

THE SAN DIEGO COUNTY PUBLIC DEFENDER YOUTH COUNCIL  
PRESENTS

THE

25 MOST

REMARKABLE

★ TEENS

IN SAN DIEGO

2020

August 15, 2020

Dear 25 Most Remarkable Teens of San Diego 2020,

Unfortunately, because of the spread of COVID-19 and the necessary caution against large gatherings, we are not able to present an in-person event for the 25 Most Remarkable Teens in San Diego this year. But in spite of COVID-19, we are determined to recognize each of you for your outstanding commitment to community, public service and active citizenship.

In 2017 we created the San Diego County Public Defender Youth Council to provide a forum for adult/youth partnerships, a place where teens and adults could learn from each other and work together to find a shared voice. The 25 Most Remarkable Teens in San Diego is one result of that collaboration.

The 25 Most Remarkable Teens in San Diego is an annual youth recognition program that rewards accomplishments in 25 non-traditional categories. By recognizing young people as community assets, celebrating their efforts and achievements, the Remarkable Teens program reinforces and rewards hard work, perseverance, dedication and courage as it leads young people to believe that they can do whatever they put their minds to.

Congratulations to each and every one of you – socially distanced as mandated by the times, but with genuine admiration and enthusiasm, I applaud your accomplishments.

May the values and ideals that led to the honor of this special recognition continue to inspire you in the years ahead.

Best wishes,

Randy Mize  
Public Defender





## Youth Activism

# SAW PAW KAY

## e3civic High School

Saw Paw Kay is a 17-year old junior at e3civic High School where he is Student Body President.

Saw was born in Myanmar in a refugee camp. His family fled the Karen conflict to settle in America with hopes of finding a better life. After numerous moves within the United States, the family settled in City Heights when Saw was twelve. Saw and his brother were constantly hassled in City Heights by other kids wanting to fight. Consequently, as they got older, they joined a gang to protect themselves. It gave them security and respect. From Saw's perspective, it was absolutely necessary to belong to a gang in order to survive in their rough and dangerous environment. According to Saw, "My people did not flee from the Karen conflict only to be kicked and shot at in the streets of America." Saw became involved in the Ace program at the Union for Pan Asian Community in City Heights which lifted him out of the gang lifestyle. He became part of a multi-cultural group of former gang member teens who, in 2018, created a neighborhood café called Youth Business Enterprise.

Saw is an outstanding student at e3civic and earned the Grades and Grit Award and the Griffin Award for Outstanding Overall Student. He was valedictorian at Horace Mann Middle School and was selected in high school to attend the School of Ethics and Global Leadership in the fall of 2019 in Washington. He is a spokesperson for the Karen Community in San Diego, serving on the First-Generation Youth Group Panel at SDSU sharing successes and challenges after refugee camp resettlement. He also won first place at the San Diego Fair for his poem "Stop the Genocide of My People."

Saw is a tireless volunteer and advocate. He is one of 40 teen leaders fighting hunger in San Diego with the Jewish Family Services' Teen Leadership Program.

Saw Pay Kay receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Youth Activism.



## Community Service

# NATASHA THREAT

## Pacific Ridge School

Natasha Threat is a 15-year old junior at Pacific Ridge School in Carlsbad. She is the founder of the non-profit, *Beegether*. Natasha's philosophy is "If you see an issue, research it. If you find a dire need in your community, solve it. When you see a difference that needs to be made be it."

At the age of twelve, Natasha founded, *Beegether*, an organization whose goal is to beautify the community through planting. In 2015, she raised more than \$1000 to plant a weedy slope at Poinsettia Elementary and turn it from eyesore into an area of botanical beauty. In 2019, she raised over \$1,500 to revitalize a blighted area near Pacific Rim Elementary school. Natasha raises money by collecting unwanted items, picking up free goods, and selling the items at monthly garage sales. Any money that does not go toward buying plants is given to charities and community projects.

Natasha is the head of the WE movement at her school. The WE movement is an international development charity and youth empowerment movement. As head of WE, she led the collection of food for a local food bank, spread kindness by writing cards anonymously and placing them around campus for other students to find, and coordinated the collection of funds to sponsor four people with clean water for life in areas where clean water is hard to come by. Due to Pacific Ridge's commitment to the WE Foundation, the school was one of a chosen few to be represented at WE Day.

Natasha is a member of A Million Knots, a service-learning group that hosts a school in India to provide education to 12 girls under the age of thirteen. She also serves as a literacy advocate, volunteering for the Carlsbad City Library's Summer Reading Program Team.

According to her nominator, Colonel Humberto Jones, Natasha embodies the John F. Kennedy quote, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

Natasha was awarded the President H.W. Bush Points of Light Award.

Natasha Threat receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Community Service.



## Social Conscience

# ELENA MEDINA

## High Tech High Chula Vista

Elena Izcalli Tlauixochitl Medina is a 16-year old junior at High Tech High Chula Vista. She has a passion for activism and organizing. Elena has used her love for art, music and poetry to inspire positive action in political and social issues.

Elena is involved in many social justice activities on campus and in her community. She co-teaches a student-led Ethnic Studies class at her school, she is co-president of the M.E.Ch.A. club (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán), and was a finalist for student board member for the California Board of Education. Most recently Elena was one of 15 students selected around the nation to accept the Yale Bassett Award for Community Engagement for the class of 2021. (The award recognizes a record of creative leadership and public service, academic distinction, interdisciplinary problem solving, and experience addressing societal issues that might include, but need not be limited to, race and racism.)

Elena was born and raised in Chula Vista, California, embracing her Indigenous Chicana traditions. From a young age she spent time exploring music and poetry with mentors such as renowned Chicano musician and activist, Ramon “Chunky” Sanchez and U.S. Poet Laureate, Juan Felipe Herrera. Elena is a guitarist and singer and has even created her own musical album. She read her poem “Cultura” at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ethnic Studies department at UCLA. She read her poem “One Day” at the final lecture of Poet Laureate Juan Herrera. “One Day” was also read at the Women of the Year Awards hosted by Assembly member Lorena Gonzalez. “One Day” was published in 2016 in the Library of Congress.

