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Piner Class of 2025, Proud of the Accomplishments and the Obstacles Overcome, Is Eager to Take on New Challenges

By Adriana Trujillo, Marcela Urbina and Eduardo Lojas

Piner High School's Class of 2025 is justifiably proud of its accomplishments and the obstacles it overcame and eager to take on the challenges of the world.

The list of accomplishments is long and includes rigorous academic achievement, strenuous athletic competition, civic engagement through the **Associated Student Body**, extra curricular activities and clubs and perhaps most of all the time spent developing relationships with their friends.

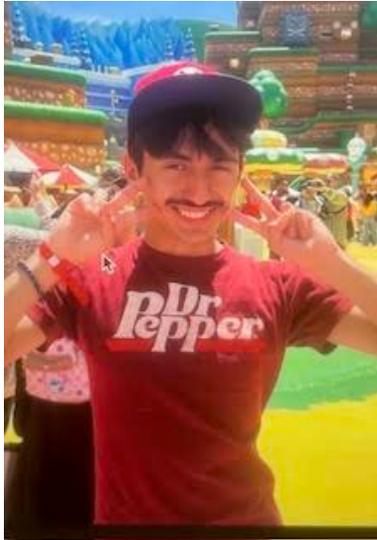


The **Class of 2025** stands on the threshold of a new chapter, looking back not only at the challenges it has faced, but on the strength it's gained through them. From navigating a world transformed by the uncertainty of the **Covid 19 Pandemic** to adapting to new ways of learning and connecting, the **Class of 2025** proved

its resilience time and time again. The struggles didn't define the **Class of 2025** but refined them. Every setback became a setup for growth, and every moment of doubt was met with determination.

"Oh I was a mess after Covid," said **Val Avalos**, a Piner senior in an interview. "I came into high school really insecure. I had lots of anxiety. I didn't have a good relationship with my parents and I was really depressed so it wasn't fun. School helped in a really good way to find out who I am and the people who I surrounded myself with really helped me grow as a person."

That is a sentiment shared by many members of the **Class of 2025**, including **Sofia Franco** and **Michelle Fonseca**.



Val Avalos



Sofia Franco



Michelle Fonseca

“Covid didn’t affect my education but it affected my mental well being,” Ms. Franco said. “It was very hard for me to socialize with others after so long of being away from people. So it was hard for me to make friends or talk to people. Although I was doing very good in all my classes, the social aspect was hard for me to overcome. Eventually I was able to get out of my comfort zone and make friends so putting yourself out there without the fear of others judging you is very important.”

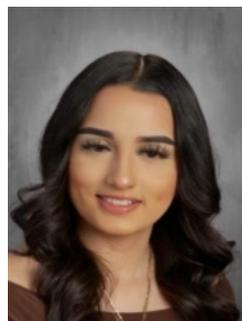
For her part, Ms. Fonseca said “COVID 19 made it difficult to connect with others, especially freshman year where nobody really knew each other and I didn’t have any friends. I felt alone and it was really hard to make friends because I was so shy and didn't know anyone. Covid 19 was a struggle I had to overcome.”

And overcome it they did while thoroughly enjoying the process.

“You all remember the Zoom meeting’s screen full of muted mics, tired eyes, and unstable WiFi,” said **Bianca Valdiva**, a senior in a speech that was one of three winners of the **Senior Speech Contest**.

“Let me take you back to the beginning of August 2021,” Ms. Valdiva said. “Our freshman year didn't start with the usual excitement of high school movies. Instead, we walked into high school wearing masks, six feet apart, and trying to recognize each other behind face coverings. The halls were quieter, the rules stricter, and the world was still healing from a pandemic. Somehow, along the way, we made unforgettable memories.”

Those unforgettable memories include the **Senior Prom, Senior Ditch Day, Senior Assassin, Senior Sunrise** among many others.



Bianca Valdiva

"Senior Assassin or Prom has been my favorite senior event," said Mr. Avalos. "Prom was fun because I got to dance and be with my friends, the venue was really nice and fancy. I got to see everyone's pretty dresses and got to see my friend win prom king. Senior Assassin was fun too because we got to have a target and we had to eliminate them in order to move on to the next round."

For her part, Ms. Franco said Senior Ditch day was her favorite senior activity.

"We gave ourselves the day off and me and my friends went to the beach," Ms. Franco said. "That day was the day that it finally hit me, I was graduating soon and soon I will be leaving behind these memories. Although the thought of graduating soon was in the back of my head, it was still the funnest day of my high school years. I laughed so much and my friends and I got soaked by the cold waves."

Perhaps the thing that came up most in interviews was the memories of the friendships made at Piner.

"My favorite senior activity has been senior sunrise because me and my friends were all at the football field looking at the sunrise which there wasn't one because it was so cloudy and foggy that day," said **Raquel Castro**, a senior. "It was still fun to do because I was surrounded by all the people I love."

The **Class of 2025** also has a message for the classes that come after it.

"My advice would be that you really only live once," said Mr. Avalos. "As a senior and as of anything it really comes down to how this is really your last experience being a high schooler. You won't ever have anything to go back in time and it's worth just living the moment and having fun and making memories. You have to remember that you're in control and never take anything so seriously."

