

'D Word' Billboards **Aim To Get People Talking About Disabilities**

by Ryan Boldrey, MLive.com/TNS February 18, 2025

This past month, it started popping up on 14-by-48foot billboards towering over downtown Kalamazoo, and along U.S. 131 and I-94 with a gigantic "#DWord" as the dominant visual. The billboards were made possible by Adams Outdoor Advertising, who donated the space to the nonprofit for 2025.

The idea is to make viewers pause. That's after all, the intent behind the message, said Leece, the communications and outreach manager with DNSWM.

If people follow the billboard's suggestion and visit dwordpride.org, they can learn more about the campaign, which states emphatically: "Disability is not a bad word."

Continue reading on page 2

Cover Story (continued)	2
Training Group and Women's History Month	3
Employee Spotlight	4, 7, 9
Adopt-A-Family Valentine's Bake Sale	5
Valentine's Day Fun	6
Leading The Charge	10
BOD Committees and Responsibilities	11- 12
Birthdays	13
Social Work Appreciation Month & Anniversaries	14
Trainings	15
March Events & Tributes	16

'D Word' Billboards

Continued from page 1

"For a long time, people have shied away from using the term 'disability' because they don't want to be offensive," Leece said. "People don't know that it's an OK thing to talk about disability. So, they use euphemisms or words that make them feel better like special needs or handicap-able.

"We just want people to know that there's nothing wrong with saying 'disability.' The more we talk about it, the more normalized and accepted disability becomes. It's not a bad thing to have a disability, so just say the word. That's kind of our goal behind the campaign."

Leece, 37, has been with DNSWM for 12 years. Growing up, her older brother, Larry, was diagnosed with autism as a young child - inspiring Leece to get involved. Doctors in the 1980s told her parents her brother would never be able to do anything, she said.

"It's made me very passionate about trying to make sure that he could live life in the way that he wanted to and that opportunities weren't going to be denied to him simply because he's autistic," Leece said. "Going through elementary, middle and high school, I would see people make assumptions about what he could do.

"They'd say, 'He's probably never going to be able to do this or that.' And we would say, 'He's already doing those things, you're just counting him out.' So, advocacy just became part of our lives and it just continued."

Leece lives with a disability herself.

Diagnosed with ADHD at 25, she didn't know growing up that mental health needs can also be considered disabilities.

"A lot of people have mental health needs, but they have no idea that they have a disability," she said. "And that goes back to the fact that in our society and our schools and places we grow up, we don't tend to talk about disabilities." Disability Network Southwest Michigan helps people of all ages with any type of disability to navigate life, with a goal of helping people live more independently. They do that through weekly peer support groups for adults with autism, people with brain injuries and people dealing with chronic pain. They also have a group for women with any type of disability.



"A lot of organizations require some type of proof of disability and we don't, which makes us really unique," Leece said. "If you say you have a disability, then we help you."

DNSWM also has programs to support people when rights are being violated. In addition, the organization works with clients on self advocacy and helps connect people to community programs that assist with basic resources such as transportation, housing, health care and food.

Disability Network also offers free consultations to businesses and nonprofits who wish to become more disability-friendly and accessible. That can be as simple as helping design spaces to become easier to get in and out of. Another example is helping select lights with people who have sensory issues in mind.

"Disability impacts everybody," Leece said. "Every gender. Every race. Every socioeconomic status. You can live your entire life and never think about disability and then because of a health condition or an accident, disability can become the center of your world."

CONGRATULATIONS



To our first Foundations for Success Training Group of 2025!



Women's History Month

Every year, March is designated Women's History Month by presidential proclamation. The month is set aside to honor women's contributions in American history.

Did You Know? Women's History Month started as Women's History Week . . . Women's History Month began as a local celebration in Santa Rosa, California. The Education Task Force of the Sonoma County (California) Commission on the Status of Women planned and executed a "Women's History Week" celebration in 1978. The organizers selected the week of March 8 to correspond with International Women's Day. The movement spread across the country as other communities initiated their own Women's History Week celebrations the following year.

In 1980, a consortium of women's groups and historians—led by the National Women's History Project (now the National Women's History Alliance)—successfully lobbied for national recognition. In February 1980, President Jimmy Carter issued the first Presidential Proclamation declaring the Week of March 8th, 1980, as National Women's History Week.