Elena has volunteered and participated in a variety of public service programs and organizations including Assembly Member Dr. Shirley Weber’s Young Legislators Program, Youth for Border Aid, Border Dreamers, Border Angels, and ACLU San Diego.

Elena Medina receives the Remarkable Teen Award in the category of Social Conscience.



## Filmmaking

# ALEX PAZ

## San Marcos High School

Alex Paz is a 17-year old senior at San Marcos High School.

Alex is a prolific film maker who, although he started to dabble in filmmaking using an iPad when he was nine, only picked up his first video camera in his sophomore year. At first, he was mocked for being the kid with the camera who appeared everywhere to film school events, but he persevered and worked on his craft, and was soon doing significant, interesting, and insightful work. Alex helped create a video for the Make-A-Wish foundation and has directed over thirty videos for the San Marcos Unified School district. He is extremely talented at making football hype films which are screened on his popular YouTube channel. His success in filmmaking led him to a guest host role on KUSI News's Prep Pigskin report for his outstanding videography work on the football field.

According to Career and Technical Education teacher Scott Campbell, "Alex has a vision of what he wants to do with his life. He pursues a career in filmmaking with a passion like no other student I have ever met. He uses social media to promote his skills and this has led to paying jobs most teens would envy."

Alex made a High School Senior Class retrospective video on his high school years as well as a lament that senior year was cut short due to COVID-19. The piece is stirring, dramatic, and ultimately very optimistic about the future.

Alex says that the reactions he receives from the people he inspires when he releases a new video are his favorite part about filmmaking. In the fall, Alex will be attending Palomar College and will join their media broadcast and film story-telling programs. He will later transfer to a four-year university to major in film. His dream is to become a full-time content creator for the Kansas City Chiefs after he graduates from college.

Alex Paz receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Filmmaking.



## Citizenship

# RIYA AGARWAL

Torrey Pines  
High School

Riya Agarwal is a 17-year old graduate of Torrey Pines High School. She will be attending the University of California, San Diego this fall.

Riya is the Queen for the House of India within the House of Pacific Relations (HPR) Queens Organization at Balboa Park. Her mission with HPR is to foster the spirit of understanding, tolerance, and goodwill between all ethnicities and cultures. As Queen, Riya spreads cultural awareness to her local community and Balboa Park visitors. She helps showcase India's rich culture and cuisine through dance performances, ethnic food, and fashion. Her leadership in these events has helped support the construction of the House of India cottage in Balboa Park. The building of this cottage will enable the House of India to create interactive stations and hands-on activities for visitors to experience and understand India's cultural heritage for future generations. Riya has created a children's book on Indian customs to spark children's interest and creativity. The book contains pages which include famous Indians in STEM, crossword puzzles, origami direction and coloring designs.

According to Rajshree Mudaliar, the President of the House of India, "Riya epitomizes the true qualities of a global citizen...she believes when people have a great awareness of each other's culture, they will have a better appreciation for diversity and coexistence."

But besides promoting different cultures, Riya is also involved in various community service events which include volunteering at Father Joe's Kitchen, Beach Cleanups, Charity Walks, and making blankets and packages for the homeless.

Riya also enjoys playing varsity rugby, performing classical Indian dance, and she has earned a second-degree black belt in Tae Kwan Do. Riya says the skills she learned in Tae Kwan Do have helped give her confidence on many levels. Riya also served as a Commissioner in her school's Associated Student Body and enjoyed planning spirit events for her peers.

Riya Agarwal receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Citizenship.



## **Courage to Overcome Adversity**

# **JOSE RAMON LOPEZ**

**Sweetwater  
High School**

Jose Ramon Lopez is a 17-year old senior at Sweetwater High School.

Jose entered the foster care system at the age of nine due to a neglectful father who was a human trafficker and a mother who was a drug dealer in Mexico. Jose writes that he felt people saw and treated him as the product of that, as if he had a choice. This profoundly affected his self-esteem, emotional state and many other aspects of his life. But Jose refused to follow in the footsteps of his parents and relatives, many of whom are in jail, and decided to be a positive role model for his younger relatives who are facing challenges similar to his own.

Jose is involved with Guardian Scholars, a program that helps foster youth to prepare them for college, and Reality Changers, a program that provides at-risk youth with academic support. Jose excels at school. He started the school Business Club which helps with the school's morning broadcast. He is on the school's hockey, swim and golf teams, and has taken a special class in the medical field for the past four years. Jose is also a Junior Recruit with the Civil Air Patrol, as well as a volunteer at his church.

Jose's nominator, Courtney Denice, writes that she is "in awe of Jose's accomplishments. Born into an unfair and unkind situation, Jose has proven his resilience time after time... He is truly a remarkable, humble, and kind young man."

Jose plans to go to community college and then transfer to a 4-year university to earn a degree in business administration or communications. After college, he would like to start his own business and non-profit. Jose says when he was young, he questioned, "Why do I have to go through this? Why can't I be like the rest of the kids, normal?" Now he says he understands that we can't control the life we're brought into, but we can change what we do with it.

Jose receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Courage to Overcome Adversity.



## Social Justice

# MAKFIRA ABDULLAHI

## Morse High School

Makhfira Abdullahi is a 17-year old incoming freshman at the University of California, San Diego, and a recent graduate of Morse High School. She is a passionate activist involved in improving her community in numerous ways.

Makhfira has served as the secretary of the One World Club at Morse for the past three years. One World is an international non-profit educational program for youth of all ages which fosters civic commitment to school, local, national and global communities. As secretary of One World, Makhfira organized events such as the annual Week of Consciousness and Walk for Peace. She arranged the donation of hygiene products and toiletries to Rachel's House for Abused Women and raised over \$1000 for the International Rescue Committee and the Anti-Defamation League.