Franco's advice for students who come after the Class of 2025 is "something I learned from my senior year was to not let yourself drown in school work. Leaving everything for the last minute was a bad habit that created more stress. But despite that I also learned that enjoying every moment and having fun is the most important part of senior year, it's your last year and you deserve to have some fun after all the years of school you went through."

The importance of keeping up with school work also was mentioned by **Janette Valdez**, a senior.

"I learned that time management is key, don't leave everything to the last minute because it will make you feel so stressed," Ms. Valdez said. "A piece of advice that I can give incoming freshmen is have fun while it lasts because time goes by really fast that you don't even know it."



Juan Jo Gonzalez

Finally, **Juan Jo Gonzalez**, one of three winners of the senior speech contest, who will be giving his much anticipated speech at graduation, perhaps seemed to sum up the spirit of the **Class of 2025** the best.

"We must not let our fears control our desires," Mr. Gonzalez said. "We will never know what we are capable of if we do not try."

Only Two of Associated Student Body Elections Were Contested This Year Suggesting Unfortunate Degree of Apathy at Piner

By Eva Escamila

Only two of the **Associated Student Body's** elected positions were contested in this year's student government election, suggesting a degree of student apathy at **Piner High School** in a critical area of education having to do with civic engagement.

Contested elections in student government show a degree of interest and give students more of a choice in how they want their voices heard here at Piner.



ASB Leadership for 2025-2026



Cimberlee Case, the ASB adviser

““Pressure, shyness, embarrassment, worried about a grade, they don't care - apathy, this is what they tell me,” said **Cimberlee Case**, a government teacher and ASB adviser at Piner. “Sometimes I have to ask people to fill spots. I am hoping that soon we will have more competition for these positions.”

“I will say the current Junior class is a real struggle,” Ms. Case said. “I have a feeling we will bounce back the following year.”

Ms. Case said ASB is a great way for students to help facilitate activities at school.

“They get to choose spirit days and activities that we do.”

Students who are engaged in school activities do better in school. There is evidence to support this. Students in ASB also have to be of good character and must maintain good grades so it helps that way too.”

Ms. Case said the number of students who join ASB grows each year.

“We have gone from 1 class to 2,” she said. “The first year I had 31 students on the roster when I took it over. The second year I had 40 something. This year I have 51. We are growing the program and hope to keep it steady.”

Alexis Phalavong defeated **Alexis Silveira Herrera** in the election for ASB Treasurer in the sole contested election. In the contest for Sophomore Class President **Landon Williams-Humphreys** defeated **Kira Bourland**.

B.J. (Betsy) Guillen ran unopposed and was elected ASB President, while **Johnny Alvarado** ran unopposed and was elected ASB Vice President. **Yanet Benitez** ran unopposed and was elected as ASB Secretary.

Jocelyn Uraje Galindo ran unopposed and was elected Senior Class President, while **Fernanda Contreras** ran unopposed and was elected Senior Class Vice President.

Makenzie Linsenmeyer ran unopposed and was elected Junior Class President, while

Kamila Olvera ran unopposed and was elected Junior Class Vice President. **Yael Zamora** ran unopposed and was elected Sophomore Vice President.

ASB “is a group of student leaders who work together to make school a better place,” said Ms. Guillen, the newly elected ASB President, in an interview. “We plan events, support clubs, promote school spirit, and so much more. It helps others by giving students a voice, creating a positive environment, and building a stronger school community.”

“This was my first year in ASB, and I love the experience,” said Ms. Uraje, the newly elected Senior Class President.

Each student in this class has a goal to compete to show school spirit.

“ASB is a class that is hardworking but still having fun in the process,” said Ms. Silveira, the newly elected Junior Class Treasurer.

“I enjoyed getting more involved with my school, it helped me step out of my comfort zone and make me more outgoing,” said Ms. Contreras, the newly elected Senior Class VP.

ASB Events

ASB students had many events here at Piner that were unforgettable, the Monroe Toy Drive, Rallies, Movie Nights, Homecoming, Prom and Spirit Weeks were all set up by these students.

To be fair, when it comes to winning in specific categories in events, students are able to make their voices heard to have a more of a true and honorable outcome. ASB makes sure everything is set and unbiased.

“The whole school collected toys for the Monroe students and ASB gave it to them,” said Ms. Zamora, the newly elected Sophomore Class VP.

“It's fun seeing the kids at the drive receive their toys,” added Ms. Conteras.

“There were lots of smiles and a sense of accomplishment after each event,” said Ms. Guillen.

The outcome of these events that ASB holds, helps show smiles and bring out a lot of positivity for others and themselves.

“I loved seeing the joy on the little kids' faces as they received toys. It reminded me of my own childhood when getting toys felt like such a privilege,” said Ms. Uraje.

“Unfortunately, many kids today can't receive toys due to the current economic climate. I'm so grateful that Piner High School is able to contribute by collecting toy donations to give to children in need. Seeing the spark of enjoyment in their eyes when they receive the toys is truly heartwarming.”

Individual Contributions

While ASB is a leadership class, many students play a very important role individually.

"I really enjoyed being behind the scenes when planning big events here. Everyone was kind, making it easy to get along with others" said Ms. Benitez, the newly elected Junior ASB Secretary. "I would definitely recommend the class if you're a committed and enthusiastic team player, plus it's a great way to make fun memories with your friends".