MARCH IS WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

IN THE SPOTLIGHT



Meet Celeste Graham,

Director, Clinical Services

About Celeste

What is your background and how did you end up at SDRC?

I have been a licensed Physical Therapist since 1997 and started out in geriatrics, working in skilled nursing facilities. After three years, my career path turned toward pediatrics and for the most part, I have never looked back! Most of my experience has been with the County of San Diego's California Children's Services Medical Therapy Program, where I was a treating PT, Senior PT, Supervisor, and the Chief of OT/PT Services. Outside of my CCS time, I also worked in various multidisciplinary settings, including early intervention, outpatient therapy clinics, acute care, non-profit, utilization review, and ambulatory Special Care Clinics. Over the years, I developed an interest in administration and management and spent less time "hands on" as a clinician. I am fortunate to have landed at SDRC where I feel my experiences and the support of the team here will help in my role as the Director of Clinical Services.

Why did you get into this business?

I learned about Physical Therapy in high school, and I was able to shadow PTs in the hospital and outpatient clinic settings through a program called "Career Experience" during the last couple months of my senior year. That sealed the deal in my interest in PT, and I was fortunate to be accepted into the PT program while in undergrad at East Carolina University.

Tell us about one of your best days at work.

It is so hard to choose one best day! I would say that every moment when a child I've served learned a new skill or reached a new milestone always made the day brighter.

What is the most important characteristic of a good leader?

I think transparency is really important. Building trust is also very important to me, and I believe doing so through results and setting a positive example is key.



Where were you born and raised?

I was technically born in Brooklyn, NY at the hospital where my mom worked at the time as a physician, but was raised on Staten Island where my parents, older sister, and I lived. When I was 15, my family moved to Pennsylvania, where I spent my high school years. I went to college in North Carolina, during which time my parents moved to Florida. So I like to say I lived up and down the east coast, but have made San Diego my home since 1998 after following my big sister out here, though she has since moved back to New York.

What is your family like?

My husband Joe also moved to San Diego from out of state (Illinois). I have a son (Brandon, 21) and stepdaughter (Soleil, 22) both currently in college. We also have an 11-year-old chocolate lab named Molly, who is everyone's favorite family member.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

I enjoy reading, especially when unwinding at the end of the day. I also enjoy walking and running for both physical and mental health.

Do you play or watch any sports?

I was a cheerleader in high school (which is controversial as a "sport" itself!) and cheered for football, soccer, boys and girls basketball, and even wrestling. I root for the NY Giants for football and oddly love watching ACC basketball and all of March Madness.

Adopt-A-Family Sale







The bake sale was a complete success!

We sold out! We are so happy for the continuous support from everyone in the agency, specially Mark and Gabby for allowing us to have these events to raise funds for our final goal during the holidays.





Valentine's Day Fun In The South Bay









Check Out Our Talented Clients -







IN THE **SPOTLIGHT**



Meet Justin Sugay,

Service Coordinator

About Justin

How long have you been employed at the regional center and what do you do?

I'm new. I'm in my eighth month here as a Service Coordinator in Unit 2 serving the adult population in the East County area, mostly El Cajon and Santee.

Why did you get into this business?

I was in ABA for 10 years and while I loved working in that field, it was time for a change and I had numerous colleagues' transition to regional centers in this role and thought it would also be a good fit for me.

Tell us about one of your best days at work

I had a parent who was understandably very stressed about her son. She was very selfless and her other son overheard me appreciating her efforts but reminding her that she needs to also take care of herself. Her other son recommended she sleep in her own bed, among other things. We concluded with "What's the simplest little thing you can do for yourself to make sure you are taking care of yourself first, even just a little bit?" She said she enjoys drinking coffee. From that day forward, whenever we talk, the first thing I ask her is "Did you have your morning coffee today?" She laughs now every time; it's a bit corny but effective!

Where were you born and raised and how many siblings are in your family?

I was born in New Jersey but we moved to the San Francisco Bay area where I was raised when I was only a few months old. I have two sisters.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

I love taking my six-year old daughter to the park so she can play. I like to watch NFL football as I am a huge 49er fan, play video games, and ride my motorcycle.

How many kids/grandkids do you have?

I have one wonderful six-year-old daughter.



Do you play or watch any sports?

