

# Connections



## From the CEO

Dear Para Los Niños Staff,

I am pleased to welcome you to the first issue of Connections, our new internal newsletter. Connections will give us the opportunity to share our work, acknowledge our accomplishments, showcase some of our personalities and deepen our understanding of the whole of our work as an organization. Each month, Connections will offer a variety of stories on the people, places and events that comprise Para Los Niños. It will contain small feature stories as well as briefs on recent developments and upcoming events. Moreover, we welcome story ideas and feedback from all of you. Please don't hesitate to contact Alfonso Lopez in Communications with your ideas and thoughts. We hope you enjoy this first issue.

*Martine Singer*

## Passionate Commitment Is the Star at PLN Hollywood



**Adeline Fernandez** comes to work each morning ready for something new. "Every day is a learning experience. Every day we have a chance to impact a child or family in a new and positive way," says Adeline.

Adeline, **Assistant Director for Head Start**, works from

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## SPOTLIGHT

### PLN GAME CHANGERS:

**Amanda Williams, PLN-Gratts Primary Center Kindergarten Teacher and Grade Level Chair**

When **Amanda Williams** thought about what she wanted to do for a living, she saw herself pursuing a career in law. "I thought I was going to be a lawyer because I've always been interested in social justice," she said. But as Amanda continued to investigate if this was going to be the right move for her, she ended up deciding that teaching was the career that most intrigued her.

After graduating from Harvard University with a concentration on History with her focus being pan-African History, she began pondering what her next move would be. "At some point in time I decided that there were real opportunities for making justice a reality in the classroom and so I applied to Teach for America (TFA) and went through two years of teaching still thinking I was going to be a lawyer," she explained. Her decision to teach brought Ms. Williams from her hometown of New York City to Los Angeles and to work at the Para Los Niños (PLN) Gratts Primary Center. The Teach for American placement was for two-years, but when that commitment was up, Amanda decided she wanted to stay at Gratts. "I love this community, I really feel like a part of something. I feel taken care of here because of the parents and the families," she said.

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## Spotlight, *continued from page 1*

So why has this Harvard graduate continued to stick with this career and stay at Para Los Niños? "I really enjoy learning about my students and seeing them learn about themselves. I really like the character cultivation because we are all growing up together in this community," she explained. Para Los Niños is trying to transform lives by closing the achievement gap for children living in poverty. Ms. Williams is one of the game changers working to make that goal a reality every day and her motivation to help this community is what enables her to make an impact. "I



attended a constructivist school as a child and I have always thought of it as such an ideal environment in which to grow up," she said. "Places where you can make mistakes and the process is valued over the product. It's compelling to be able to bring that into a community that otherwise would not likely have that sort of education. I think a lot of American education is very compliance based and I don't see that as necessarily working," continued Ms. Williams.

It's this approach that has earned Amanda the respect of PLN students and parents. When she was asked what her best experience as a teacher was, she

admitted to being surprised to say that it was her interactions with parents during conferences. "When I meet with the parents, no matter what the test scores say, they are so grateful. These are the people who see the growth and changes in their children. They are the ones who feel the growth. It's very gratifying."

During her time at Gratts, Ms. Williams also continued her education earning a graduate degree in Urban Education from Loyola Marymount University. As for that law degree she had planned to pursue, "I've met some lawyers and learned more about the justice system and realized that I have more opportunities for making justice a reality in the classroom," she explained, "and I think I prefer the clientele."

## Best Start's Blanca Valdez: Helping Neighbors, Leading Her Community

**Blanca Valdez** has been active in her community for years, building collaborations to address critical neighborhood issues, helping to develop local leaders and connecting families to health services among other things. Today, Blanca is a **Promotora II** for **Best Start Metro Los Angeles (BSMLA)**, creating forums and other opportunities for parents to learn about nutrition, health and education access for their children, and training residents to become community leaders in their own right.

"Blanca is a major component in leadership development for the parents. She helps the parents learn how to facilitate their own neighborhood meetings, teaches them community engagement, how to create their own agenda with important bullet points, and how

to invite other agencies and residents," says **Brenda Aguilera, Program Director for BSMLA**.



Blanca and Best Start Metro LA work with parents to strengthen their community leadership skills, promote social connections, and provide concrete supports that build the protective factors associated with improved child outcomes: parental resilience, social connections, concrete support in times of need, knowledge of parenting and child development and social and emotional competence in children.

Blanca is looking forward to continuing her work in the community, helping parents and families. "I do it because I like it, it doesn't feel like a job when I connect with the parents. I, too, am a parent in this community."

## News Briefs: Internet Upgrade

Thanks to the IT Department who recently increased our bandwidth and updated our technology infrastructure. Copper wires were replaced with fiber wires and the main data pipe was increased ten times to allow for more data flow at faster speed. "Fiber wire is the future and we wanted to take PLN to that level and it was needed," said **IT Director, Giovanni Rivas**. With online testing becoming the norm at the school sites and the work load of the departments becoming more web based, internet capacity has become increasingly critical at PLN.



## Adeline Fernandez, *continued from page 1*

the PLN Head Start site in Hollywood where dozens of kids come daily to learn and grow. "Our families strongly believe education is the foundation for their kids success," says Adeline, "and they feel those educational needs are being met here."