"This was my first year in ASB and I loved it," added Ms. Phalavong, the newly elected ASB Treasurer. "I would highly recommend other students to join!"

"It required a significant amount of effort, but it was worth it," Ms. Uraje added.

Future Success with ASB

With setting up behind the scenes, communicating, and thinking outside boxes, these students were asked how they dealt with their own personal goals to be successful.

"I focused on bringing the Piner community together and connected with students, shared my goals, and listened to their ideas," Ms. Guillen said.

Students shared that ASB has prepared them so much for their future success whether it's for jobs or school.

"Through ASB, I've learned valuable leadership skills and how to plan and run events," said Mr. Williams-Humphreys, the newly elected Sophomore President. "Skills that will be helpful in the future."

"I have learned leadership skills and how to be more outgoing," said Ms. Bourland, who lost to Ms. Phalavong, in the contest for ASB Treasurer. "I have also learned how to talk to all kinds of different people."

Piner, Led by VP Ryan Thompson and Government Teacher Cimberlee Case, Proudly Hosted SRCS 2025 Special Olympics

By Elly Somnavong

Piner High School hosted a Special Olympics event for the first time. The event was a track meet and was held on Wednesday, April 30, 2025. The event was organized at the district level by Kaitland Pinella, principal of Lewis Learning Academy and Special Education Program Manager for the district.

At Piner the track meet was coordinated by District Athletic Director and Piner Vice Principal **Ryan Thompson** and **Cimberlee Case**, the teacher in charge of the **Associated Student Body (ASB)** and an economics and government teacher at Piner.

This was the first time Piner has hosted a Special Olympics event. Piner principal and volunteer at the event **Andrea Correia** said, "we have never hosted the Special Olympics Track Meet before and we're very excited to do so," she explained. "We're approaching it as a learning experience. What can we do better? How can we make it more exciting"

Volunteers, teachers, ASB students, the yearbook class, and others from Piner came out to support and manage the event.

Ms. Case stated, “with their help it’ll be easier to do this again next year,” as the students helped staff and administrators a great deal for the entirety of the event.

During this meet, a total of 24 schools signed up to participate, and 23 showed up. Schools from all over Sonoma County, kids of all ages and grades ranging from elementary to high schools participated in the games together.



Kaitland Pinella, the coordinator for the SRCS Special Olympics events and also the principal at Lewis Learning Academy.



Ryan Thompson, SRCS Athletic Director and vice principal of Piner High School, helped coordinate the event for Piner.



Cimberlee Case, ASB adviser, also helped coordinate the event for Piner.

The day’s events started with a welcome ceremony, followed by a Parade of Athletes. There was a Special Performance from **Fierce Cheer Elite**, a Nationally ranked Championship gym which produces Elite All Star Cheer Teams in Northern California, as well as a speech by Piner’s Ms. Correia.

Piner’s **Ariana Villalobos** sang the National Anthem, and everyone did the recitation of the Special Olympics Oath, which is the following.

*"Let me win
But if I cannot win
Let me be brave in the attempt"*

After the opening ceremony, the games began. The first competition included student athletes competing in two heats of the mile race, each featuring 16-18 runners. The next race included two heats of the 4X100 relay race. Each heat involved 9 teams.

“The mile was pretty good, everyone was running together,” said **Brandon Foster**, a volunteer and a Piner sophomore. “The relay races were pretty cool too, seeing their different capabilities.”

“It’s really fun seeing my students from other schools I’ve worked for and how they interact with my current students,” said **Noa Lewin**, a volunteer and special education teacher at **Montgomery High School**. “Two students of mine – Ryan and Alex – were in the relay.”

Following soon after the racing events the field was open for visitors to watch athletes competing in javelin, shot put, softball, tennis ball throwing and standing long jump.

Parents of participants, staff from other schools, volunteers, and organizations who came to support the event had a lovely time watching the children run around and have fun.

"It's pretty cool hanging out with the special needs kid," said **Tyler Coester**, a volunteer at the meet and a senior at Piner. "They're all good kids at heart. It's great to see them having so much fun."

Some of the staff present from other schools, ranging from elementary to high schools were from an Inspire special education program. Inspire is designed for students who may struggle with integration in regular special education settings, needing a more tailored and supportive environment.

Often these programs focus on addressing behavioral needs, trauma, or learning differences with children, and may utilize smaller class sizes, specialized curriculum, and therapeutic approaches.

All the Inspire staff work in the classrooms with students daily, so they came to the event to support the students. The staff said that they are present or at least try to be present at every Special Olympic event.

Stacy Bowdish, a supervisor for Inspire and has been there for two years, does the secondary olympics.

Bowdish said that the track meet was her, "6th Special Olympics," and that she adores seeing the children enjoy themselves. "It's fun to see the students run into their old friends, all the kids have a good time."

Gretchen Skalinder, a teacher from **Brook Hill Elementary School**, works with the RISE program, teaching third through sixth grade. She has worked at the school for two years and has attended the event for both years.

In the context of special education, RISE can refer to a few different things. However the one that Skalinder was referring to is the "Reaching Independence through Structured Education," which is a program or classroom setting designed to support students with significant disabilities, such as autism or developmental delays.

Skalinder shared that there were two RISE classes present at the event, her class and another first and second grade class from Brook Hill.