Makhfira is a Young Legislator for California's 79th State Assembly district, a program initiated by Assembly Member Dr. Shirley Weber. The program focuses on policies in state and local government as well as team building among youth interested in politics and law. She is also part of several local advocacy groups including Defund School Police SD, Student Amplifying Voices, and Sisters Gonna Work it Out. These groups strive for educational and social justice in the community.

Makhfira also participated in the Rotary Youth Leadership Awards and Triton Summer Academy, a UCSD program of 100 select students from the West Coast that aims to prepare students for college life.

As an Oromo-American Muslim Female, Makhfira continuously strives to represent the voices of individuals who look like her and come from similar backgrounds. Through grassroots work, she hopes to inspire change in all institutions and emphasize the importance of diversity, representation, and youth advocacy. Her nominator, Bilal Mohamed, notes that, "Makhfira is committed to represent the best of her people and community, no matter where she goes."

Makhfira plans to study Political Science at UCSD, with an emphasis on International Relations.

Makhfira receives the Remarkable Teen Award in the category of Social Justice.



## Performing Arts

# KAAVYA RAAMKUMAR

Del Norte  
High School

Kaavya Raamkumar is a 16-year old junior at Del Norte High School. She is a violinist, Indian classical dancer and vocalist.

As a violinist, Kaavya is a soloist who holds the Certificate of Merit Level Eight with state honors as well as being a member of multiple orchestras. She is first violinist in the San Diego Youth Symphony and represented San Diego in orchestral performances in San Francisco, Carnegie Hall and the Sydney Opera House. She was awarded first place in the Young Musician's Competition and was invited to perform at the California Federation of Women's Clubs South District Arts Festival. As a community performer, Kaavya has performed at many events and venues throughout San Diego, including Balboa Park, the County Fair and various fundraisers. She has spread cheer through her music at many senior centers, libraries and the Ronald McDonald House. She has also performed solo at the San Diego Museum of Art to depict the relationship between music and art. As a mentor in the San Diego Youth Symphony, Kaavya guides many students in music.

In addition to being a violinist, Kaavya is a trained Indian classical dancer and vocalist, and has performed in many international music and dance festivals, community and benefit events. She has performed at the San Diego Music and Dance Festival, the Festival of World Dances, the South Asian Culture show, the Indian Fine Arts Academy of San Diego Dance and Music Festival, the Festival of Lights and December Nights in Balboa Park.

Passionate about STEM, Kaavya also volunteers at the Fleet Science Center as a gallery facilitator demonstrating science experiments and helping visitors. She also volunteers as a STEM tutor to elementary and middle school students.

Nominator Juan Palacios says, "It is a joy to be in the presence of a young person with the ability to interpret music at a higher level but also one who has such natural leadership qualities."

Kaavya Raamkumar receives the Remarkable Teen Award in the category of Performing Arts.



**Most Enterprising**

**DIEGO REAL**

**Mount Miguel  
High School**

Diego Real is a 17-year old graduate of Mount Miguel High School with a passion for engineering.

Diego was President of Mount Miguel's first Robotics Club. Due to the infancy of the program, not only did Diego oversee the development of the robotics team but also the creation of an engineering program: the Mount Miguel Matador Engineering Program. Due to Project Lead the Way, an interdisciplinary program for high schoolers interested in the field of STEM, Diego was given the opportunity to help write a multimillion-dollar grant for a brand-new engineering class, computer lab and collaborative workspace. This grant, made possible by California's 2016 Proposition 51, not only helped improve the facilities and curriculum offered at Mount Miguel, but allowed Diego to leave a legacy of change and leadership for a community of young people underrepresented in the STEM field.

Diego has been able to work and collaborate with people from Northrop Grumman, NASA's Deep Space Network, and SpaceX. But more importantly for him, he has visited several middle schools in his area to present and show off the Mount Miguel High School Robotics program with a goal of inspiring other students to enter STEM fields. Diego has also been to Elementary Schools and STEM events to teach younger students how to use VEX Claw Bots (foundation robot kits) as well as hosting a programming seminar teaching boy scouts how to program Lego EV3 Robots. Nominator Laura Aragon, Counselor at Mount Miguel High School says "Diego's accomplishments are impressive, but his curiosity, empathy, sense of wonder, humor and strong sense of service mark him as a true innovator and leader."

Diego will attend UCSD in the fall and study Aerospace Engineering. His goal is to work at NASA's jet propulsion laboratory.

Diego Real receives the Remarkable Teen Award in the category of Most Enterprising.



## Campus Leadership

# ZAW LER YABE

## Hoover High School

Zaw Ler Yabe is a 16-year old junior at Hoover High School.

Zaw Yabe was born in a poor rural community in Thailand in 2003. Her father died when she was six leaving her mother to raise her and her four siblings. Zaw's mother wanted her children to be educated and think for themselves so she immigrated to the United States in search of a better life for them.

Zaw moved to San Diego when she was nine. She says that when she entered fourth grade, she felt afraid and lost because she could not speak English and there was no one around who was like her. Zaw writes, "I felt like I was a newborn baby trying to learn everything. No one spoke the same language and even the food was different." After several years, Zaw began to overcome these challenges and found her footing in this country when she threw herself into academic and student life.

Zaw is involved in numerous campus leadership roles at Hoover and in the community. Mid-City Can is a community collaborative that works to create a safe, productive, and healthy community through advocacy and organizing. She has been involved with a variety of IRC (International Rescue Committee) after school and summer programs for the past three years. Zaw attends Girls Academy and Peacemakers every week where the focus is on advocacy, learning about America and San Diego, as well as public speaking. She is also the Health and Wellness Leader at Hoover and a member of the Student Council and the College Avenue Compact and Peer Mediation Service.

