



ARIZONA ASSOCIATION OF LATINO
ADMINISTRATORS AND SUPERINTENDENTS

July 2024

LETTERS

Tributes to Everyday Heroes

"Showing gratitude is one of the simplest, yet most powerful things we can do for each other."

– Randy Pausch

AZALAS

FOREWORD

by Dr. Marvene Lobato, Executive Director
Arizona Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents

The July Newsletter has “Thank You” notes from our Executive Board Members and staff to those individuals who inspired them, have been supportive, and/or paved the way for them. Everyone has someone to thank for where they are today. We know who the individual is but have not taken the time to let them know. My hope is that once you read these that you will take time to write and send a thank you note. Someone had an impact on you personally, professionally, or both. A parent, sibling, other relative, or friend may have been or is the one you rely upon for support.

A mentor, supervisor or colleague may have led, guided, prepared, or walked alongside you during your career opportunities or when you were seeking or considering your next position, promotion, or degree. Is it time to express your gratitude by saying thank you? Let someone know the impact they had on you. Share how appreciative you are for them.

Dr. Marvene Lobato



Life is not a **path** of coincidence,
happenstance and luck, **but rather**
an **unexplainable, meticulously**
chartered **course** for **one** to touch
the **lives of others** and make a
difference in the
world.

- Barbara Dillingham

Dear Dr. Hightower,

I wanted to take a moment to express my heartfelt gratitude for everything you have done for me. Your unwavering support, mentorship, and guidance have been instrumental in my professional growth and development.

As one of your assistant principals and principals, I learned so much from your leadership and dedication. You have shown me the importance of fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment, embracing diversity, and promoting multilingual and multicultural education. Your commitment to these values has deeply influenced my approach as an educator and leader.

Completing the first cohort of the Aspiring Superintendents Academy for Latino and Latina Leaders in 2022 was a significant milestone for me. Your encouragement and support throughout this journey were crucial to my success. Additionally, your embrace of Rick Miller's Kids at Hope philosophy has reinforced my commitment to seeing every child as capable of success, no exceptions.

Thank you for opening my door to educational leadership. Because of what you have done for me, I will, in turn, open doors for others. Your impact on my career and on the lives of countless students and educators is immeasurable.

De todo corazón, thank you for being a source of inspiration and for your unwavering dedication to the field of education.

Christina





Here are a few words to share about the mentors who helped me become who I am today.

First and foremost, I give thanks to my parents, Francisca and Raul, and my entire Familia. They supported me through my personal and professional careers.

Secondly, I want to thank two of my High School baseball coaches, Mr. Armando De Lucas and Mr. Manuel “Manny” Valenzuela. They encouraged me to stay in school and continue playing baseball throughout high school and college. They both became school administrators, and I always looked up to them, never imagining I would become an administrator myself.

Thirdly, my true mentor that helped me get into administration is Dr. Alejandro Perez, former superintendent of Murphy School District! Dr. Perez recommended me to an ASU Leadership Cohort while I was a 7th grade teacher. I was happy teaching and coaching; administration was not on my mind during that time. I accepted the recommendation and upon completion of my administrative certification, Dr. Perez hired me as assistant principal at Sullivan Elementary School in the Murphy Elementary School District. When a new school was built in MSD, Dr. Perez recommended me as the new school Principal.

Dr. Perez mentored many Latino administrators throughout the state of Arizona. He is one of the co-founders of AHSAA (now known as AZALAS) and the first president of the association. In honor of Dr. Perez, AZALAS awards a doctoral scholarship for a member of AZALAS pursuing a doctoral degree in education leadership. AZALAS holds the Annual Alejandro Perez Memorial Golf Tournament to raise funds for this scholarship.

I will forever be thankful for Dr. Alejandro Perez and what he did for myself and other Latino educators.