Skalinder said that she loves the event. "The kids look forward to it and it's a great opportunity for them to be outside and interact and get exercise."

Not only did special education programs come out to the event, even local businesses showed up to share their support.

Lane Petruska, from **Poppy Bank Epicenter**, said that the business has been coming to the Special Olympic events since at least mid 2024.

"We've wanted to put ourselves out to the community and give support to the Special Olympic community," Ms. Petruska said. "And we're very proud of our track record with being involved in these events in Sonoma County."

Ms. Petruska said Poppy Bank has attended 5 events, supporting a variety of sports with this event at Piner being one of the larger ones they've attended.

"I love seeing the familiar faces come out for these events, parents, kids, faculty members," Ms. Petruska stated, "it's especially important right now that we put a face to special needs and give out support in a time where many resources are starting to disappear."

Near the end, the event featured 50 meter hurdles, 25 meter slalom and 50 meter, 100 meter and 25 meter wheelchair races.

For the finale, the student athletes assembled to walk through a Spirit Tunnel of Volunteers to receive their ribbons.

All the participants, observers, volunteers, everyone present at the Special Olympic had an amazing experience. For Piner, the school plans to host many more events and variations of sports in the future, allowing the school to spread more positivity and spark excitement for all sorts of people.

Piner Life Sciences Teacher Eric Cecil's Class Organizes 3rd Annual Display of Student Made Finback Whale Model in the MPR

By Aaron Moreno and Alexander Guzman

Piner High School students enjoyed a valuable opportunity to learn more about the life of whales, thanks to the exhibit of a fin-backed whale hosted by teacher **Eric Cecil's** life sciences class on May 9, 2025.

Mr. Cecil teaches life sciences at Piner High School.

"HSB (Health Sciences and Biology) students made the whale in 2019, under the auspices of former Piner Life Sciences teacher, **Sara Heyne**," Mr. Cecil said.

The whale is constructed from sheets of plastic and tape. He estimated the construction of the whale probably took about a week. The dimensions of the whale are 70 feet long and about 25 feet wide from the tips of the flippers.

While the dimensions are in line with a typical finback whale, he conceded however that finbacks are considerably slimmer than Piner's model. In the wild, finbacks can grow to up to 85 feet and weigh up to 81 tons.

They are the second largest whale species after blue whales which can grow to 100 feet long and weigh up to 160 tons.



The Finback Whale Model on display at the MPR.



Mr. Cecil in action at the MPR.

“Blue whales are the largest creatures to ever live on Planet Earth, larger than any dinosaurs,” Mr. Cecil said.

While Piner’s whale has been viewed by students since 2019, Mr. Cecil has been having his Life Sciences classes set it up in the MPR just for the past three years.

“This year probably about 15 classes came by to see the whale,” he said.

“Most of the time they are surprised by how big it is and that they can go inside,” he said.

Asked whether Piner students ever named the whale, he commented “they had not”.

He said he would invite his classes to name the whale and let the Piner Prospector know what name the students choose..

Because they are mammals, whales must surface periodically to breathe and especially before a deep dive. They also sleep on the surface with half of their brain awake and the other half asleep.

“They evolved this characteristic to protect themselves from predators,” he said.

Finback whales live all over the world though they congregate in the waters of the arctic during the summer months when food is plentiful.

They must eat up to 2 tons a day of microscopic crustaceans called plankton during warmer months before heading south during the mating season.

Finback whales are not commonly seen in the waters along the Coast of California, which is known for a thriving population of about 40,000 gray whales that migrate thousands of miles from the arctic to the waters off of Mexico every year.

Full grown gray whales are typically much smaller than finbacks or blues at 40 to 50 feet and weighing up to 41 tons.

Asked about how to tell whether a whale is male or female, he responded "it is challenging because most of the time their genitalia are not out in the open."

"Some creatures don't have external genitalia but they still have physical intercourse," he said.

Whales typically have one baby at a time, he added

Asked how long whales live, he answered "they can live as long as 80 years. You can find the age by the layers of ear wax in their ears".

Using earwax evidence, "scientists can tell how old the whale is as well as learn about the environmental conditions prevalent during the whale's life. It is like the rings of a tree".

While full grown finbacks are typically too large for predators such as killer whales, or orcas, and sharks, their much smaller calves can be targets.

The calves of gray whales also are prey to orcas, especially in the Monterey Trench off the coast of California.

He stated "the orcas ambush the gray whales as they cross the trench."

He said "the mothers fight the orcas and have been known to push the calves to the surface to shield them from attack."

He said "some get eaten but most do not. It is the struggle for existence in nature. Students are often a little shocked about how savage existence can be in the wild."

The largest baleen whales such as finbacks, grays and even humpbacks are typically unaggressive with humans, though occasionally a jumping whale lands on a whale watching boat or a fishing boat that has come too close to the animal.

"If you threaten their babies they can be aggressive," he said.

Indeed, he explained that during whaling times the gray whale was called "the devil fish" because of its propensity to attack the boat.

In the meantime, the biggest threat to whales in the 21st Century is still human beings.

"In the past, whales were hunted to near extinction," he said. "They are not being hunted so much anymore but they are being killed by ship strikes or getting tangled in fishing nets."

He said whales also are probably being affected by human activity and climate change which disturbs their natural habits. "Whales get disturbed by human activities, especially by sonar."