I play basketball and tennis and I like to swim and lift weights. I like to watch the Golden State Warriors, UCLA Bruins and San Francisco 49ers.

What is one of your greatest accomplishments?

My daughter is my greatest accomplishment; seeing her thrive is the greatest success. Second to that would be getting some work published in the Journal of Neurotrauma.

What is the most important characteristic of a good leader?

Mutual respect. If you are respectful to yourself and to others, you act with grace, kindness, patience, compassion and empathy. Typically the best leaders don't really want to be leaders to begin with but want to just do what's best for all involved.

What do you value in a person most of all? Dignity, communication and consideration.

Where do you hope to travel to in the next five years and why?

The Philippines. It's where my bloodline is from and I would like to connect. Not to mention how beautiful of a tropical experience that some say is second to none.

More on page 8

A MISSION MOMENT



Great job Karolay Johnson!

Karolay Johnson is an awesome Service Coordinator! She is very professional and prompt when asked for additional services that my son needed. Karolay Johnson and the Regional Center are the reason my youngest is at his appropriate age level. The Early Start program works wonders for babies under three years old to have a head start in the future.

My son may not even need an IEP, because I took advantage of all the services Regional Center offered my infant and he is now accelerating. I am so grateful and would recommend the Early Start Program for all parents whose children are premature or are having difficulties early on in life.

Thank you, Casedra Owens, M.S. Internal Auditor/Fiscal Monitor at SDRC

"As women achieve power, the barriers will fall. As society sees what women can do, as women see what women can do, there will be more women out there doing things, and we'll all be better off for it."

- Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Meet Justin Sugay

Continued from page 7

Who is the funniest person you know?

The funniest person I know is my childhood friend Danny. He cracks me up no matter how long it's been since we've last hung out.

What is the best advice you ever received?

The best advice I have ever received is to keep moving. No matter how hard things get, keep showing up and just keep going. That is the definition of never letting anything ever stop you. Also: take a breath; take a break; do what you need to do to gather yourself, but never let anything ever stop you completely.

What is your favorite quote?

My favorite quote is: "Be mindful, your focus determines your reality."

Tell us one thing people would be surprised to know about you?

One thing that people would be surprised to know about me is that I can have a pretty dark sense of humor.



IN THE **SPOTLIGHT**



Meet Frances Guzman,

Program Manager

About Frances

How long have you been employed at the regional center and what do you do?

I have been with the San Diego Regional Center a little over a year as a Service coordinator for unit 34 in Eastlake. I have just accepted the position of Program Manager of Unit 56 which will serve children/TAY.

Why did you get into this business?

I have always had a passion for helping others and seeing them be the best version of themselves. When I was presented the opportunity to be a part of the organization, it just felt right.

Tell us about one of your best days at work.

My best day at work is when I make a meaningful difference in someone's life. One time, I advocated for an individual facing personal and health struggles, offering the support he wasn't receiving from others. With some adjustments, he was able to get back on his feet and overcome his challenges.

Where were you born and raised and how many siblings are in your family?

I was born and raised here in Sunny San Diego.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

In my spare time I enjoy going to Disneyland with my family and close friends.

How many kids/grandkids do you have?

I have two kiddos, a boy and girl.

Do you play or watch any sports?

In high school, I played lacrosse, and my favorite sport to watch is baseball.

What is one of your greatest accomplishments?

My greatest accomplishment would be overcoming odds and obtaining my Masters Degree.

What do you value in a person most of all?

I value honesty and ambition.



What is the most important characteristic of a good leader?

Effective leaders possess multiple important qualities. One that stands out to me is the concept of a servant leader - someone who fosters an environment that encourages innovation, empowers employees, and prioritizes the well-being of those around them. In addition to this, they also embody traits such as empathy, active listening, stewardship, and a strong commitment to their team.

Where do you hope to travel to in the next five years and why?

I hope to travel to Spain in the next five years. Spain has always been on my bucket list.

What is the best advice you ever received?

The best advice I've ever received is that everything happens for a reason and occurs at the right time. If you're running late, there's a purpose behind it. If you don't get the job, it simply wasn't meant to be yet. Your time will come when the moment is right.

What is your favorite quote?

