

Twenty-three students from across Stanislaus County were saluted Tuesday morning for overcoming major challenges and/or succeeding beyond expectations. They were recognized at the 14th annual Every Student Succeeding awards breakfast at the Petersen Event Center in downtown Modesto.

Following are the remarks read about each student:

Gillian Allen: Gillian is a senior at Grace Davis High School, in the Modesto City Schools District. Gillian came into the world with the help of science and fertility experts, but six years later her mothers ended their marriage. In the ensuing years, Gillian experienced a number of moves, and the arrest and 3 year incarceration of one of her parents. She attended six different elementary schools. Luckily, Gillian kept a positive attitude and saw the advantage of a good education. Through hard work and the support of inspirational teachers and counselors, she has earned a 4.59 grade point average and has taken several Advanced Placement classes. While excelling in her high school classes, she has also completed six courses through MJC through the high school's Middle College program. She tutors her peers and was voted President of her CSF chapter. She has been accepted to the University of Oregon to major in biology. This young lady took the hand she was dealt and has made the best of it ... more than the best of it, actually, and for this we applaud you.

Joanna Baal: Joanna has a lot on her plate for a high school senior at Beyer High School with work, school, and preparing and applying to college. Her nominator said Joanna is unique and one of the most remarkable students I have had the pleasure of knowing. Joanna came to Beyer High School three years ago after going through many transitions and challenges in her life. Joanna came from a neighboring school with straight A's. This was rare for a student that faced new challenges every year. Joanna had no problem showing initiative when she needed help; she got a job when she needed money for housing or the things she wanted; and when she needed extra help for school she showed up early. She refuses to allow any circumstances to interfere with her school work. Joanna ranks in the top 5% of her class with a cumulative weighted GPA of 4.08. Joanna has the dedication to amount to anything she sets her mind to. .

Cynthia Bermudez: Cynthia is a senior at Pitman High School in the Turlock Unified School District. Cynthia was your normal teenager until she sustained a Traumatic Brain injury in a bicycle accident. She was airlifted to UC Davis and went into a coma. Many complications followed during her stay in the hospital, but she eventually came home in late July of 2014. She could not walk or talk, and had very limited mobility on the left side of her body. At the end of that same year, she was able to return to school. The good news, Cynthia has made monumental strides: she utilizes assistive technology to speak but can say a few words, and she walks at least 75 feet and is working on making it to 100. While Cynthia's life has changed dramatically, she dramatically changes the lives of all she meets. Thanks to her determined mother, who, in turn, thanks the incredible support team that has surrounded her daughter,

Cynthia is doing well. Winter proms, Pitman High choir, fist bumps and smiles: congratulations Cynthia Bermudez for fighting the good fight.

Blake Bonander: Blake is a 6th grade student at Julien Elementary in the Turlock Unified School District who at a very young age, experienced a catastrophic loss in his life; his mother passed away. Blake and his father moved several times between her death and the summer before Blake entered 5th grade. It was at this time that Blake's father was incarcerated. This was very difficult for Blake to process during fifth grade and he recognized that he struggled emotionally. In spite of his struggles, Blake is a very well-rounded young man who loves to play on his Little League baseball team, play videos and football, and spend time with his family and dogs. He continues to meet and excel in all standards. He rarely misses a day of school and is always prepared to learn. Blake enjoys assisting students in the POD program and students in the Moderate/Severe classrooms with their special projects. He is a young man with sizable goals. Blake hopes to attend Yale and become a defense attorney when he is older so he can support others going through a difficult time. It is indeed our honor to congratulate Blake Bonander.

Ashly Breeding: Ashly is a senior at the Stanislaus Military Academy or SMA, an alternative education program sponsored by the Stanislaus County Office of Education. As a fourth grader, Ashly took care of her drug addicted and alcoholic mother. That year, her mother OD'd twice and after Ashly was suspended and assigned to repeat the 4th grade, her mother shaved her head and sent her back to school to deal with the shame. In a short timeframe, Ashly's dad filed for sole custody, her mother fatally overdosed, and her grandmother passed away. Ultimately, Ashly ended up in Principal Daniel Vannest's office, asking to be admitted to the SMA and clarifying that she really wanted a chance at being a "normal" kid. Suspensions, previous assignment to Reyn Franca, physical abuse, acute eczema and chronic asthma did not make her seem like a viable cadet, but she took full advantage of the opportunities afforded by the school, and she is on track to graduate. Thank you, Ashly Breeding, for not choosing the role of victim, but holding fast to the role of victor. We wish you well.

