alondra Bautista**, a freshman who threw a perfect spiral pass during the event.

"I found the idea of girls flag football interesting," Bautista said in an interview. "This is our first time playing football. I hope to play. My only other sport is cheerleading. I also like being able to play with my friends."

Bautista also said she was attracted to playing a slightly less physically intense version of football.

"I like how competitive it is and it's not quite as rough as with the boys."

"I have played flag football since middle school and my experience of playing it was amazing and fun with other people," said **Crystal Villalobos**, a freshman.

Mr. Thompson said the plan is to start girls flag football as a varsity sport in Santa Rosa high schools and expand to junior varsity if there's enough interest.

Other potential players have some experience playing girls flag football.

"I played before in 8th grade at Piner Olivet," said **Angel Ochoa**, a sophomore in an interview. "I like more aggressive sports. I like running and I like throwing."

The team will have seven starters so games will be seven against seven.

North Bay League

The **North Bay League (NBL)** will be adding the sport next year as well so there will be a lot of new schools next year fielding a team.

In Santa Rosa and California more broadly girls flag football started as a youth club sport and then caught on in high schools, Mr. Thompson said.

In 2024, the North Coast League held its first girls' flag football playoff championship. This year, 2025, will be the second playoff championship for the league. The sport is growing around the U.S.

The North Bay League will be able to host an official division and all the Santa Rosa High Schools will be able to compete next year.

"It's cool that girls flag football is going to be a new sport at Piner," said **Caleb Kenyon**, a freshman at Piner. "I would probably go to their games."

Outgoing Piner Vice Principal Thompson Has Many Happy Memories and Hopes to Be Able to Return Some Day

By Aaron Moreno, Elly Somnavong, Alex Guzman and Sebastian Witthaus



Ryan Thompson

Ryan W. Thompson, the well liked departing vice principal of **Piner High School**, said he has many happy memories of his short time at the home of the Prospectors and hopes someday to return.

Mr. Thompson, who also is the Athletic Director for Santa Rosa City Schools, is being transferred next year to be vice principal at **Rincon Valley Middle School** due to budget cuts in the district.

In his first year as vice principal, he was very well liked by students and teachers alike and especially appreciated for his "Friday Funnies" during 4th period announcements.

He also gets credit for launching Girls Flag Football as a new sport at Piner and in the other Santa Rosa City High Schools. (See separate story on Girls Flag Football.)

About 900 students and faculty also signed a petition of support for Mr. Thompson and Assistant Principal **Norma Vasquez** in the wake of the school board's decision. (See separate story about the petition.)

"If we lose Mr. Thompson and Ms. Vasquez, we lose vital parts of the culture and of our campus," said **Amanda Park**, a teacher at Piner in an emailed comment. "As a teacher, I feel supported by both of these administrators and fear what new blood may bring."

For his part, Mr. Thompson said "our district is in a tough spot, both financially and structurally."

"We absolutely needed to make changes to make sure that we could continue to serve students."

"It is unfortunate that our education system has come to the point where we need to discontinue services for youth based on finances. Especially public education, which our country has relied upon for decades. As a fundamental right in our country, I feel that we should not have to be in this situation."

Nevertheless, he said he understands that these are tough decisions that will not please everybody.

"I just hope that in the end, our community will come together to focus on what is right for students," he said.

Mr. Thompson lives in Santa Rosa though he was born in Marin County. He said he moved here when he was very young. His stepfather, **Juan Duffield**, is a campus supervisor at Piner.

Mr. Thompson first arrived at Piner High School in 2013, as an assistant principal. He was at Piner for 6 years before moving schools.

"I then moved to a couple different positions before being offered the opportunity to come back this year," Mr. Thompson said. "This was my first year back at Piner since 2019."

Mr. Thompson will be missed

"Mr. Thompson does a lot of things around the school," Duffield said in an interview. "He's been a teacher at other schools, so he knows how the district works. He cares about what's going on around campus. He understands about culture and poverty."

Duffield said Mr. Thompson will be greatly missed.

"I will miss everything about Piner," Mr. Thompson said. "There are so many positive things that Piner students and staff do that it will be a huge void in my life to not be a part of it."

Mr. Thompson said he has many great memories of Piner, but one of his favorites was in his first year. The football team went to the playoffs. In the game Piner scored a touchdown.

"After they scored, the vice principal at the time ran across the end zone with me, waving Piner flags, to celebrate the score," he said. "It was a huge piece of being involved in the event and Piner life."