He said "they could be kept out of areas they historically have depended on for food."

According to Mr. Cecil, there are approximately 30,000 finback whales left in the wild down from a population of some 200,000 before whaling began in the 19th Century.

That represents a significant comeback, however, since their numbers had dwindled to a few hundred.

The population of gray whales in the wild, which was down in the hundreds of specimens, also has recovered to around 40,000.

For his part, he commented "I often marveled at the idea that some of the biggest whales eat tiny little crustaceans. It is really weird. How does the biggest thing on earth eat the smallest thing?"

Finback whales, as well as blue whales, gray whales and humpback whales, are known as "baleen whales," because of the sheets of fibrous material they carry in their mouths instead of teeth.



A gray whale displaying its baleen.



Whales eat tons and tons of tiny crustaceans called plankton.

He said of the baleen whales "they swim through the water with their mouths gaping open collecting up to two tons of plankton a day."

To be sure, several species of whales do have teeth instead of baleen.

These include orcas and dolphins and giant sperm whales which can grow up to 60 feet long and up to 50 tons and are known to dive deep to dine on giant squid.

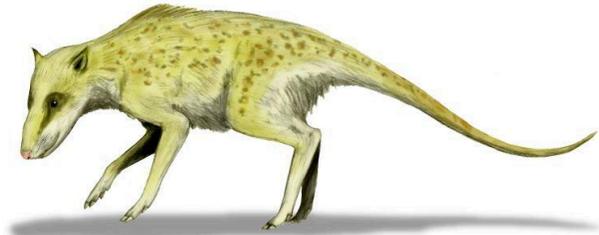
All whales are mammals, which means they are warm blooded, give birth to live offspring, and feed their babies with milk.

In addition, Mr. Cecil said whales typically congregate in societies for protection and friendship.

“They stay with each other for a long time. They have close friends. They are intelligent creatures with complex lives.”



A fearsome Sperm Whale locked in combat with a Giant Squid.



Indohyus is an ancient ancestor to all whales.

For his part, Mr. Cecil said Piner’s whale model fits well into the evolution curriculum because it allows students to connect with the idea that whales evolved from land animals.

“One of my favorite [Theory of] Evolution stories is that whales started out as a land dwelling deer-like animal with sharp teeth called Indohyus.”

Mr. Cecil also likes teaching about whales because it gives him an opportunity to demonstrate the power of cooperation.

Indeed, he said “it took cooperation between the U.S., Canada and Mexico to bring an end to whaling and save the species from extinction. I like to focus on things where people work together.”

Piner High’s Donna Fernandez Wins Award for Teaching About the Holocaust and Genocide in Statistics for Social Justice Class

By Keriana Singkeo

Donna Fernandez, a beloved **Piner High School** math teacher, was awarded the “Morris Weiss Award” for teaching about the Holocaust and other genocides to students in her Statistics for Social Justice class this year.

The Morris Weiss Award is given annually by the Holocaust Center of **Jewish Family and Childrens' Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties**, to an educator who teaches about the Holocaust.

The Holocaust involved the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews by the Nazi regime in Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945.

Piner's campus is heavily Hispanic, so when Ms. Fernandez asked students if they knew about the Holocaust many students would say "it was in Germany, during World War II."

Ms. Fernandez said she was surprised they didn't know anything else about it, or the reason why it happened. So she decided to teach them about