Moones Mansouri, the IRC Refugee Youth Program Coordinator who nominated Zaw writes, "Zaw is an inspiration to everyone around her, not only her peers but also to her teachers... she never gets discouraged and is constantly motivated to try new things."

In the words of Zaw, "It's okay to fail now to succeed later. When you have hopes and dreams, you must never give up in order to grow and become the best version of yourself."

Zaw Ler Yabe receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Campus Leadership.



## **Innovation**

# **CHRISTOPHER CALIGUIRI**

**Canyon Crest  
Academy**

As a 16-year old junior at Canyon Crest Academy, Christopher Caliguiri is instrumental in supporting a wide variety of projects and programs that further science through his passion for innovation and research.

Christopher works alongside Ph.D. candidate Richard Gao and mentor Dr. Alysson Muotri, the Director of the Stem Cell Research program at UCSD, to develop a novel robotics platform controlled by brain organoids. (An artificially grown mass of cells or tissue that resembles an organ.) The robot platform Christopher developed has been featured in a variety of publications, including the New York Times, and won a variety of science fair awards. Christopher has also worked alongside NASA researchers, developing capillary action technology for potential use on the International Space Station.

In nominating Christopher, Richard Gao says, “Christopher is one of the most motivated and independent students I’ve ever met, far surpassing many UCSD undergraduate students even. Aside from his outstanding proficiency with robotics and electronics, a key trait is his resourcefulness in solving technical problems. I believe Christopher has a bright future of innovations ahead of him in whatever field he chooses to work in.”

Christopher leads fellow students in STEM within his school and community through various organizations. This year he is president of his school’s first robotics team, responsible for overseeing all departments including the budget, and casting the vision to the 100-member team. Previously, Christopher was the project leader for his school's synthetic biology (iGEM) research team, taking them to Boston to share their work in an international setting. Christopher has also earned the rank of Eagle Scout.

In order to share his passion for innovation and scientific inquiry, Christopher conducts science and engineering classes across San Diego. Through his outreach programs, he has reached hundreds of underserved students, aiming to instill a passion for scientific inquiry and engineering.

Christopher Caligiuri receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Innovation.



**Journalism**

**VANESSA  
GALINDO**

**San Diego  
High School**

Vanessa is an 18-year old senior at San Diego High School with a passion for journalism.

For the past three years, Vanessa has been the leader of her school's campus news program. She became interested in working with media from a very young age. She and her aunt would record and take pictures of anything and everything. She loves to make videos and pictures of everyday life because she believes sharing one's perspective on life is important. She says that filmmaking informs people to a different cultural perspective and can provoke certain feelings within an audience that might change their view on different countries and nationalities. Vanessa loves to tell the story to drive both communication and action. At San Diego High School, Vanessa filmed and directed several news packages dealing with climate change and campus cleanup. These news segments addressed shortcomings in the school and impelled change.

Vanessa recognizes that she does not like to stay in one place for long. She has a love for learning about new cultures and different ways of living. Having lived in both the United States and Mexico, she is looking forward to traveling and writing stories about her experiences. She is also in the school music program and thinks that exploring the arts and finding ways to be more creative in one's life is important to generate new ideas that entertain, inform and inspire others.

Vanessa writes, "Filmmaking is very important to me because it can help enlighten people with new cultures, perspectives, or provoke specific feelings within a diverse audience."

In the future Vanessa wants to be part of a team that helps bring people together through commentary, film and art.

Vanessa Galindo receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Journalism.



## Commitment to Personal Excellence

# ANIKA MENON

## Mount Carmel High School

Anika Menon is a 17-year old senior at Mount Carmel High School. She is committed to helping others and making a positive impact in her community.

Born into a family who emphasized the importance of helping those less fortunate, Anika began volunteering at the San Diego Food Bank at the age of six. As she grew older, she began participating in medical camps, which provide free medical care to those without insurance. For the past three years, she has worked in internships and as a volunteer at Palomar Hospital and Scripps Mercy. She is trained in multiple nursing responsibilities including inserting and removing IVs and catheters and administering medication. Anika gained valuable experience in a hospital setting providing direct, hands-on patient care alongside clinical professionals.

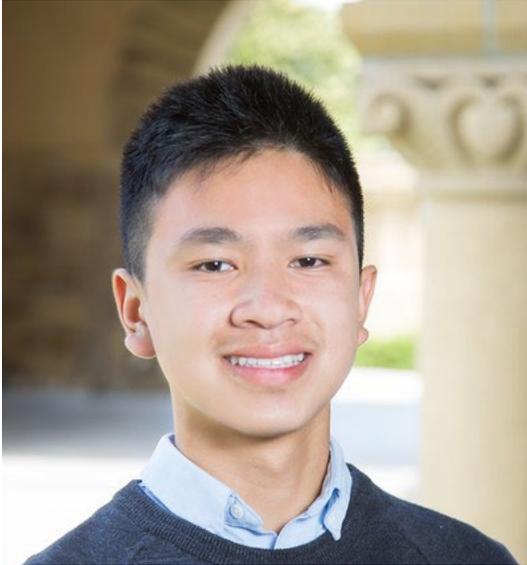
Anika is the President of Mount Carmel High School's *No Place for Hate* committee where she and other members strive to reduce bias, discrimination and bullying on campus. She is a Sundevil Ambassador at the school. These ambassadors go to elementary and middle schools throughout the district to teach younger children about kindness and the importance of character. She is a tutor for the Urban Life College Achievement network which provides tutoring in a variety of subjects to high school students who are recent refugees.

Anika is also a Bharatanatyam dancer (classical Indian dance) and has completed 13 years of training in the art form. Anika says of her commitment to personal excellence, "I am a true believer in universal love because each person is carrying their own burdens and fighting their own battles and what the world needs more than anything, is love."

Nominator Sheila Hatfield writes, "Anika seeks out and is inspired by people she admires and seeks to gain insight from their experience and teachings."

Anika will be attending UCLA in the fall as a nursing major and hopes to become a pediatric nurse anesthetist.