Serenity Dalton: Serenity, a 6th-grader at Lucille Whitehead Intermediate in the Waterford Unified School District, has endured and overcome many challenges and obstacles in her life. When her family arrived in Waterford in 2016, they began to have financial struggles that had an impact on the family as a whole. Serenity's parents, who love their children, tried to keep a roof over their head, food for the children, and a safe environment for all members. With the help of an amazing team at Waterford that included teachers, school nurses, transportation, and the Nutritional Services Department, Serenity persevered. At the present time, Serenity has kept her academics ahead despite her struggles. She is currently placed in foster care with her sister and continues to attend the school where it all started. She has been able to keep her friends at school and keeps in touch with all those who rallied around her during these emotional and difficult times. Let's join the Waterford administration and all those who supported Serenity in recognizing her strength and perseverance.

Bettina Davidoff: Bettina is an Assyrian kindergartner at Stanislaus Elementary School in the Stanislaus Union School District. This young lady has significant, bilateral hearing loss. She continues to lose hearing and her nominator believes that this may result in total loss over time. As a baby, Bettina underwent a necessary surgery, the side effect of which was trauma to the speech area of the brain. Regardless of both hearing and speech difficulties, this kindergartner's day is spent, 100%, in a general education setting. Originally, a Speech and Language Pathologist worked with Bettina but now, she only checks in on her occasionally. Both parents work tirelessly at home to support her educational efforts. Just recently, Bettina scored 100% on her Rhyming Benchmark Test. This young lady and her family are absolutely dedicated to her success, and Bettina Davidoff is well on her way. Congratulations.

Dana Dever: Dana Miracle Dever is a most resilient Empire 5th grade student. Last spring, Dana, the eldest of four, moved into a supportive home environment under the loving care of her uncle and aunt, along with one of her siblings. She and her sister remain in kinship care while two younger siblings live in similar supportive environments. Despite the challenge of these changes, Dana, who seems mature beyond her years, maintains a positive attitude and continues to work diligently, maintaining excellent grades. Dana states she likes everything about school, particularly language arts and math. Her interests include art, singing, gymnastics and playing with friends and her siblings. She is also a songwriter and has written two songs -- one titled "*Love Is All You Need in Life*" and another, simply "*Home*." Although much of Dana's success can be attributed to her own grit and determination, she also has the benefit of counseling support, PBIS, after school activities, Kindness Club and the Empire Running Club. When asked if 3 wishes could be granted, Dana responded that she wished to be in her home environment with her loving family, to have enough money to meet basic needs, and to be surrounded by love while knowing she is loved. Her nominator said we all admire Dana's wonderful character and are very proud of her accomplishments.

Matthew Elgen: Matthew is an 8th-grader at Spratling Middle School in the Keyes Union School District. Matthew was making some poor choices his first semester at Spratling. He missed several days of school, had some discipline issues, and consequently barely had a grade point average. But all that changed. Teachers pitched in to seek alternative approaches. Counselors put this young man on their radar screens. And alternative high school students from the PACE program mentored him about overcoming obstacles and negative circumstances in life. The very good news is that at the end of his first semester of his 8th grade year, Matthew had a 3.0 and not a single discipline issue. He scored 92% on his Constitution test, one of the highest scores in the school. We congratulate you, Matthew Elgen, for deciding to succeed rather than fail, to rise rather than fall, and move forward rather than stagnate or step back.

Dylan Hamilton: Dylan is in the foster care system and has attended six high schools in four years that have been as far south as Pitman High School and as far north as a high school in Oregon. Dylan came to Gregori High School in the middle of his senior year, has quickly adjusted to the campus, and has positive interactions with staff and

peers. Dylan was committed to making Gregori his home despite several previous school moves and housing placements. He continues to persevere, work hard on a daily basis, and maintain his focus on his future and personal goals despite the adversity. His nominator says he has a fun personality and makes a positive impact on those around him on a daily basis. He is personal and kind and Gregori has a better school climate when Dylan is attendance. Dylan's passion is basketball. Even though he did not make the team, he started out the season as team manager allowing him to be a part of something he loved. Dylan desires to play ball for the Modesto Junior College Pirates next year unless his path takes him in serving our country. He credits Stephanie Orona, his Foster Youth Specialist, and Erika Suarez, his school counselor, for their dedication to him. We salute your resiliency, Dylan, and wish you all the best.