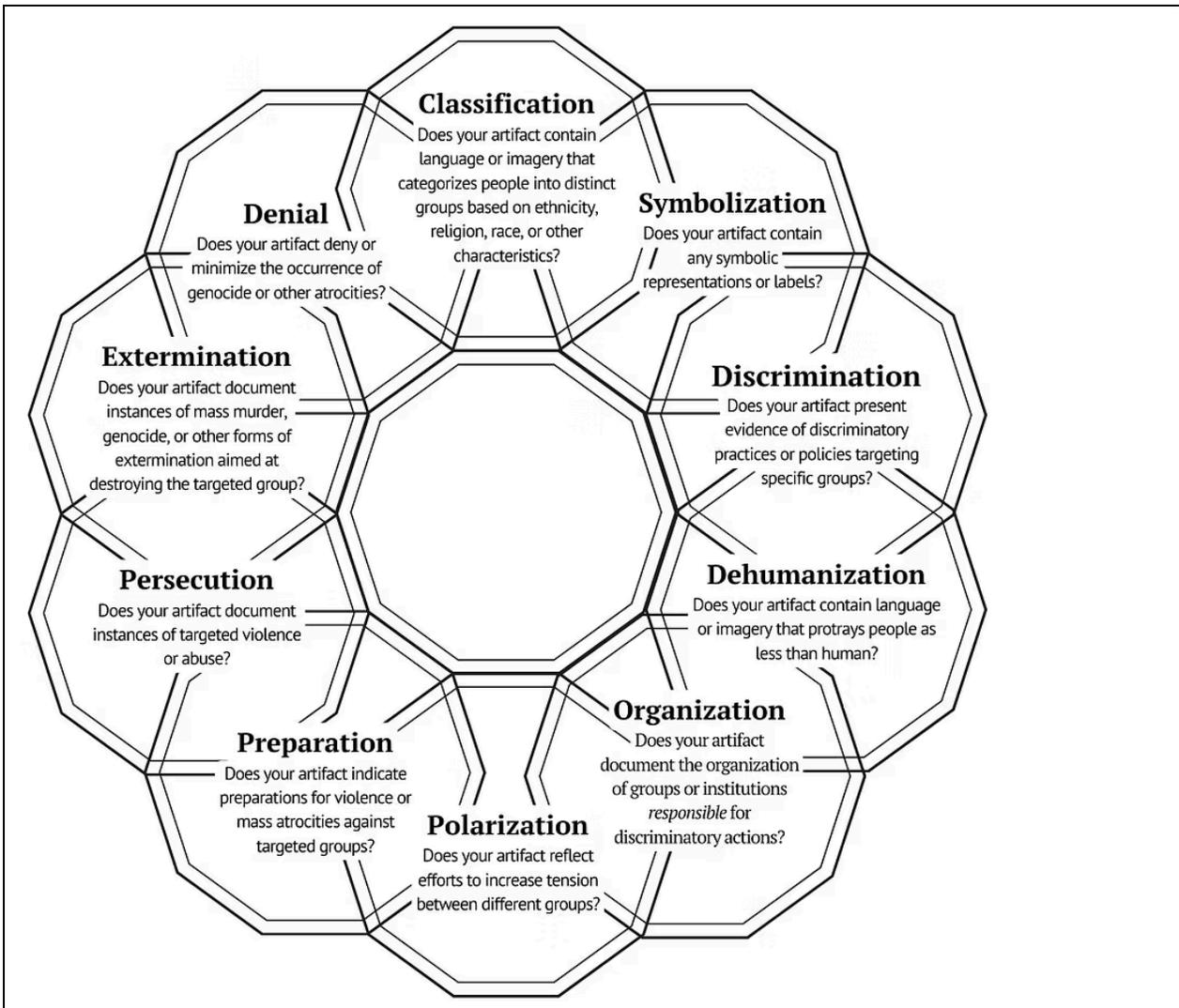
Donna Fernandez

the Holocaust and other genocides including the California Indian Genocide.

The California Indian Genocide refers to the systematic violence, displacement, and policies enacted against Native Americans in California between 1846 and 1873, following the U.S. annexation of California and the Gold Rush. These policies caused a dramatic decline in the indigenous population, from an estimated 150,000 to roughly 30,000 survivors.

"I am a member of Jewish Family and Children's Services' Educator Leader Council," Ms. Fernandez said in a written answer to questions from The Piner Prospector. "I have learned about the importance of teaching about genocide by examining the United Nations' definition of genocide."

Ms. Fernandez said she used lesson plans about the 10 stages of genocide created by the **Redbud Resource Group**, a California-based nonprofit organization focused on improving public health and education outcomes for Native American communities.



Graphic from the Redbud Resource Group

“The course I taught, Statistics for Social Justice, afforded them the opportunity to learn about society and injustices through a mathematical lens,” Ms. Fernandez said.

“Teaching students about where injustice comes from and the dangerous implications was very important to understand how students can advocate for equity.”

Ms. Fernandez said it’s important that someone educates students about standing up for themselves and other people. She noted that many things divide the world and that students need to learn how to cope with division and change it.

Her idea was to teach her students in a creative way by using math.

"The Holocaust is a genocide, and Native Americans have experienced a genocide through colonization and Westward expansion," Ms. Fernandez said.

"I am Pomo from Elem Indian Colony in Clearlake Oaks, California," she said. "The California genocide is personal and affected my family. The Holocaust is taught in the school system, but Native American history and contemporary issues are minimally studied."

Ms. Fernandez noted that Native Americans are the people that were in America first, and it's painful knowing that white settlers forced them out of their own country. She said white settlers also forced Native Americans to forget how to speak their language, and destroyed their culture.

"When I ask students about the ancestral tribes of Sonoma County, no one knows," Ms. Fernandez said. "Native Americans are invisible in our educational system."

As such, Ms. Fernandez said students need to learn about the Pomo, Wappo, and Coast Miwok who are Indigenous to the Santa Rosa area.

"The destruction, deliberate massacres, and laws aimed at eliminating my people fit the UN's definition of genocide," Fernandez said. "Teaching about the Holocaust and genocide prevents the erasure of history, stops negative stereotypes, and shows the contributions of the people to society."

For her part, Ms. Fernandez believes that it should be mandatory for all students in America to learn who used to run this country before it was stolen away from them. She said it's not fair to Native Americans to be excluded from the curriculum.

Ms. Fernandez said there are three things she wants students to understand about the Holocaust and other genocides so history doesn't keep repeating itself.

"First, it was a tragic human event that had devastating effects on people," she said. "Second, at the center of the Holocaust was bias, which led to propaganda, oppression, and hate. Third, we need to hear the real stories of resiliency and hardships experienced by survivors to show that we care about their lives and appreciate their sheer courage to live."

Asked how she was able to teach about the Holocaust in a math class, Ms. Fernandez said "math is about the study of patterns and numbers in our world; understanding patterns that led to the Holocaust and genocide is equally important."

Ms. Fernandez said she taught about the Holocaust in part by showing the documentary 'The Broken Promise,' which shows the rise of autocracies and their impact on genocide."