Juan Duffield

Even though Mr. Thompson will be leaving Piner, he said he would absolutely love to come back to later in his career.

"I would only hope that the school would have me back."

Mr. Thompson graduated from El Molino High School and later graduated from Arizona State University with a bachelor's degree in Secondary Education Physical Education.

In his spare time, he enjoys "playing with my kids, hanging out with my family, and enjoying some good physical activity or movies in my free time."

"I have recently started to do a lot more barbecuing and hope to get better at that."

Mr. Thompson said the reason he decided to work in education was because he wanted to share his passion and enjoyment of sports, health, and physical activity.

"My goal was to share my knowledge and experience with youth to encourage them to have fun as well."

When *The Piner Prospector* asked him if he would say a final goodbye during the morning announcements, he said the question made him tear up a little.

"I haven't written it yet, but I absolutely will share a final message," he said. "I only hope that I can do it right."

We will all be listening and thanking him for everything he's done for Piner. Goodbye for now Mr. Thompson.

Four Grace Program Sophomores Get 900 signatures for Petition in Support of Two Departing Administrators

By Aaron Moreno, Elly Somnavong, Alex Guzman and Sebastian Witthaus

A student-led petition in support of Piner High School administrators who were transferred or released from their contract was signed by almost 900 students including 600 physical signatures and 285 electronic signatures.

The petition said “bring Vice Principal **Ryan Thompson** back to Piner and keep Assistant Principal **Norma Vasquez** at our sight. At Piner High School we need four administrators to make sure we can keep our campus safe given our increased enrollment.”

The petition was the brainchild of **Brandon Foster, Angelina Olivares, Anais Lopez** and **Izzac Lopez**, all four of whom are in Piner’s **Grace Program**, which helps students who fall behind in credits earn extra credits that count toward graduation requirements.



Brandon Foster



Angelina Olivares



Anais Lopez



Izzac Lopez

For his part, Foster said in an interview he got the idea about the petition after hearing about the decision to transfer Mr. Thompson to a different school and release Ms. Vasquez in his Social Studies class with **Ms. Paulina Lopez**.

“Ms. Lopez told me about how Mr. Thompson was being transferred and Ms. Vasquez was being let go, so I figured I’d better make a petition to the board to show them students here don’t want them to leave.”

Foster said it’s a matter of safety on campus. “We need 4 administrators. It will affect the safety of the school if they leave.”

Foster also testified before the **Santa Rosa City School board** about the petition on Wednesday.

Foster described Mr. Thompson as “an understanding person who plays a huge role in keeping our campus happy, but at the same time safe. He's always around campus and greeting students.”

He noted that Mr. Thompson has been an important advocate for the Grace Program and helps students in so many ways.

“He had big shoes to fill from last year with Mr. [John] Kennedy and his amazing role at Piner and he definitely filled in for that if not more,” Foster said.

Foster also praised Ms. Vasquez for “always looking out for our students and making sure students are getting where they need to be and is on top of getting things done.”

He said without Ms. Vasquez’s guiding presence, Piner’s campus is going to feel less safe for current and incoming students.

Both Mr. Thompson and Ms. Vasquez said they were deeply touched by the petition. Mr. Thompson said he has many happy memories at Piner and hopes someday to be able to return.

During a Grace teacher meeting on Wednesday, Ms. Vasquez also expressed how much she loves being at Piner and how much she appreciated the student’s petition.

Mr. Thompson and Ms. Vasquez were not alone in being touched by the student petition.

“I am incredibly proud of our Grace sophomores for initiating a petition to support our two outstanding administrators,” said **Johana Perdoma**, the Grace counselor.

“They are putting into practice the civic skills they’ve learned in their Social Sciences class and showing a deep understanding of advocacy and community responsibility.

Perdomo said seeing the Grace sophomore “find and use their voices to stand up for what they believe is best for our school is inspiring. Their leadership and passion reflect the very heart of what Piner and the Grace Program are all about.”

Grace Girls Club's Fourth Annual Event to Bring Awareness to Sexual Harassment and Assault Was a Big Success

By Damian Viveros and Cristian Tobar

Piner High School students said they were grateful for the **Grace Girls Club's** fourth annual event to bring awareness to sexual harassment and sexual assault, noting that repeated efforts to raise awareness were starting to sink in with students.

On April 16, 2025 Piner high school held their annual event about sexual harassment and assault awareness and about the importance of consent during lunch. It showed students the effects of not speaking up about sexual assault and harassment, and urged them to speak up if they feel uncomfortable.