Arturo



Tribute by Arturo Carrizoza



It is difficult to just choose one person to thank for all of the professional blessings I have been bestowed. I have been very fortunate to have wonderful supervisors throughout the years that have supported and mentored me as I grew as a professional. During my college years, Eddie Diaz was my supervisor for almost four years. He gave me many opportunities to learn about civil engineering. We worked hard together, and we also played hard. He invited me and my fellow co-workers to "hit the lake" on the weekends, and he cooked a mean brisket.

The principal who supervised me during my first teaching job right after college is Ms. Barbara Kamon. She was also the assistant principal at the elementary school that I attended as a child. She gave me many leadership opportunities as a teacher. We instituted the school's first leadership council, of which we co-chaired together.

My first central office administrator opportunity came when Molly Evans and Melanie Block convinced the superintendent in 2006 to give me a chance. Melanie and Molly subsequently became central office administrators, and they led Educational Services for their respective school districts. Nora Gutierrez gave me the opportunity to transition to central office administration from an elementary school district to a high school district. She supported me as I took on leadership roles in professional organizations.

My current supervisor, Jeremy Calles, gave me the opportunity to lead as his deputy superintendent. We are currently working vigorously to improve learning opportunities for our students.

I have also been blessed with a beautiful wife and three boys that are the motivation for all my endeavors. But if I must choose the most influential figure in my professional career, it must be the strongest, most courageous, and most loving person I have ever encountered, my mother, Maria Isabel Ceja. My mother raised seven of us, mostly on her own. This was after helping raise most of her 17 siblings. She migrated to the United States on her own in the 1970s. She worked tirelessly to save enough money to bring her children with her to the United States. She has always supported the educational endeavors of her children. Everyone of us graduated high school. An accomplishment that she was unable to attain herself due to her family obligations. Yet, she is the smartest person I know. She is the matriarch of the family. She leads with grace, a keen sense of right and wrong, and with unwavering love for all her children. When I find myself strained with my professional endeavors, I always think of her and how she was able to accomplish so much all on her own. This puts my meager challenges into perspective and allows me to stay the course and work through any difficulties I face. I am forever grateful to my mom.

Thank you, mom. I love you.

Juan



Tribute by Juan Ceja

Dear Barbara,

The profound sense of loss, the enduring love, and the deep respect I hold for you defy simple description. Your mentorship changed my destiny. You showed me the power of seeing and nurturing the strengths in those around me. The genuine respect you demonstrated and the trust you had in others was of infinite value. The ways you prioritized and modeled language that focused on strengths and possibilities influenced the way I approach teaching and leading.

Your journey as a trailblazing female leader with a doctoral degree inspired me to believe in my own capabilities to pursue and complete my doctorate. The support and confidence you demonstrated along the way were transformative.

As I reflect on my career as a teacher and leader, I recognize you as an influential giant upon whose shoulders I stood. Your mentorship continues to guide me every day, and I strive to embody the same dedication, compassion, and wisdom that you so effortlessly demonstrated.


Thank you for making me a better leader and person. I carry your teachings with me always, and share the invaluable lessons you imparted with new generations of leaders.

With deepest respect and admiration,

JoEtta



Tribute by Dr. JoEtta Gonzales



Dear Mr. McKissick,

When I was asked to write about a special person who was influential in my life, I immediately thought of you. While several people came to mind, you are the person who inspired and nurtured my love of reading. At an early age, I developed a passion for reading. A passion that grew from just reading words on a page to stories that enveloped me. Not only did my classmates and I love reading, you showed us how to use our minds to imagine and dream. I recall you reading to us daily and, with every line, painting a picture so vivid, so engaging, and so alive that we could hardly wait until the next chapter. In other words, you ignited my love of reading in all forms and made reading magical.

Growing up wasn't easy back then, and having a caring teacher like you was hard to come by. However, you came into our lives and gave us a new outlook on life. Because you cared, we somehow knew that we could be more than we ever imagined. Moreover, you taught us how to be strong, how to use our voices, and use the power of the pen.

Thank you for devoting your life to teaching and shaping young minds. Because you decided to take these little stars in whatever shape we were in and began to polish us, we were provided with unforgettable learning experiences. Experiences that challenged us and instilled confidence. We were encouraged to stand tall and take pride in ourselves. And as we pushed towards academic achievement, you were determined to promote the long-term development and success of the whole child . . . and so you did.