The documentary film explores the history of the Holocaust and other genocides that have happened and are still happening. The documentary teaches that authoritarians use genocide as a tool to advance their political agenda, and consumerism helps them do it.

Asked how students responded to learning about the tragedy, Ms. Fernandez said her students were troubled by the loss of life due to inhumane actions. But she said they felt that they better understood how bias can lead to harmful ideas and practices.

To be sure, Ms. Fernandez said many of her current students were surprised that there were other genocides in other countries.

“The Holocaust makes me upset,” Ms. Fernandez said. “It affects me personally as a California Native American. My ancestors experienced the California Indian Genocide; they have endured societal, political, and economic factors that have contributed to the loss of land, language, and traditional practices.”

Given that personal history, Ms. Fernandez said she was honored to receive the Morris Weiss Award.

“I feel proud of the great teachers on the Educator Leaders Council with me, who are advancing their knowledge about the Holocaust so they can teach using survivors' testimony, artifacts, and documentaries.”

Professionally, Ms. Fernandez has been teaching at Piner since 2021. She previously taught at Navajo Preparatory School for 10 years, and at Dzilth-na-o-dith-hle Community Grant School for 4 years..

Piner’s Max the Cat, Attacked by Unknown Varmint, Is on the Mend

By Aaron Moreno

Piner High School's unofficial ambassador **Max the Cat** was recently attacked by some wild animal, believed to be an opossum.

For anyone who might not know, Max is the gray colored Tabby Cat that usually roams around campus either during the day or night. Max is also known around campus as Gracie or Mama.

The name of Max’s caretaker is a woman named **Peggy Marcom**, who lives near Piner High on Jenes Lane.

Ms. Marcom said in a text message that Max is owned by a neighbor who wishes to be anonymous. She said Max prefers to live with her because the neighbor has six dogs.



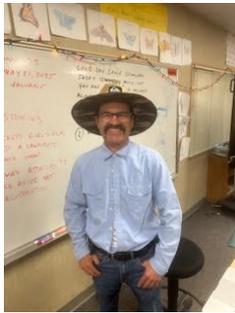
Max at home

Max “got into a fight with I think an opossum and he had quite a puncture wound on his belly,” Ms. Marcom said. “I took him to the vet of course and he had to stay indoors for two weeks with one of those collars around his neck. Now he seems to be just fine.”

Ms. Marcom said she was “so surprised to find out that he’s been entertaining” the Piner community. “He’s quite a character isn’t he?”

Someone who is especially close to Max is **Antonio Chavez**, Piner’s head custodian, which is why he was shocked to hear Max had been attacked.

“The other day I got a message that Max was attacked by an opossum or some animal,” Chavez said in an interview.



**Antonio Chavez,
Piner’s head custodian.**



Max resting at home.

Max disappeared about 3 weeks ago so Mr. Chavez assumes Max probably got his injury during or before the time he was missing.

“I saw Max today,” Mr. Chavez said. “He came right up to me. I think he was happy to see me.”

Piner GSA Club Welcomes All to Join Next Year and Walk This Year with Pride at the Santa Rosa Pride Parade

By Sebastian Witthaus

As Pride Month and the Santa Rosa Pride Parade approach on May 31st, I’d like to shine some light on our school’s own Pride Club, the **Piner High School GSA Club for Gender and Sexuality Awareness.**

For context, I am **Sebastian Witthaus**, a trans student at Piner who's been in the GSA since the start of this year (my freshman year).

When coming to Piner, I wondered what I would encounter as a newly out trans man. Would I be met with indifference? Would I be bullied and misgendered by my fellow peers? Would I ever find people beyond my friend group who'd accept me as who I am?

Instead of all that, I have found a safe place here at Piner in the GSA Club, where all are accepted. The GSA strives to bring attention and love to the LGBTQIA+ community, though you do not have to be in the community in order to join.

GSA meetings are held in special education science teacher Catherine Jorgenson's room A6, and the club welcomes anyone who wishes to attend.

The club joins in with the food fairs, the club rushes, the haunted house earlier this year, and more events. The GSA can always be seen doing something fun and innovative at these events, like this April when the club served ice cream and soda for the food fair.

For the upcoming Pride Parade in the downtown plaza on May 31, the GSA has invited schools from all over the Sonoma Schools District to join in the walk this year. The Piner GSA Club members will be wearing their own custom Piner GSA shirts to show those attending the parade that Piner has Pride as well. They've provided a sign-up sheet for those who wish to participate, club members or not.

"I became interested in participating in GSA as a desire to be a stronger ally and to help students feel safer on campus," said Ms. Jorgenson, one of the many teachers in the GSA. "I think we've built a really good community with the teachers and students, I think that everyone feels really supported."

In addition to Ms. Jorgenson, the GSA Club also has support from **Dawn Neufeld, Ashley Richard, Heather Benson, Casey Carl** and **Erik Klouse**.

"We've done it for two years, but it's been running for a while," said Ms. Jorgenson. "Ms. Benson and Ms. Carl ran it before. They started it and when we started showing interest they let us take over."

"This is my ninth year at Piner," Ms. Jorgenson said. "I'm really looking forward to walking in Pride with the group, I think it will be an incredible experience with the group this year. We did an end of year bowling party last year. The parade will be more emotion filling for the group."

For her part, Ms. Jorgenson said the consistency of members has really helped the club and the community.