Angelina Olivares



Susanna Sanchez



Izzac Lopez

Angelina Olivares, a Piner sophomore, said many people still don't know how common sexual harassment and assault is. She cited statistics showing that one in nine girls and one in 20 boys have been the victim of sexual abuse.

Given these statistics, the Grace Girls Club thought "it important to share awareness about sexual assault and consent," Olivares Guzman said. The event was "important because not a lot of people know about" the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, said **Susanna Sanchez**, a Piner senior.

"It's good that the Grace Girls Club is showing people what it is and what they can do if they experience it."

Sanchez was not surprised that girls get more sexually harassed and assaulted than boys because she said girls are more vulnerable than boys.

"I haven't heard much about boys being sexually harassed or assaulted, but I do know it happens," she said. "It is everywhere, it could even happen in your home."

Even though the event was sponsored by the Grace Girls Club, it wasn't just girls who attended or learned something.

Izzac Lopez, a Piner sophomore, said he attended the event to support his friends in the Grace Girls Club. He said he wants his fellow students to see that harassment and assault need to stop and that consent is critical.

Three Piner Educators Say Teaching Newcomer English Brings Rewards Especially When Former Students Return to Say Thanks

By Romina Ortiz, Isabel Ramirez and Adriana Garcia

When **Jen Griffiths** started teaching English Language Learners and Newcomers at **Piner High School** six years ago, she never dreamed about how much her efforts would be appreciated by her students.

Ms. Griffiths said she has many happy memories of teaching Newcomers and ELLs during her 16 year career, but the one memory that stands out "is a visit from a student I taught in 2019, my first year at Piner. The student came back 5 years later to thank me for teaching him English."

She said the student asked her if he could speak to her current students about the importance of learning English and paying attention in class.



Jen Griffiths

"My students were riveted by his impromptu presentation and of course yours truly was overjoyed," Ms. Griffiths said.

"It's so gratifying when they come back to say hello and share their success stories with me," she added.

Such unexpected rewards are sweet because they are rare while the challenges are plentiful.

"The constant influx of new students can be difficult, but having another newcomer teacher (**Page Willson**)

has helped ease this challenge,” Ms. Griffiths said. “Thank you, Ms. Willson!”

While teaching newcomers is challenging, it’s nowhere near as challenging as being a newcomer or an English Language Learner.

“Imagine being new to the country, language, foods, friends and school,” Griffiths said. “It’s a lot to process.”

That’s a sentiment shared by Ms. Wilson.

Newcomers “are often distressed from having to leave their native countries and everything they knew and loved,” Ms. Willson said.

According to Ms. Griffiths, long-term ELLs have the benefit of being in friend groups and have more experience with school expectations and living in this country.

“Newcomers need to land in a classroom where there is a lot of emotional and academic support,” she said.

“They are processing the language at lightning speed and typically may understand more than they speak.”

Ms. Griffiths said the first six months is called the pre-production “silent period.”

“However I have my students speaking and presenting much sooner because their successes in my classroom will enhance their performance overall.”

Ms. Griffiths said she has “taught up to 40 newcomers at a time,” though 16 is supposed to be the cap.



Page Willson

More recently, she said she has had fewer students due to opening more sections of Newcomer English.

“Smaller groups provide my students the comfort to take more risks,” Ms. Griffiths said. “They just finished two presentations and did very well.”

Ms. Griffiths said she tries to make ELLs and newcomers feel welcome by connecting from the very beginning.

"I say their names correctly, I nurture them and I also provide structure," she said.

"Some students have not been to school (or very little school) which is very tricky because I have to acclimate them to so much more than just learning English," she said.

Ms. Griffiths said she gets to know her students "pretty well and I have taught multiple siblings and cousins, so I am known to some newcomers already, which is handy."

She said she also works hard to embrace her students' home culture because she wants to learn about them and hear what makes them proud.

Ms. Griffiths said she uses a lot of Guided Language Acquisition which is focused around presenting information in a comprehensible way.

"For example: color coding the parts of speech, input charts and voice recordings of their progress is really helpful," she said.

"My guiding light is relationship building," she said. "This helps students feel comfortable enough to take risks and speak. Oral production is the key. Getting reluctant students to speak is always such a win and by the end of the year, they are chatting away!!!"

One of the occasional challenges Ms. Griffiths and other teachers face is teaching students who have problems controlling their anger.

"Going back to relationship building: I have found over the years that the students who have issues will typically discuss them with me because they feel safe," she said.