Though it has been a few years since our last meeting, I still carry your words of encouragement with me. You have always been an important figure in my life. There is an old African proverb that says, "It takes a village to raise a child." Well, you are an integral part of my village and my foundation.


Thank you, Terry McKissick, for your dedication and motivation; encouraging me to be more than I ever thought I could be. I can almost hear voices ringing from the halls of Byron Kilbourn School, echoing that very sentiment. Many teachers are remembered, but few are treasured. And because of the impact you've had on my life, and countless others, I am truly honored to have the opportunity to share it with you.

It is with much gratitude that I take this time to celebrate you, because contrary to popular opinion, all heroes don't wear capes. You'll forever be my hero.

Tracy



Tribute by Tracy Harris



One important person in my life who has profoundly shaped me both personally and professionally is my mother, Carmen Bonifaz. As far back as I can remember, she has been my most impactful teacher, not by profession but by practice. My earliest memories are of her working with me as a young child, guiding me through my studies, instilling confidence in me, and always encouraging me to strive for excellence. She embodies what it means to be family-centered, strong, and an extraordinary role model. I have been blessed by her wisdom and guidance. As an immigrant with three children in the 1980s, my mother faced numerous challenges with remarkable resilience and grace. She bravely overcame her fears of leaving behind her family, language, culture, and life to create new opportunities for my brothers and I.

Watching her push through barriers and navigate an unfamiliar world with such courage has taught me invaluable lessons about perseverance, sacrifice, and unconditional love. Her dedication and support have shaped me into the person I am today, and I am deeply grateful for her profound impact on my life. From her, I have learned the importance of family, advocating for oneself and others, and staying focused on the important things in life. Her love and strength continue to guide me, and I strive to honor her always.

Gisselle





Dear Mr. Michael Martinez,

As you know, my education career as a teacher and administrator began in southern Colorado. In the spring of 1995, I realized that I could no longer tolerate the bitter cold winters. I knew it would not be an easy feat to secure an assistant superintendent position in a new state knowing no one. All I wanted was for someone to give me an opportunity. After my interview in June, I accepted the position of assistant superintendent of Instructional Services with the Globe Unified School District. I was determined not to disappoint you.

I began working under you in July 1995. I soon learned what type of leader you were and how fortunate I was to learn from you. You are a role model who believes in leading with integrity, transparency, and consistency. I watched as you treated all employees with respect. You were visible, approachable, firm but fair. You always had an open-door policy for employees, parents, and community members.

I witnessed you show compassion toward others. You would direct others to provide the support needed when an employee or family faced a hardship or tragedy. When my husband passed away unexpectedly, you allowed me the time I needed to work through my grief and determine when I was ready to return to work.

You are a leader who values employees in every department. I remember one situation where you confidently reminded teachers that they do not work in isolation. Classified staff are often unrecognized, but not under your leadership. When you stood up for them, they appreciated your support. The administrative team heard repeatedly that all students are important. Our job was to provide a safe learning environment with no room for discrimination or negligence. Your expectation was that all students were to be treated fairly and with respect.

Mr. Martinez, you modeled how to lead with confidence and dignity when testifying at a hearing or meeting with a state agency. You had to defend our small school district to the Arizona State Board of Education and Arizona School Facilities Board. You did this to acquire appropriate funding for our students and to build a much-needed middle school.


You have been my mentor for 29 years. I will be forever grateful for how you guided, challenged, and supported me. I have you to thank for the success I have had as an assistant superintendent, executive director of finance and as superintendent. I know that you had an impact on the following individuals who retired or are currently serving as assistant superintendents or superintendents: Dr. Carlos Bejarano, Dr. Randy Blecha, Dr. Jacob Chavez, Ms. Cindy Segotta Jones, Ms. Ema Jauregui, Ms. Norma Jauregui, Dr. Eddie Lewis, Dr. Jose Leyba, Dr. Randy Mahlerwein, Dr. Cecilia Maes, Dr. Vicente Ontiveros, Mr. Joe Quintana, and Dr. Richard Vierling. You hired or promoted each of these individuals.