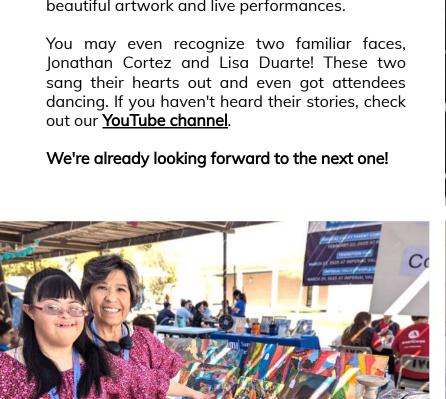
"It's important to always look where you're headed rather than where you were." – The Lion King

Tell us one thing people would be surprised to know about you?

I have Irish twins.



Leading the Charge in Imperial Valley was a success! Self-advocates, parents and families, service providers, and our staff attended inspiring breakout sessions and enjoyed beautiful artwork and live performances.











Meet our new Board of Directors officers and members!

Officers

David Hadacek, Chair
Tessie Bradshaw, Vice-Chair
Virginia Bayer, Secretary
Matthew Storey, Treasurer
Terri Colachis, ARCA Rep
Norma Ramos, Immediate Past Chair
Chris Hodge, Member at Large
Mark Klaus, Executive Director
(Ex-Officer)

Members

Elmo Dill Pamela Ehlars Wendy Forkas James Gonzalez Yasuko Mason Laura Oakes Julie Randolph Erik Rascon Kimberly Rucker Mark Uyedo Taylor Wiesner Cali Williams

Board Member Roles

- Set policies consistent with the mission of the San Diego Regional Center
- Ensure the San Diego Regional Center is operating within the nonprofit corporation laws, The Lanterman Act, the DDS/RC contract, and other relevant laws and regulations
- Recruit, hire, and evaluate the Executive Director
- Provide personal and/or professional experience
- Ensure organizational planning and manage resources
- Monitor and evaluate San Diego Regional Center's performance
- Represent stakeholder interest
- Be accountable to the public



The Board of Director Committees and Their Responsibilities

Several Board Directors and Members serve on Committees with SDRC staff.

Executive Committee:

Staff: Mark Klaus (Ex-Officer)

The Executive Committee serves as a delegated authority for the Board, which manages corporation affairs and exercises certain powers in the Board's absence. Responsibilities include contract approval, strategic plan coordination with the Executive Director, and reporting to the Board for ratification.

Finance Committee:

Staff: Dulce Morin (Primary), Webb-Rex, Miguel Larios

The Finance Committee upholds fiscal integrity and accuracy in management information by supervising key staff, including the Executive Director and Chief Financial Officer, in line with Board policies. Its duties encompass reviewing and presenting annual budgets and financial reports, as well as advising on expenditure policies.

Board of Director Committees and Their Responsibilities continued

Client Advisory Committee:

Staff: Robin Bello (Primary)

The Client Advisory Committee provides advice, recommendations, and technical support to assist the Board in fulfilling the corporation's obligations related to operating the Regional Center and serving individuals with developmental disabilities and their families.

The Personnel Committee:

Staff: Christine Lux-Whiting (Primary), Kimberly Steitz

The Personnel Committee is responsible for reviewing and advising the Board on matters concerning personnel policies, including pay scales, fringe benefits, employee relations, and equal employment opportunities within the corporation.

The Audit Committee:

Staff: Dulce Morin (Primary), Robert Webb-Rex

The Audit Committee, overseen by the Board, evaluates the independent auditor's performance, ensures financial compliance, and reviews audit reports, while also approving non-audit services and negotiating compensation.

Vendor Advisory Committee:

Staff: Miguel Larios

The Vendor Advisory Committee provides advice, recommendations, and technical support to the Board to assist the corporation in its operations but lacks the authority to act on its behalf.

Nominating & Bylaws Committee:

Staff: Mark Klaus (Primary), Bonnie Sebright

The Nominating and Bylaws Committee is tasked with recommending qualified candidates for the Board and officers, ensuring they meet the requirements outlined in the corporation's bylaws. This committee also oversees the annual review of the bylaws and suggests amendments to the Board as needed.

Investment Policy Committee:

Staff: Christine Lux-Whiting

The committee is responsible for carrying out the proper investment of the defined benefit plan assets in accordance with the Investment Policy Statement approved by the Board. The members of the committee are the Chair of the Board. Chair of the Personnel Committee, Chair of the Finance Committee. Executive Director. Officer, and Financial an appointed individual knowledgeable in investment strategies. The investments are carefully selected from the funds offered by the pension provider.