Anika Menon receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Commitment to Personal Excellence.



**Entrepreneur**

**ANDREW  
DIEP-TRAN**

**Mission Hills  
High School**

Andrew Diep-Tran is a 16-year old junior at Mission Hills High School in San Marcos.

Andrew is an entrepreneur and an economics enthusiast who has developed ways to inspire and teach in communities where few opportunities exist for students in this arena.

In his sophomore year, Andrew created *Operation Economics International*, an organization whose goal is to provide educational opportunities through book drives, competitions, and corporate partnerships. He recently incorporated this non-profit and is collaborating with an economics teacher to develop a curriculum that other students can use to replicate and create their own chapters around the world.

Andrew founded a business and economics club at his school, the *FIBE Fellowship* (Finance, Investments, Business and Economics). Andrew invited local business people to be guest speakers during club meetings, including the chief operating officer of Sony Electronics. He organized stock market simulators, two “Shark Tank” entrepreneurship competitions and business-related videos and lectures designed to foster interest in careers in business. He partnered with the Associated Student Body to implement the first annual Entrepreneurship Competition of Mission Hills High complete with cash prizes and mini scholarships. He grew the club from ten students in its first year to over one hundred members by the third year. Andrew is currently establishing *FIBE* chapters in elementary, middle, and high schools in the San Marcos Unified School District.

Andrew volunteers at the San Marcos City library and the Mission Hills High Key Club as well as working as an assistant to a UCSD Economics professor.

Andrew was appointed to the San Marcos Youth Commission in 2019. He also recently acquired a TEDx license and is currently organizing TEDxMissionHillsHS, the first youth-oriented TEDx event in San Marcos.

Andrew Diep-Tran receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Entrepreneur.



**Dance**

# **BERET DERNBACH**

**San Diego School of  
Creative and  
Performing Arts**

Beret Dernbach is a 17-year old senior at the San Diego School of Creative and Performing Arts. She is a Highland Dance world champion.

Beret started Highland dancing when she was five years old. She is a two-time Highland dance World Champion, a three-time U.S. Champion, and she has won five Western Region Championship titles. She is the sixth American in the 124-year history of the World Highland Dance Championships, which is held in Scotland, to win in the juvenile division.

In addition to Beret's dancing accomplishments, five years ago, when she was in eighth grade, Beret singlehandedly started a community service project called "Project Poppy" to honor Veterans who have sacrificed their lives for our country. Each Memorial Day she distributes between 200 and 1000 handmade felt poppies, the national symbol of Remembrance Day, at ceremonies across California and in Scotland.

True to her heritage, Beret works with the House of Scotland in Balboa Park as a performer and full-time member of the organization. She has been dancing at House of Scotland shows since she was five.

Beret is also part of the San Diego Global Neighborhood Project. This non-profit develops cultural, education and trade partnerships with 15 countries. According to Martin Kruming from the Global Neighborhood Project, "Beret is an extraordinary young woman who knows who she is and where she wants to go. The world needs more young leaders such as Beret... Beret is a leader who cares about people. She combines talent, values, a strong work ethic, humility, persistence and dedication."

Beret will be a freshman at the University of California San Diego in the fall, majoring in Political Science and International Relations on a pre-law track. She hopes to go to law school when she graduates and plans to run for President of the United States in 2040.

Beret Dernbach receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Dance.



**Perseverance**

**MASITIS  
AHMED**

**Crawford High  
School**

Masitis Ahmed is an 18-year old graduate from Crawford High School.

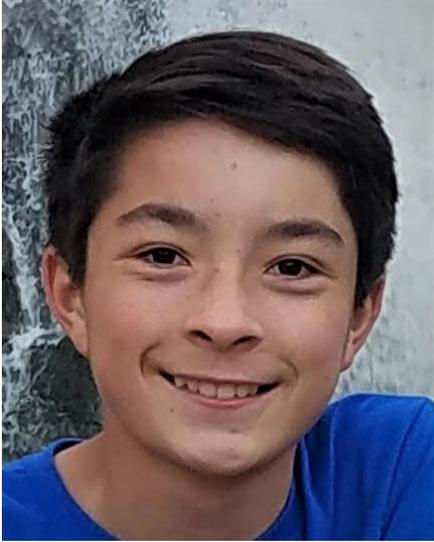
Even as a newborn, Masitis Ahmed knew what it meant to suffer. After undergoing two heart surgeries while an infant, she instinctively knew what it felt like to fight for her life and be resilient. Because of Masitis's cultural background as a Somali immigrant and practicing Muslim, and the worries about her health, her parents kept her at home for most of her childhood. She could not stay after school to play sports or join any after school programs. Masitis grew up very reserved and afraid to try anything new. She spent her freshman year at Crawford High School sitting alone, waiting for an opportunity to come her way.

Masitis knew she had to step out of her comfort zone to change her life and towards that effort she became a mentor leader for a summer program for incoming freshmen. This program gave her the confidence to try new things. She joined the Girl's Take Flight program which is a program run by the Elementary Institute of Science. She took their thirty-two week internship, and became FAA Certified as a commercial drone pilot. She started a drone club at Crawford so that she could share her drone flight knowledge with others.

Masitis plays the guitar, piano, and drums, and has written a play which is being performed at San Diego City College. She is the head of public relations for the Umi Learning Center, a non-profit organization that teaches English to recent arrivals to the United States. According to Crawford High counselor, Dan Dadmun, "I've never met a student as eager to learn new things as Masitis. She latches on to opportunities and learns what she can from them...she also shares her knowledge with others."

Masitis graduated from Crawford with honors and will attend San Diego State University in the fall, well on her way to fulfilling her dream of becoming a commercial pilot.

Masitis Ahmed receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Perseverance.



## Technology: Robotics

# DAVID SCUBA

## Torrey Pines High School

David Scuba is a 15-year old sophomore at Torrey Pines High School.