"We work on strategies they can use (take a walk, make sure they are eating/sleeping enough, etc...)," she said.

She also said she depends on Piner's strong counseling staff and Family Engagement Facilitators or FEF's.

"I feel these wrap-around supports have really helped with these situations. The social-emotional piece is essential to understanding the newcomer student so I spend time building trust with students so that they feel safe enough to speak with me. Our admin team has been super helpful when major issues arise."



Dawn Neufeld

For Willson and **Dawn Neufeld**, who have been teaching newcomers at Piner for five years and three years, respectively, the biggest challenge is the language barrier.

“My Spanish is okay, but sometimes it’s hard to communicate effectively in your non-native language,” Willson said.

“I only speak English, so when I have students who are fluent in other languages it can be challenging,” Neufeld said. “Imagine how they feel!!!”

Ultimately, all three teachers said personal relationships with students was what makes them enjoy their jobs as educators.

“They are funny and they make me laugh,” said Ms. Willson.

Three Piner High School Journalism Students on Their Favorite Poems in Honor of National Poetry Month

By Aaron Moreno

My favorite poem is “In Lak’ech” by **Luis Valdez (b 1940)**. The poem goes like this:

*“Tú eres mi otro yo, You are my other me
Si te hago daño a ti, If I do harm to you
Me hago daño a mi mismo, I do harm to myself
Si te amo y respeto, If I love and respect you
Me amo y respeto yo, I love and respect myself”*

Something I love about this poem is how positive it is. It reminds the reader to treat people how they would want to be treated, which is a statement I agree with. I also like how the language switches from Spanish to English in the poem. It makes this poem stand out from others and also allows more people to be able to enjoy the literature.

This poem was translated by Valdez into Spanish and English, the poem was originally used as a greeting by the Mayans many years ago. It was a way of building friendships and trust by being humble and basically telling a person that you two are equal.

The first time I heard this poem I was in 5th grade, the class would all read the poem out loud together before starting class. Since then I've had a teacher show the class this poem at least once a school year.

By Eva Escamilla

My favorite poem is "Risk" by **Anais Nin (1903-1977)** which begins :

*Risk
And then the day came
When the risk
To remain tight
In a bud
Was more painful
Than the risk
It took
To blossom.*

What I love about "Risk" is the way it's a deep poem with a deep meaning yet has such a small amount of explanation or words to it, which makes this poem a free verse in rhythms and it only has 8 lines to it, the tone in this poem is very urgent and straightforward. The statement, "In a bud" is a metaphor and imagery that Nin uses in order to represent growth. Anyone can take this poem how they view it and each person can have a different understanding of this poem. What it means to me is to not be afraid and to take risks in life. In my past, I have regretted not taking risks and when looking back at it, I wish I could go back. I never come out and take risks because I'm concerned about other people's perspectives/thoughts/words or embarrassing myself, etc... and that mindset has kept me from doing loads of things I wish I would've just done and taken the risk whether the risk was bad or good. This poem reminds me that there is more to life than anyone's opinions and to just do it. When you read "Risk" it should remind you that the pain of embracing taking risks and changes can lead to transformations and growth.

Keriana Singkeo

My favorite poem is "Misunderstanding" by **Ha Jin (b1956)**.

*Misunderstanding
By Ha Jin*

So let misunderstanding spread.

*It only shows how different
you are from others.*

*Many things cannot bear
explaining; you'd better
let silence and labor speak
in your defense.*

*You don't need many friends
or to be enamored with beautiful women
or share the wine of happy gatherings,
because you have solitude enough,
content to leave this world without a sound.*

*Distant thunder can give you pure joy.
Birds in the sky can teach you
another kind of wisdom.
As your soul is growing new wings
such words will disappear from your dictionary:
boundary, complaint, cowardice, collapse...*

I actually presented this poem without reading it for my assignment in English. The poem talks about letting people judge you, and think wrong of you because it shows how unique and different you are. I'm not a big fan of reading poems but this poem definitely opened my eyes when I first read it. It taught me how to not care about what other people think, how I don't need to impress anyone, just to be myself. A lot of poems have a deep meaning and for me this poem definitely meant a lot.

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DLONKEVICH@SRCS.K12.CA.US

REPORTERS/EDITORS

Eva Escamilla
Adriana Garcia Torres
Alexander Guzman Ruiz
Eduardo Lojas Trigeros
Aaron Moreno Gonzalez
Romina Ortiz Palomares
Adriana Ramirez
Isabel Ramirez Beltran

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Sebastion Witthaus