The Hollywood Center follows an approach known as the *Creative Curriculum*. This approach emphasizes building relationships for infants and toddlers because children under three are developing trust and autonomy, which they acquire in the context of relationships. For three- to five-year olds, the focus is on creating a robust, multi-choice environment because, at this stage, children learn best when they have options about materials and activities.

Moreover, the Hollywood site serves a uniquely diverse

population in which families come to the center from a range of cultures, speaking a variety of languages including Spanish, English, Armenian, French and Bangladeshi. "The diversity is terrific, so many different cultures and languages," says **Juana Armenta, Site Director**. "It's wonderful to see our children learn and develop a respect for differences."

"This diversity presents both challenges and opportunities in serving our families, but we feel very empowered to do whatever it takes to get the job done," says Program Director Adeline. "And that attitude isn't just here at the Hollywood site, you see it throughout Para Los Niños. We all know our children's successes are our successes. It's emotional and powerful work, and it's what makes us passionate about what we do."

## Welcome New Staff Members!

| NAME             | DEPARTMENT                            |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Bianca Fisher    | Early Education - Head Start Cypress  |
| Sara Medina      | Charter Middle School                 |
| Lucila Nares     | Charter Middle School                 |
| Iris Pereira     | Mental Health Services                |
| Jennifer Ramirez | Early Education - Head Start Cypress  |
| Cindy Salazar    | Afterschool - Family Learning Complex |
| Erica Morales    | Family Services                       |

## Parents Take Photos to Support Healthy Eating



Many Para Los Niños families are unaware of the unhealthy eating choices they face. Tight budgets, fast food promotions, limited knowledge of nutrition and a host of other factors often lead our families to make poor eating choices that can lead to weight problems and even more serious issues such as diabetes. That's why the **Parent Collaborative** group of PLN's **Senderos** program organized an effort over the last few months to educate families as to the hazards of poor eating and viable nutritional alternatives, culminating in a photo exhibit on eating choices at the MacArthur Park Recreation Center on March 12.

Parents took photos of common food choices in their neighborhoods, placed them on poster boards and wrote descriptions that provided information as to why these foods were unhealthy. "Through these photos,

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## THE SENDEROS TEAM



## Healthy Eating,

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parents were able to showcase everything they've been discussing these past few months. They looked at the issues that have been chronically impacting families' access to healthy foods and the amount of unhealthy food marketing their children are exposed to. But it wasn't just about past and present. It was also about looking forward", says **Sheena Nahm, Senderos Program Director**. "This exhibit gave parents the confidence to speak out about an issue that was important to them. It showed the incredible power of a group of passionate individuals speaking out, hoping for a better future, and calling for policy change."

During the MacArthur Park event, guests were treated to an assortment of healthy snacks, including pita bread with salsa and a variety of fruits. As guests walked into the main room of the recreation center, they were greeted by parents who were standing next to their photos. Guests had the opportunity to engage with parents as they expressed how they felt about the unhealthy food marketing environment for their children and their families.

Representatives from the office of **Councilman Gil Cedillo** and **County Supervisor Hilda Solis** were on hand to lend their support.

## Helping Families in Need at Ralph's Garage

It's a weekday morning and **Ralph Guirado** walks into his office at the S. Mark Taper Foundation Child and Family Center to start his day. He's just about to sit down at his desk to check his work email when the phone rings. "Hi Ralph, I've got a family that needs..." This is usually how Mr. Guirado's day begins. "What I do is support families," Ralph says, "It's our mission to help families and it's what I love about this work." Ralph's job title is "**Resource Facilitator**" meaning that his role is to connect individuals and families to whatever they might need. "I am the guy they'll check with to see if that exists," he explained. This could be anything from a domestic abuse intervention to furniture for a home to helping a homeless family find a place to stay for the night.

In fact, Ralph helps PLN families in so many different ways that it's almost unfair to have just one job title next to his name. "I facilitate a fathers group called Project Fatherhood, co-facilitate a women's domestic violence group and co-facilitate an anger management group."

Ralph's fathers group is particularly important to him. "Project Fatherhood was created to help fathers understand they have a major role in the lives of their children whether they are in the home or not," he explained. Many of the fathers he deals with have restraining orders or are estranged from their families and need guidance and support in finding ways to play positive roles in the children's lives. The number of the participants in these groups range from 10 to as many as 40!

Another important responsibility Ralph has at PLN, none might be bigger, at least logistically, than managing the space known to many as "Ralph's Garage." This is the space where you'll find anything from children's toys, clothes, canned foods, household items such as kitchen cups and dishes, trash bags and even first aid supplies. All of these items are donated. "This week I went to Warner Bros Studios to pick up four boxes of clothing and shoes," Ralph beamed, "This was Superman and Iron Man stuff and I know when I get a little kid in that warehouse and they see it, their

eyes are going to light up and that's why I do this!"

The items in Ralph's Garage are given free to families in need. These needs are determined by Para Los Niños counselors who visit families and

assess those needs. This Garage was created six years ago as part of PLN's "Partnership for Families" initiative. "All this stuff is here to help families so they can use whatever money they have for other needs," Ralph explained.

"The biggest challenge is getting people comfortable with coming to us to ask for help," he acknowledged, "Many of our clients are undocumented and are afraid to seek services." Ralph wants families to know they should get over their fears and realize that the Garage is available for them no matter their circumstances. "We do this to give these families hope," Ralph said. "All of us in Family Services are very passionate about what we do and the Garage is one example of that."