Legislation Committee:

Staff: Gabby Ohmstede (Primary), Seth Mader

The Legislation Committee provides advice, recommendations, and technical support to the Board regarding proposed and/or current California laws that could potentially impact individuals that we serve, their families, community partners and also the developmental disability service delivery system.

Have an outreach event you need staffing for?

email us: communications@sdrc.org



Birthdays

March 1

Susanna Carlos

Leslie Santana Verduzco

Charles Wisda

March 2

Coral Mireles

March 3

Alejandro Galvan

March 4

Diane Millan

Zach Guzik

Sydney Seel

Magaly Abarca

March 5

Umaima Gajjar

March 6

Tania Cisneros

Victoria Otero

Edith Gonzalez Belmontes

Paulina Amador

Michelle Morales

March 7

Nghi Tat

Maureen Tuala

Jeanne Awal

Magali Diaz

Armor Espinoza

Dr. Theodora Nelson

Carolyn Razo

March 8

Melissa Dimdiman

Joanna Rodriguez

Sara Fitzgerald

March 9

Celia Hernandez

Brenda Mungarro

Nasdira Romero

March 10

Ethel Lee Sturdivant

Jerome Spruille

Abigail Amorsolo

Karla Chairez

March 11

Jesus Espinosa

Lucky Erentreich

March 12

Iames Perez

March 13

Myrza Olivan

March 14

Steven DeLaTorre

Saralynn Keenan

March 15

Adriana Hernandez

March 16

Josabeth Cecena

March 17

Sylvia Saldana

Cristina Valverde

Paula Arango

March 18

Debra Johnson

Mabel Evangelista

March 19

Crystal McMahand

Oscar Rosales

Paul Ramirez

March 20

Alma Gonzalez

Charlene Molina

Kinshirley Nguyen

Mark Martin

Ana Mercado-Bovee

March 21

Blanca Martinez

Flor Burciaga

March 22

Veronica Rivera

Angela Patricelli

Brandi Eugenio

Yesenia Vargas

March 23

Eric Lingley

Justin Sugay

March 25

Yesenia Martinez

Chelsea Rodriguez

March 26

Jessica Macknick

Maryam Muneer

Beatriz Bautista-Juarez

Sarah Hernandez

Deborah C. Hodge

March 28

Judith Munoz

lennifer Lee

March 29

Kimberly Whitney

Jose Ramirez

March 31

Juvelyn Garcia

Jose Verdin





March is Social Work Appreciation Month!

This year, we're treating every region to a delicious **Ice Cream Social** planned especially for you by your Manager Teams from Client Services, Clinical Services, and Community Services Departments. Get ready for a **"sweet"** time to connect and celebrate with your colleagues! Keep an eye on your inbox for details about your local event date and time - they'll be coming your way soon! We can't wait to see everyone there!

But that's not all! Throughout the month, we'll be sending special email spotlights showcasing the amazing work of different teams across our agency. It's our way of recognizing the incredible

contributions everyone makes to our SDRC family.

Get ready... March 17-21 is Spirit Week, and we may have some more tricks up our sleeve as well! We look forward to celebrating the amazing work happening at SDRC every day!



Anniversaries

1 Year

Maria Hernandez Samantha Siclari Michelle Chaidez Alexxis Llanes Anabel Ruiz Ernest Robrecht Lynette Zoll

Katherine Sorensen Lizbeth Sandoval Anna Aviles Concepcion Nubes Vy Le Eric Arigo **5 Years** Joseph Polimino Lisa Kaplan

10 Years Laura Sandoval Sanchez

'D Word' Billboards

Continued from page 2

When that happens, Leece said, she hopes they turn to DNSWM first.

"A couple years ago, somebody told us that we are one of the best kept secrets in Southwest Michigan and that really stuck with us," Leece said. "We don't want to be a secret. "We think about ourselves as the first stop for people with disabilities... If we don't have a service or a program that supports what somebody is in need of, we can connect that person to another program or organization."

The Kalamazoo-based disability services and support organization has been serving the community since 1981, born out of the disability rights movement of the '70s.