Jacob Hankins: Jacob is a 7th-grader at Daniel Savage Middle School, in the Sylvan Union School District. His nomination starts with these words: "Jacob Hankins is a cancer warrior in our midst." Jacob's mother fought thyroid cancer, Jacob's sister just completed her cancer treatments, and Jacob has been diagnosed with two cancerous tumors located in different lobes of the brain. Appropriate treatment is still under debate between USF, Stanford, and Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York, but it appears that he will be in treatment for at least a year or more. The fight for his life has already begun with early rounds of chemotherapy. Through all of this, he is shy, goofy, upbeat and optimistic and working to keep his grades up. Spearheaded by the campus supervisor, efforts are underway to support the family through the fiscal and emotional hardships of this journey. What an incredible success story you are, Jacob Hankins!

Erin Hawthorne: Erin has suffered tragedy and loss that no child should have to encounter. She grew up with a mother who struggled with addiction and felt the hardship of an absent father. Due to her mother's struggles, Erin and her brother were forced to live with multiple family members throughout various states, attending more than 13 schools between kindergarten and her current placement at Mae Hensley Jr. High School. In the summer of 2018, Erin and her brother witnessed their mother lose her battle with cancer. Despite the trauma, hurt and instability, Erin never lost hope. With the help of teachers, friends, and her aunts Janice and Christy (who are in the process of adopting her), Erin continues to find reasons to smile and thrive academically every day. Despite family hardships, personal conflicts, and the loss of her mother, she is an amazing young lady and has come alive becoming one of the most beloved students on campus. The fact that Erin is in Special Education doesn't phase her. She has earned the Principal's Honor Roll each quarter of her 8th grade year. She has demonstrated amazing growth at Mae Hensley and is on track to promote to high school. The Mae Hensley team along with Erin's aunts are proud of her success and cannot wait to see what her future holds.

Ezekiel Hawthorne: Ezekiel is a 7th-grader attending Mae Hensley Junior High School, in the Ceres Unified School District. And his life has not been easy. Ezekiel and his sister were growing up in poverty with a mother struggling with addiction and an absentee father. He and his sibling lived with multiple family members in various states, and he has attended more than 13 schools before coming to Mae Hensley. Last summer, his mother passed away, losing a fight with cancer. Somehow, through it all,

Ezekiel stays involved with athletics, spends his lunchtime playing in flag football tournaments, keeps up passing grades and seeks extra one-on-one support from teachers. The good news is that his aunt and uncle are in the process of adopting both him and his sister. His nominator writes that "Ezekiel is an outstanding student and an even better friend. He can often be seen talking to students who are new to the campus." Ezekiel Hawthorne models what it means to overcome adversity and succeed. Thank you for sharing your story with us.

Destenee Hernandez: In 2007, an accident occurred that changed the life of Destenee Hernandez forever. She has had countless doctor and hospital visits and surgery in 2011. Today, Destenee is a happy, enthusiastic 8th-grade student at Turlock Junior High School who seems to enjoy life to the fullest. Even though she faces many struggles in her life, they are difficult to notice because of her constant positive demeanor. Destenee loves to greet everyone that passes by her with a big "hello" or "good morning." The office staff calls her the morning sunshine and says she is the best office greeter anyone can have. Her smile can light up a room. Her classroom teacher and paraprofessionals have all stated that she is an absolute pleasure to work with and is always willing to help the classroom staff. She always appears excited to work, follows classroom routines without hesitation, and is a very social and friendly girl who doesn't stop smiling. Turlock Junior High School is so fortunate to have Destenee's "ray of sunshine" on their campus. Congratulations Destenee!