Over the past six years, David has developed a passion for robotics and been active with the FIRST team in robotics competitions. FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) is an international youth organization that develops ways to inspire students in engineering and technology fields.

David started his robotics journey in 4th grade with FIRST Lego League. Initially he built and coded Lego robots. David then participated in FIRST Tech Challenge competitions in middle school where he expanded his interest and developed his ability in designing and building robots. David is now honing his skills in designing, building, machining and CAD.

David and his teams have won multiple league robotics championships. This year, he and his team, *Singularity*, won the San Diego Regionals in a first-place alliance where the teams qualified to compete at the World championship in Houston.

But David is not only active in robotics events, he is also a community service driven young man. David has inspired the students at Maryland Elementary School in Vista with his Boy Scout Eagle project by building two box libraries and completing a book and school supply drive in collaboration with the school librarian to increase literacy in the student population. The student body is predominately from families who speak English as a second language. David's next goal is to start a Lego robotics team at Casita Center Elementary school to inspire younger students to learn about robotics.

For the past month, David's robotics team has worked in collaboration with Forecast 3D to start a GoFundMe and raise money to 3D print custom-designed reusable face shields for healthcare professionals working with COVID-19 patients. The team has already raised \$4,000 and has begun shipping the shields to hospitals around the country.

David plans to major in mechanical engineering in college while also helping others to further their own exposure in all things related to robotics.

David Scuba receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Technology: Robotics.



## Civic Engagement

# CATHERINE TAMAYO

## Academy of Our Lady of Peace

Catherine Tamayo is a 16-year old junior at the Academy of our Lady of Peace. She is passionate about public speaking, politics and criminal justice.

In 2018, Catherine was the youngest student attorney to work with her team for a second-place spot in the San Diego county Mock Trial tournament. She continues to compete every year on a strong team that always takes one of the top spots in the competition.

Catherine started her own club at school – Women in Politics (WIP). With a mission statement of “Uniting girls, women, and others in politics to create space for civil discourse, seeking to promote dynamic, solution-oriented discussion necessary to bridge the political divide,” the club’s goal is to heal political division on a local level. In nominating Catherine, Kaila Weedman writes, “At a time when the political discourse has become so polarized, Catherine has shown commitment and bravery in creating a space where teens are encouraged to discuss the issues in a respectful forum.” Those invited to speak at the club have included San Diego Port Commissioner Rafael Castellanos, U.S. District Judge Jill Burkhardt and San Marcos city councilmember Maria Nuñez. Club activities include voter registration and informed discussions of upcoming elections and the operational workings of the political process.

Catherine also spends her time sharing her skills with others. For the past several years Catherine has dedicated five hours a week to tutor students with autism in math.

Catherine is most proud of her ability to overcome personal challenges in her life. She says that however difficult things may have been at home, growing up in a single parent family, her struggles during her childhood and teen years were necessary for her growth, resilience and maturation.

Catherine plans to attend San Diego State University and then hopes to go to law school to improve the criminal justice system by becoming a criminal defense attorney.

Catherine Tamayo receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Civic Engagement.



## Photography

# CHRIS HTOO

e3civic

High School

Chris Htoo is a 17-year old senior at e3civic High School. He is an award-winning photographer with a passion for the environment.

This honor student was born in a refugee camp of 50,000 on the Thai/Myanmar border. He is Karen, a minority group targeted by the Burmese government. His parents fled their home when their village was burned to the ground. Chris came to the United States when he was nine years old.

Chris has won numerous photography prizes in the Scholastic Art and Writing Competition, a prestigious recognition program for creative teens in grades 7 through 12. He has won multiple prizes for photography at the San Diego Fair as well as winning an award for a film he produced which was screened publicly at Digital Gym Theater in San Diego.

Chris is also passionate about the environment. He attended the UCSD Global Environmental Leadership and Sustainability Program studying biodiversity, habitat destruction and volcanic eruption on the Big Island of Hawaii. He is a member of RiverWatch, an organization that measures water health at seven locations along the San Diego River. He was sponsored to attend the Society for Range Management's intensive environmental science and conservation camp in Half Moon Bay to learn public land stewardship. Chris received a scholarship to attend John Hopkins's Engineering Innovation Summer program at USD where he was recognized as the best engineering student in the group.

This civic minded environmentalist participated in the San Diego annual Homeless Count and acted as a technical inspector in the March Primary Election. He was a YMCA Teen Achiever and is part of the Upward Bound Program. Chris was also chosen to be part of the Asian Pacific Youth Leadership Project in Sacramento. He hopes to become a professional photographer, an engineer or a shoe designer for Nike.

Chris Htoo receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Photography.



## Leadership

# AMELIE SIMPSON

## Valhalla High School

Amelie Simpson is a 16-year old junior at Valhalla High School.

Amelie is a singer, songwriter and guitarist. She is a member of Valhalla Vocal Music's Chamber Ensemble. She also performs as a professional solo artist and has played at many venues throughout California, including the House of Blues, Seaport Village, and the San Diego County Fair.

At Valhalla High School, Amelie serves as president of the Rotary's Interact club, a club seeking to perform community service locally and globally. She started the chapter of Interact at her school as well as organizing the school's Australian exchange program. She is involved in the Fleet Science Center's BE WiSE program, which promotes STEM learning experiences for young women. In 2019 Amelie won a full scholarship to attend Innovalab in Silicon Valley, a two-week technology camp.