Jacki Elmira Slape, the club president, "is hard working, has great ideas, rallies the group together for events, and is a super positive influence for people," Ms. Jorgenson said. "She's a senior, so we need to find a new president. If anyone is interested, they can let us know. They have to be willing to put in effort."

Slape said in an interview that she joined the club to spruce it up and help it get more

involved in the Piner community.

"I didn't join freshman and sophomore year because it was dumb and I wanted to make it better," Slape said. "They didn't do anything so I wanted to fix it up."

"We're not just focused on being gay, but we're here as a club," she said. "We're here for everyone."

Slape said anyone can join GSA "and I encourage anybody to join."



Luke Adams

While the GSA is full of a colorful cast of members, some may stick out such as senior **Luke Adams**, who was apparently conscripted Ms. Slape to join the club.

"Drafted," Mr. Adams said. "It's a roller coaster. Ups and downs."

Other members such as **Aiyanna Bustamante-Rodriguez**, a Piner sophomore, described the club as "really interesting and like a cool place to fit in."

"GSA makes everyone feel welcome," Bustamante-Rodriguez said.

"I feel like every place should have a GSA," said **Emma Murphy**, a Piner junior in the club. "It's a comfortable place with no judgment. Everyone here is supportive and won't get mad at people for being themselves. It's a private and safe space for everyone."

"I'm looking forward to the Pride Parade," Ms. Murphy said. "Everyone in the community being supportive together. I also really enjoy selling things at the haunted house, it gave us an opportunity to be with the community and see other clubs."

"Unlike other clubs where people are combined by interest, we are bound by something we can't control," said **Catherine Vaughn-Foster**, a Piner freshman. "It's just who we are, this is a place where we can be who we are."

The GSA welcomes anyone and everyone to join them this May 31st to walk in the downtown Piner Parade. They hope to see you there!

—With reporting by **Elly Somnavong**.

Piner High School Junior Francisco Reyna Shows Newcomers the Way to Success with his Work Ethic and Positive Attitude

By Romina Palomares and Adriana Garcia

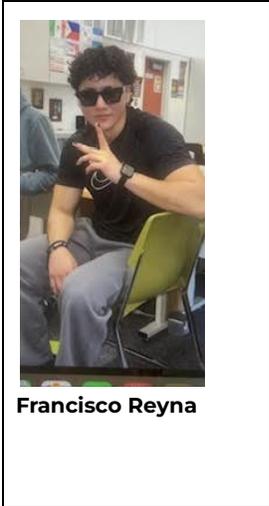
Francisco Reyna, a junior and newcomer success story at **Piner High School**, says he hopes to graduate next year with “good grades” and is grateful for the kindness of his teachers and friends who helped him through a challenging and fun American high school experience.

“I was very nervous, and I didn’t know what I was going to do at a new school,” Reyna said in written answers to questions from The Piner Prospector. “I was lost and couldn’t find the classrooms, but someone helped me find them.”

Reyna said everyone at Piner was “very nice” to him. “I’ve never experienced any discrimination from the teachers,” he said.

Piner administrators, teachers and aides “helped me with people who speak both languages (English and Spanish) so I could learn more about the school,” he said

Reyna said American high schools are much more controlled than the schools he was used to in Mexico.



“It’s very different, because here in the United States everything is very controlled with young people and their parents, and in Mexico not so much. You do what you want without anyone calling your attention.”

Even so, he said his Piner experience has helped him learn and communicate better in English.

Reyna said the most difficult subject he had to take was U.S. History, because I had never heard anything about it.

He said the easiest class is Concert Band, where he played trumpet this year.

Some of his favorite experiences at Piner were meeting friends and joining the **M.E.C.H.A.** club.

M.E.C.H.A. stands for **Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán** and translates to **Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán**, a nationwide student organization that emerged from the Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

As a newcomer from Mexico, Mr. Reyna said American culture in general was surprising to him.

“I have been very surprised by the security with the police, and that Mother’s Day is celebrated on the second Sunday of May.”

Asked what he missed most about Mexico, he said “my friends, and my family but also the Mexican War Band.” **The Mexican War Band** refers to the band of the 8th Cavalry Mexican Military Band, which played in 1884 in New Orleans and is seen as a precursor to Jazz music.

The Mexican War Bands most famous songs include “Sobre las olas,” or “Over the Waves.”

Mr. Reyna’s teachers heaped praise on Reyna for his good nature and enthusiasm for learning.

“He auditioned for my top group next year on drums and got in,” said **John Mayer**, director of concert music at Piner. “He has been an awesome student this year, who has been working hard on a new instrument. He has been a positive influence in my class all year.”

“Francisco is a fantastic human,” said **Dawn Neufeld**, a Piner Newcomer English teacher. “He is always willing to help and shows enthusiasm in his learning. He’s also really fun to talk to.”

“Francisco always brought smiles and positivity to the classroom,” said **Page Willson**, a Piner Newcomer English teacher. “He was excited to learn and worked hard to achieve his goals. He will do well in whatever he chooses to do in the future.”

TO SUBMIT A TIP ABOUT AN EVENT THAT THE PINER PROSPECTOR SHOULD COVER, PLEASE EMAIL JOURNALISM TEACHER DAN LONKEVICH AT DLONKEVICH@SRCS.K12.CA.US

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