Robbie Jackson: Robbie is a 5th-grader at Standiford Elementary School in the Sylvan Union School District. Robbie is an orphan. Her father died before she was born, and she lost her mother when she was a 3rd-grader. She lives with her aunt and her aunt's 9 children. She helps cook, clean and watch the younger children. Robbie spreads love around generously: she puts the needs of other students ahead of her own, befriending a peer who struggles with anxiety and inclusion; she writes letters and draws pictures to show her appreciation of others; and she maintains her grades. She has embraced the Leader in Me and the 8 Habits of Successful Kids programs at school becoming a shining star. Robbie has missed only a half day of school so far this year because she wants to be at school. Long story short, despite adversity, Robbie Jackson is succeeding!

Henry Johnson: Henry is a 16-year-old sophomore at Denair High School in the Denair USD. He was born with Apert Syndrome, a genetic disorder characterized by the premature fusion of certain skull bones. At the age of 3, Henry was placed in a severe learning handicapped classroom in Stanislaus County. At the age of 5, Henry worked himself out of his severe learning handicapped classroom and was placed in a moderate to severe class at Denair Elementary. Today, Henry participates in a 7-period day at Denair High School, one of which includes work study. Work study allows Henry to manage the school's coffee cart, Coyotes Cup of Kindness, where he serves specialty coffee, tea, and hot chocolate. When Henry began as a freshman at Denair High School, his support team was a bit nervous about his ability to learn at a high level, engage with like peers and be able to live the full high school experience while participating in extra-curricular activities. Apparently, the adults were the only ones worried because Henry hit the ground running and hasn't looked back. He immediately

bonded with Mr. Moore, his special education teacher, and their strong partnership assures Henry's academic, social and transitional success. Today, Henry is taking Biology, Art Design and Work Study along with his core classes of English, History and Math. Through his will, grit and perseverance, he is a succeeding student and entrepreneur. Congratulations Henry, and thank you for the inspiration you are to all of us.

Peyton Jones: Peyton is a 3rd-grader at Rose Avenue School, an elementary school in the Modesto City Schools district. Peyton has End-Stage Renal Failure which has resulted in Congestive Heart Failure and Cardio Myopathy. Consequently, she is hooked up to a dialysis machine every night for 8 or more hours. The blips and bleeps and restraining tubes make sleep difficult, but nonetheless, Peyton gets to school drawing on grit, determination and commitment. Through her constant pain, she is kind, compassionate, and thoughtful. Through careful and collaborative planning, Peyton has made gains in academics and attendance, she is excited to participate in classroom discussions, and she has made new friends at school this year. We are all learning invaluable lessons in perseverance and courage from Peyton Jones.

Addison Ranae Martins: Addison, a third-grader at Hurd Barrington Elementary School in the Newman-Crows Landing SD, takes multiple medications daily and requires medical procedures to be done every hour and fifteen minutes, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This is normal for Addison; this is Addison's life. Addison fights a rare disorder that affects the bladder and gastrointestinal system. Her nominator says to someone on the outside, even medical personnel, some of the choices Addison has made seem impossible. To Addison, through good days, rough days, long procedures, hospitalizations, missed time in class due to procedures, nothing is a hindrance to her. She perseveres, and with a positive outlook leads by example, with a great attitude everyday showing others that, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE! Along with keeping up with her academics at school, Addison also enjoys being active in her community. She is involved with Newman's 4H and actively participates in "Comforting Kids Foundation Bailey's Legacy Run" which is devoted to helping provide comfort and normalcy in the hospital environment for infants, children and their families. When Addison started kindergarten she was asked what she wished to be when she grew up. Her response was a butterfly. When it is freed from its cocoon it spreads its wings and turns into a beautiful butterfly who can fly high in the sky. The staff at Barrington are proud to say over the past 4 years they have witnessed the opening of that cocoon, who is now a beautiful butterfly, watching her soar to new heights. We are so proud of you, Addison!

Gaber Mohsen: Gaber is a senior at Ceres High School, in the Ceres Unified School District. At 16 years of age, Gaber was finally able to leave the violence and poverty of Yemen to come to the United States. He had been separated from his parents for three years while waiting for his visa. His memories of a childhood in a war torn environment include bombings and gunshots in the middle of the night. As a new student at Ceres High, confronting the obstacles of language, poverty, and emotional distress, this young emigrant signed up for a full schedule of college preparatory courses. He attended tutoring sessions every day at lunch and after school and summer school to earn credits and practice English. He now serves as a mentor to new students coming from similar

backgrounds, providing each newcomer with an introduction, a tour of campus, and a first-day guide. He also serves as a liaison from the district to the Arabic speaking community in Ceres. This young man, in two short years, has pushed himself to the extent that he is graduating with honors this June and attending Modesto Junior College to take care of the general education courses required for a degree in engineering. Thank you, Gaber Mohsen, for showing us what it takes to be successful.