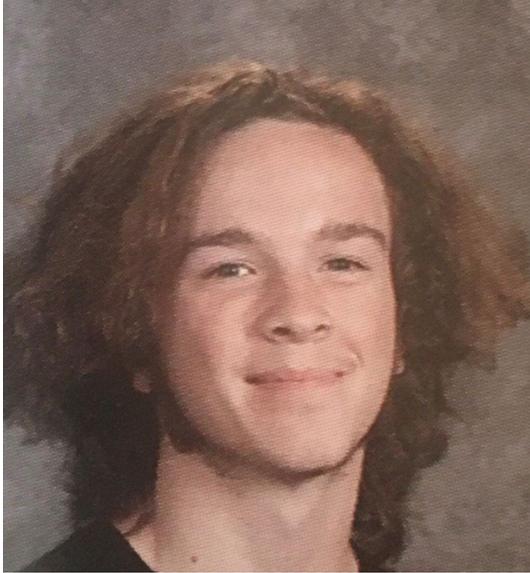
Amelie is currently participating in The Digital Experiment, a virtual leadership and cross-cultural exchange program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. She is also a contributor to *Rambler*, a local teen magazine, and recently launched Pen Pal Party, a program to help teens feel connected during times of social isolation. Amelie's motto is "The worst someone could say is no". She is bold and courageous and understands, at this young age, that risk is inherent in every enterprise and she is not afraid to fail.

Amelie is passionately dedicated to community service in San Diego. She volunteers at local nonprofits, including the Mitchell Thorp Foundation (supporting families whose children suffer from life-threatening illnesses, diseases and disorders) the Princess Project (providing free prom dresses to high school teens who cannot otherwise afford them), Traveling Stories (helping children learn to read), and the Water Conservation Garden (inspiring the conservation of water and other natural resources).

An accomplished two-sport athlete, Amelie is a starting midfielder on both Valhalla's varsity field hockey and lacrosse teams.

In nominating Amelie, The Mitchell Thorp Foundation writes, "While Amelie's musical abilities stand out publicly, the majority of her other accomplishments, especially her dedication to service and leadership go unnoticed because of her humility."

Amelie Simpson received the Remarkable Teen Award in the category of Leadership.



## Music

# LIAM GARDNER

## San Diego High School

Liam Gardner is a 16-year old junior at San Diego High School.

Liam is a talented musician. He started his music career in elementary school and became passionate about honing his skills, not only his own playing, but also in helping to improve the playing of those around him. Liam plays bass, viola, violin, cello, piano and guitar.

Music has always been a part of Liam's life. His father played keyboard in a metal band and his mother played the flute, but they were also major rock and roll, disco, classical and jazz fans. Liam had a wide range of musical tastes at an early age. His first instrument was viola in elementary school which he played until he picked up the string bass in middle school. In middle school, orchestra class was the favorite part of his day. Liam poured every ounce of his time and energy into orchestra and into improvement.

In high school, he worked even harder at his music and was able to memorize and play pieces almost instantly. He was accepted into the San Diego Youth Symphony as he continued to play for San Diego Unified School District Honor Orchestra. School music director and nominator, Kayla Rodgers, remembers when Liam showed up to the first honor orchestra rehearsal from his house on the other side of town, on the bus, with his string bass. She immediately understood his dedication. (The large instrument is six feet long, over two feet wide and heavy!)

Kayla Rodgers says, "Liam shares his talent and skill...once he commits to something, you can guarantee that he will be there for whatever is needed, regardless of the obstacles."

Liam tutored children in music after school which ignited his desire to be a music teacher. As a first-generation college student, he plans to obtain a master's in music education so that he can inspire young people to experience the joy he receives from music.

Liam Gardner receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Music.



## **Courage to Overcome: Family Situation**

**LLUVIA  
UGARTE**

Otay Ranch  
High School

Lluvia Ugarte is a 17-year old graduate of Otay Ranch High School.

Lluvia's childhood cannot be regarded as memorable in any joyful way. At the age of four, Lluvia was subject to severe child endangerment, survived the murder of her twin sister, was separated from all biological family members and experienced the imprisonment of her biological mother and stepfather. Through her early years spent in foster care, she was deprived of educational instruction and had grown accustomed to a deep longing for connection. Lluvia remembers, while in foster care, having tantrums and being put in a car seat and left in the garage all alone while she screamed until exhausted from the emotion. Lluvia's mother was a teenage parent and Lluvia was in foster care for two years before being adopted. At the age of ten, Lluvia was diagnosed with Alport's syndrome, a rare kidney disease which can cause hearing and vision loss.

However, in spite of these life challenges, Lluvia has excelled in all that she has pursued and demonstrated an incredible resiliency in the face of so much adversity. Lluvia is kind and compassionate in her treatment of others. She feels their pain and empathizes with everyone, especially children. She is driven in her pursuit to earn a medical degree by excelling in her academic life. She graduated from Otay Ranch with the Seal of Biliteracy, a California Scholarship Federation Seal Bearer (CSF), Varsity Cheerleader Captain, and an Associated Study Body participant in Spirit and Arts.

Lluvia writes of her ordeal, "I have refused to become a victim of my past. My drive to excel is not only for me, but for my sister Martha who was not given the chance to experience life or pursue her dreams."

Lluvia will attend San Diego State University this fall studying biology, with the ultimate goal of pursuing a career in medicine.

Lluvia Ugarte receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Courage to Overcome: Family Situation.



## Personal Determination

# MATTHEW TILLYER

Classical Academy  
High School

Matthew Tillyer is an 18-year old graduate of Classical Academy High School.

Matthew became physically disabled six years ago following a severe respiratory infection that attacked his nervous system. Initially he was bedbound, unable to move from the neck down. He was dependent on a feeding tube to eat, and on his family for all his physical care. Miraculously, due to experimental medication and months of physical therapy, Matthew was able to rejoin society in a wheelchair just in time for high school.

Matthew always loved football, and wanted to involve himself in the sport, so in his freshman year, he contacted the head football coach. The coach asked Matthew to film Varsity practices and games. New friendships and skills grew from this and encouraged Matthew to think bigger about his involvement in the school and his community.