In closing, I want to thank you for taking a chance on this Colorado administrator and providing her with the best mentor and good friend.

Forever grateful,

Marvene





I would like to take this opportunity to thank my brother Johnny R. Medina. I lost my brother unexpectedly on June 28, 2021. I'm thankful that as brothers, we had a great childhood raised by two responsible parents (and two siblings—Rosie and Joseph). Our lives as adults were no different. We remained close and supportive of each other and we took time to learn about the many things that we were passionate about. My brother had a love for cars, history, politics, architecture, low rider culture, and the social and economic issues that impacted Latino families. More than anything his love for photography was front and center. Love for photography was something that was passed down from our mother.

Often, I'd contact my brother and ask for advice on how to improve my photography skills. The most important thing I learned from my brother is that photographers have the power to tell a story through the lens. My brother also shared with me that not every photograph will be perfect and sometimes the rawness of a photograph adds value, uniqueness, and integrity. I spent many days with my brother in the deepest roots of Los Angeles photographing subject matters that were important to him; there were stories to be told. Los Angeles is where his heart was. I never had a chance to thank him for sharing his skills, words of wisdom, and his love for photography. In return, I've learned to trust the process, bring out the very best in people through photographs, and never be unwilling or too shy to take photographs.

Brother, thank you for the many skills you taught me and for inspiring me to be a better photographer. I should have told you sooner, but it's never too late.

Vincent





Mary Rosales, the first principal I worked with after college, is the person I consider my mentor and inspiration. Starting my teaching career in the Isaac School District, I felt immense relief knowing I would be working with a principal from New Mexico who understood my upbringing and the importance of familia and cultura. As a young Latina trying to find her way in the large metro city of Phoenix, this was invaluable.

At Esperanza Elementary, Mary provided me with a safe space to learn and grow as a teacher and leader. She later became a confidant and mentor, guiding my leadership development. Mary is my loudest cheerleader, an advocate, and a role model for young Latinas pursuing higher education and accessing jobs that have not readily been available to Latinas.

Mary has also become a cherished member of our family. When I returned to work as a new principal, she and her granddaughter Camille cared for my daughter, enabling me to focus on my new role without worrying about my child's care. Mary's support has been instrumental in my journey, and I am forever grateful for her guidance and friendship.

Mary has also been instrumental in my development as a Latina leader. It was Mary who ensured that I became a member of AHSAA (Arizona Hispanic School Administrators Association) in 1992, an organization filled with supportive leaders who are dedicated to the growth of Latino leaders to ensure that our students have the best advocates leading their learning.

Mary Rosales was born in 1937 in Las Cruces, New Mexico, to Ernesto and Emma Narvaez. She was the second oldest of five children. In her childhood, their family would go to the local library every weekend and check out their books for the week. She met the love of her life, Sal Rosales, while in high school, and after graduation, the two were married and moved to Camp Pendleton, California, for Sal's service with the USMC. After his service ended, the two made Phoenix their home.

Mary has three children: Juliet, Sal Jr., and Richie. After raising them, she returned to school at ASU to obtain her teaching certificate. On her first day, she was late to class after getting lost, and fortunately, her professor took pity on her and walked her to her next class on campus.

Upon graduation, she spent three years teaching kindergarten in the Avondale School District. Simultaneously, she obtained her administrative degree and applied for an assistant principal position. She was encouraged to apply for the principal positions open across the district. She was one of the first female principals to be hired within Isaac School District, ultimately landing at Zito Elementary School. She then was selected to be the first principal at Esperanza Elementary School - a visionary bilingual school serving kinder through third-grade students. She started a "books and breakfast" program that brought in a guest reader to read books to students and their parent's in English and Spanish - she hoped to bring books into her students' families by making it a group activity. A memorable moment was when she submerged her entire body into a tub full of Jello and ate (gummy) worms after her students read a record number of books during the school year.