Jenise Perryman: Jenise has the qualities of Every Student Succeeding given that she has gone through so many challenging situations in her young life. Currently, Jenise lives with her Nana in Riverbank and has since her 8th grade year. Prior to 8th grade, Jenise moved around a lot with her single mom. It was difficult to maintain a consistent home, but school was always consistent for Jenise. Jenise has been in the Riverbank Unified School District since PreK. She is now a senior at Riverbank High School and is due to graduate in May, 2019. Since moving in with her Nana, Jenise's grades improved and allowed her to be more involved in extra-curricular activities. She dabbled in volleyball, basketball, FAA and has been a member of the Drama department for 3 years. But Jenise's passion is music. She is a member of the MJC Night Orchestra and Night Band as a trombone player and participated in the summer program called MoBand for the last two summers. Jenise is looking to attend school after graduation and major in music. She would like to perform professionally and possibly give music lessons or maybe even become a teacher. Jenise is a one of a kind student who has struggled in her early life but has managed to overcome all of that. Please join me in honoring Jenise Perryman.

Stefani Saldivar: Stefani is a 4th-grader at Las Palmas Elementary School in the Patterson Unified School District. Stefani was a healthy baby who walked and talked before she turned one. But as she grew her parents noticed that her eyes were not moving together and one eye tended to wander. She was diagnosed with congenital glaucoma, a serious condition that causes blindness. She was two years old when she had her first surgery. Waiting for another surgery, Stefani worked at home, and upon her return, with the help of assistive technology, orientation and mobility support, a specialized teacher and a one on one aide, she thrived. Consequently, she was placed in a general education setting. She eventually had the needed surgery, and she re-entered her new class setting without missing a beat. By the age of 9, Stefani had seven surgeries and through it all, she has stayed motivated and positive. Stefani Saldivar is a wonderful example of not letting her disability define her and modeling perseverance. All the best!

Lord Singh-Ramirez: Lord was diagnosed with Nephrotic Syndrome, a rare kidney disease which leads to permanent kidney damage or kidney failure, when he was 2 years old. He has been unable to participate in physical activities throughout his entire life and is currently on the wait list to receive a transplant for both of his kidneys. The summer before Lord started high school, his kidneys failed and he was hospitalized, causing him to miss his entire first year of high school. During this difficult time Lord was receiving chemotherapy, dialysis and helping his sister who was diagnosed with a disease that causes frequent seizures. Lord not only had to take care of himself, but he now had to help his sister overcome her challenges while living in some unbearable

living conditions. Lord came to Del Puerto High School in Patterson with only 10 credits as a late sophomore. His determination and efforts has allowed for him to graduate a trimester early while maintaining a 4.0 GPA. Described as a model student, Lord's goal is to attend a four year university to become an Astro Physicist and eventually work for NASA. Thank you Lord for the inspiration you provide to all of us.

Lilly Willmarth: Lilly is a 7th-grader at Hart Ransom Elementary. Her teacher describes her as "one of the most talented students I have ever met." Lilly has had to struggle with visual and physical challenges her entire life. At 4 months of age, she was diagnosed with a severe cataract in her left eye, and by the time she was 3, she had had two eye surgeries. At 2, Lilly was diagnosed with Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis which causes a loss of range of motion, constant pain, and chronic anemia. But none of this has stopped Lilly. She is a straight A student, an avid reader, and a lover of school. She personifies an "attitude of gratitude," participating wherever she can to belie her challenges. She practices gymnastics through the Gym Stars of Modesto, is an active member of the Wood Colony 4H Club, and she plays the saxophone in the school band. And there is so much more. Her mother, Angel, is literally her guardian angel, and supports her daughters' efforts to experience life fully. Lilly Willmarth hopes to be a family therapist and spread her positive fairy dust – and playing it forward is certainly a sign of a successful student!