In his sophomore year, Matthew became a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes on campus, eventually serving as president in his senior year. He organized and planned weekly lunch meetings for approximately 150 students. He contacted local pastors to speak, created group games and arranged food donations from local businesses. He also served as an editor of the school video news program as well as commissioner of Link Crew - a student mentorship program. Matthew's determination to not let his challenges determine his ability to serve and connect, has forever positively impacted his high school and community. Principal Dana Moen says "Matthew has never once let his wheelchair define him.... Matthew has not given up hope that he may walk someday, but in the meantime, he does not let anything stop him."

In revisiting the trials and challenges of his disability Matthew shares a truth he learned from this traumatic experience when he says, "I discovered that despite my challenges I had a far greater ability to give back than ever before." Matthew remains committed to serve his community throughout his life.

Matthew will be attending UCSD in the fall and plans to major in International Studies-History.

Matthew Tillyer receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Personal Determination.



## Most Promising Teen

# LILIAN FRANQUI

Pacific Beach  
Middle School

Lilian Franqui is a 13-year old eighth grade student at Pacific Beach Middle School.

Lilian was adopted from Chenzhou, China when she was just one year old and has lived in America ever since. Her life is dedicated to her music, schoolwork, sports and community. Lilian has received the International Baccalaureate Student of the Year award twice at Pacific Beach Middle School. She has played the violin on KUSI news, won the Concerto Competition at the San Diego Youth Symphony (SDYS) in 2019, and is the co-Principal for the upcoming 2020-2021 concert season for the SDYS's Sinfonia orchestra. Lilian has also received a scholarship and been selected as first chair at the prestigious Interlochen Arts Camp in Michigan.

While Lilian has been recognized for her hard work and dedication to excellence, she is particularly proud of making a difference in the world by participating in various service organizations. She is currently the President of the Class of 2025 for the National Charity League Seaside Chapter. During the school year Lilian was the Treasurer of the Kiwanis' Middle School Program, Builders Club. Both these organizations focus on a commitment to community service, leadership development and cultural experiences. Lilian also mentors young players at SDYS and plays the violin for young children at their Childhood Introduction to Music Education with Smiles program.

Lilian is very active in sports and is currently on the elite team for the Coastal Clash Field Hockey U14 team. She is also an avid surfer.

Nominator Rachel Callahan writes that during COVID-19 and inspired by musicians in Italy playing on their balconies, Lily surprised her neighbors by performing an impromptu violin concert in the complex's courtyard. The delight of her neighbors was clear as her music momentarily took them away from the widespread fear and panic we are feeling today. She adds, "I have worked with many young adults, Lily is the only one of whom I've thought she will change the world for the better."

Lilian receives the Remarkable Teen Award in the category of Most Promising Teen.



## **Public Defender's Award of Excellence**

# **OLIVIA YANG**

### **Canyon Crest Academy**

Olivia Yang is a 16-year old senior at Canyon Crest Academy.

Olivia is a professional figure skater. She skated for Team Del Sol synchronized skating team and is a gold medalist in the U.S. Figure Skating Moves-In-the-Field.

Olivia is the founding president of an inspirational club called *Sports for Exceptional Athletes* which serves students with developmental disabilities in a variety of capacities. During her presidency in her freshman, sophomore, and junior years, Olivia helped thousands of exceptional athletes and their family members by providing and organizing coaching, tournaments, sports camps, and fundraising in twenty-two different sports throughout the county and across the border to Tijuana, Mexico.

In addition to her club, Olivia devotes herself to scientific research. She was selected to study Parkinson's disease at California State Summer School for Math and Science at the University of Irving and presented the clinical trial to professors and medical doctors. She is a member of a specialized team working with San Diego State University's Ecological Modeling and Integration Lab to do research on ecosystems that impact human health. Olivia will present her research at the 2020 Ecological Society of America conference in Salt Lake City.

In the summer of 2020, Olivia was selected to participate in the Bank of America Student Leader internship program to work with local nonprofit organizations, and she was also selected by the Salk Institute to further her research experience.

Olivia seeks to be of service wherever she can. She volunteers in the radiology department at Scripps hospital, is a Kiwanis Family Chair, serves in the Key Club, and plays the piano in church. She coaches students in figure skating and works as the social media relations officer of the US Figure Skating Junior Board. Olivia has been awarded three President's Volunteer Service Gold Awards during high school.

Olivia Yang receives the Remarkable Teen award in the category of Public Defender's Award of Excellence.

# 25 Most Remarkable Teens in San Diego 2020

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Saw Paw Kay	e3civic High School	Youth Activism
Natasha Threat	Pacific Ridge School	Community Service
Elena Medina	High Tech High Chula Vista	Social Conscience
Alex Paz	San Marcos High School	Filmmaking
Riya Agarwal	Torrey Pines High School	Citizenship
Jose Ramon Lopez	Sweetwater High School	Courage to Overcome Adversity
Makhfira Abdullahi	Morse High School	Social Justice
Kaavya Raamkumar	Del Norte High School	Performing Arts
Diego Real	Mount Miguel High School	Most Enterprising
Zaw Ler Yabe	Hoover High School	Campus Leadership
Christopher Caliguiri	Canyon Crest Academy	Innovation
Vanessa Galindo	San Diego High School	Journalism
Anika Menon	Mount Carmel High School	Commitment to Personal Excellence
Andrew Diep-Tran	Mission Hills High School	Entrepreneur
Beret Dernbach	School of Creative and Performing Arts	Dance
Masitis Ahmed	Crawford High School	Perseverance
David Scuba	Torrey Pines High School	Technology: Robotics
Catherine Tamayo	Academy of Our Lady of Peace	Civic Engagement
Chris Htoo	e3civic High School	Photography
Amelie Simpson	Valhalla High School	Leadership
Liam Gardner	San Diego High School	Music
Lluvia Ugarte	Otay Ranch High School	Courage to Overcome: Family Situation
Matthew Tillyer	Classical Academy High School	Personal Determination
Lilian Franqui	Pacific Beach Middle School	Most Promising Teen
Olivia Yang	Canyon Crest Academy	Public Defender's Award of Excellence





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