As her husband's health declined, Mary took a step back from administration but kept herself busy teaching quilting classes, being an active member of the Phoenix PFLAG community, and a eucharistic minister through Saint Mary's Basilica to patients at Good Samaritan Hospital. Now Mary spends time with her family, especially her great-grandchildren—Elliot, Baker and Kallen.

Monica



Tribute by Monica Mesa



I wanted to take a minute to thank my father, Richard Perkins. My dad was the hardest working man that I've ever known. He was loving, supportive and encouraging always. He loved us and we knew it.

He helped to instill in me, courage, wisdom, work ethic, and family values. He taught me how to be a man.


He always had something fun for us to do whether it was going to the racetrack on Saturday night or making homemade vanilla ice cream up north at our property. He was a brilliant machinist and mechanic, and was sought out by many from the southwest to do work on their vehicles.

He was the greatest man I've ever known.

Dad, I just want to say thank you for everything, and I think about you all the time. I'll always love you.

Ed





My journey has been profoundly shaped by the influence of many individuals. The unwavering work ethic of my father and mother, alongside my mother's daily embodiment of humility and kindness, instilled in me foundational values. Others like Ron Poole, Bill Sullivan, and Mike Martinez each contributed uniquely to my development as an educator and leader. Ron demonstrated integrity in action when I served as the assistant principal at the school where he was principal. Bill's support through cultural shifts as superintendent was crucial to the work at the school where he appointed me. Mike's resolve as superintendent in advancing critical initiatives led to substantial academic progress district-wide and served as a great example to me. Equally as critical has been the unwavering support of my wife Diana who shouldered immense responsibilities as both mother and father to our sons during my demanding career. Her reminders of the privilege of our positions and the importance of humility continue to resonate.

In addition to the individuals mentioned above, I want to recognize two individuals who influenced the start and culmination of my career in public education. Sometimes we tend to emphasize the beginning and end to things.

Joe Casillas, my first principal in 1985, played a pivotal role in shaping my career. Just a few years into my teaching journey, he approached me with encouragement to prepare for and pursue a position in school administration. Having lost my father at 15, Joe became a father figure during that stage of my life. Like me, Joe was from a small mining town, which contributed to the ease in connecting with him.

During the summer after my third or fourth year of teaching, Joe was diagnosed with leukemia. When we returned to school for the new year, I struggled to find the right words and awkwardly avoided him. After a few days of this, Joe called me into his office. He hugged me and reassured me, comforting me, instead of me comforting him. In that moment, he not only showed his care but also taught me about compassion and leadership. Joe not only saw potential in me but also helped shape me into a more compassionate and caring leader.


Dr. David Santellanes stands out as one of the most knowledgeable and wise mentors I have had the privilege to learn from. His extensive experience, unwavering encouragement, and constant availability for support and guidance have significantly contributed to my professional success, including becoming a superintendent. When Dave was superintendent at Glendale Elementary School District during my early teaching years, I did not know him well. However, when I served as director of human resources at Cartwright School District, Dave was hired as the teacher recruiter, providing me invaluable access to his expertise. He taught me everything from effective recruiting techniques to navigating the complexities of leadership politics, emphasizing the importance of grace and diplomacy.

Dave continues to offer invaluable advice and guidance whenever I need it. An intriguing note: Dave and I share the unique distinction of being the only two minority superintendents in the 100-plus-year history of Glendale Elementary School District. Dave is also from a small mining community.

I am deeply grateful for all of these individuals. Their support, encouragement, guidance, and friendship have been—and continue to be—invaluable to me.



Joe



I would like to first and foremost thank my parents for always believing in me and encouraging me to follow my dreams and to work hard to accomplish my goals. Their belief in me and supportive positive words helped me develop the self-esteem and mindset to persevere and never give up; always reassuring me that getting an education was going to be the key to future success and a better life. In addition, having spent twenty-seven years with my Sunnyside Familia has been an amazing journey.