A rallying cry of the movement, Leece said, was **"nothing about us without us."**

People with disabilities were tired of people without disabilities making decisions for them on how they should live their lives without their input, she said. As a result, disability networks, such as the one in Kalamazoo, started popping up all over the country.

Known as centers for independent living, a requirement at each is that a minimum of 51% of staff and board members must have a disability, Leece said. Of the 34 people that make up DNSWM's staff and governing board, that number hovers just above 80%.



LEAP is

Learning & Education for All Professionals

LEAP is a comprehensive and centralized system for training and to help you further your professional development. It offers a variety of training modules that tracks your progress.

The training modules offer both online and instructor-led classes.

Don't Have a LEAP Account?

New employees must register. If you have recently changed your name please log in using your existing account and update the information on your profile to reflect the new name/email.

Create your **LEAP** account **HERE!**



Earn A \$1,000 Bonus!

Please refer qualified applicants to posted SDRC positions and receive a \$1,000 bonus in appreciation. Applicants can be a member of your family, a neighbor, a friend, a former colleague, etc.

Be sure they mention your name on their application!

Referral Bonus Program

Mandatory Training

All SDRC staff are required to complete the following online

training (new employees must complete within the first 30 to 90 days of employment).

SDP 1: Staff Introduction to Self-DeterminationBasic introduction to the Self-Determination
Program.

SDP 2: Staff Introduction to Individual Budgets in Self-Determination

Basic introduction to Self-Determination Individual Budgets.

Harassment-Free Workplace -

<u>Employee</u> / <u>Manager</u> New staff must complete within 30 days of employment and every two years thereafter. Tenured staff must complete training every two years.

Introduction to the Regional Center System – Enroll HERE

Privacy and Security Series - 7-Part Learning Path: Enroll HERE

Safety in the Workplace - Enroll HERE

Workplace Etiquette - Enroll HERE

SDRC Emergency Action and Fire Prevention Plan – online and in-person: <u>Enroll HERE</u>

Person-Centered Thinking – available in person. Enrollment opportunities will be announced when it becomes available.

Workplace Violence Prevention – Enroll HERE

Heat-Related Illness Prevention Training Presentation - <u>Download HERE</u>



Ramona Family Resource Fair

Saturday, March 1st - 10am-2pm 424 Letton Street Ramona, CA 92065

2nd Annual Southwestern College Powwow

Saturday, March 1st Southwestern College 900 Otay Lakes Rd., Chula Vista, CA, 91910

Black Family Wellness Expo

Saturday, March 8th - 11am-2pm Kipp Adelante Preparatory Academy 426 Euclid Avenue San Diego, CA 92114

Early Years Conference

Saturday, March 8th - 7:30am to 4pm Town and Country Resort 500 Hotel Cir N, San Diego, CA 92108

Autism Society of San Diego

March 12th at 10am https://sdrc-org.zoom.us/meeting/register/8H2-3L2aSMaKUdiKYb4xVw

<u>PUENTE (Padres Unidos en Transformación</u> y Empoderamiento)

March 19th at 10am
https://sdrc-org.zoom.us/meeting/register/
tZ0vcu-vajktH9JeBYh7DmSjNyAz3A3Iq3_1

Friendship Walk SD

Sunday, March 23rd 7:30am to 4pm Nobel Park UTC Toscana Dr. San Dlego, CA 92122

Tribal TANF

March 26th at 10am https://sdrc-org.zoom.us/meeting/register/-m3tVa9tQDiSRqBCbWIDyg

<u>Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (GRG)</u> <u>Symposium Resource Fair</u>

Saturday, March 29th - 9am to 2pm UC San Diego Park & Market 1100 Market St, San Diego, CA 92101



Share A Mission Moment

Share your mission moment, a client success story, or a tribute from a family member, and we'll put you in the paper.

Please send to communications@sdrc.org



Congratulations!

Elizabeth Robles Monjaraz Luis Prado Pia Edusada Sara Thorpe

RECOGNIZE SOMEONE TODAY!

Each tribute will be thrown into a monthly drawing for a chance to win an SDRC t-shirt and water bottle or a \$30 stipend!

CONGRATULATIONS to last month's drawing winners!

Brenda Bello Vasquez Staphany Lu, Gabriella Lainez Elizabeth Marshall, Karina Ibarra