There are so many amazing leaders I consider great friends and colleagues who supported me throughout my educational journey. In Sunnyside, I was truly blessed to work with colleagues who valued team work. Whether it was a site leadership team or a district leadership team, we all worked together to ensure we were providing the BEST for all of our stakeholders, most importantly the students we served. Last but not least, a HUGE thank you to AZALAS for the leaders, friendships, mentors, support and knowledge I have gained from so many throughout the years; always pushing me to learn, grow and be a better leader. Again, so much to be thankful and grateful for.

Roxana





I would like to recognize my mentor of over ten years, Dr. Marvene Lobato.

Dr. Lobato has demonstrated integrity, guidance, insight, wisdom and friendship while serving as an educational leader. I have observed her lead a district with honesty, integrity, grit and a spirit of servant leadership. I watched her make difficult decisions in many arenas, while keeping children as her "north star". Leading by example, Dr. Lobato not only taught me important lessons about leadership, but also taught those around her. She was selfless and generous, giving of her time and resources without a spotlight. Her most selfless acts have happened without anyone else knowing. During her tenure as a superintendent, she helped to grow and mold the future educational leaders in her district and in our field. As the AZALAS Executive Director, she continues to lead educational leaders throughout Arizona and the nation. She has brought our organization to new heights and we are all the more enriched with her leadership and presence. Most importantly, Dr. Lobato continues to be a leadership force, while remaining humble. I would like to thank her for being my mentor and for helping me to develop as a leader in our community.

Dr. Lobato - Thank you for ALL that you do!

Marco



Along the way in our careers or personal lives, we meet special people who guide, mentor, and help us grow as human beings. I'd like to share a little bit about my God sent former colleague, mentor, and dear friend, Mary Good. She was the principal at Ray Borane Middle School where I got my first administrator position as the assistant principal. Mary did not only become my mentor and trained me as an administrator, but she has become one of the most important people in my life. She has been there professionally and personally for me and has seen me grow as a leader. She doesn't even know how much I appreciate her! Mary, you are a blessing in my life! Thanks for teaching me, helping me grow, and for always being the best version of you!

Ana





A Heartfelt Thank You to My Personal and Professional Inspirations

On my journey, I have been influenced and guided by many remarkable individuals. These people have left an indelible mark on my life, shaping who I have become and how I have navigated both personally and professionally. Today, I want to take a moment to express my deepest gratitude to those who have inspired me.

I have been fortunate to have mentors who have guided me and imparted their wisdom and experience. My high school CWI teacher and track coach Mr. Tuck Gionet and his wife Marci. I learned valuable relationship and parenting lessons by babysitting for them all through high school. They treated me like family. In school, Mr. Gionet taught all of us in his class and on his track team to work hard, leave everything nicer than you found it, and to always have a sense of humor and be able to laugh at yourself. He taught us to fight for what we believed in, even taking us to the Capitol in Washington state to learn how to get bills passed, participate in community service activities, manage money, and other very valuable life long lessons. He sadly passed away from cancer in 2015, but he left a beautiful legacy of students, family, and teachers who are making a big difference in their communities. In the professional realm, I have had the privilege of working with some truly inspiring individuals. Karla Walter gave me my start and taught me the importance of teamwork, resilience, and continuous learning. She took time to mentor and teach me so much about school district business and finance, and I am forever grateful. Her dedication and passion for her work is contagious and pushes me to strive for excellence in all that I do.

To everyone who has played a role in my personal and professional development, thank you. You have helped shape the person I am today and continue to inspire me to be better every day. This article is a small token of my immense gratitude, and I look forward to paying forward the kindness and wisdom you have shared with me.

Thank you,

Rosalie



Multiply My Thanks

For what you have done,
for what you have said,
for what you have helped me with,
thanks seem not enough.

I want only to tell you one simple phrase,
yet I feel the need to ensure that
the emotion is conveyed.

If I could just say it, and ask you,
please multiply my thanks by infinity.

- Author Unknown



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Make it a great day!

Tracy Harris