

news  
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## **Educators of the Year announced as part of the Chinese Cultural Center's 27th Annual Confucius' Birthday Celebration**

After a three-year break, the Central California Chinese Cultural Center has partnered with the Tulare County Office of Education (TCOE) again to honor teachers through the Confucius' Birthday/Educators of the Year Awards.

Yesterday afternoon, Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Tim Hire and Wendy Jay, a member of the Chinese Cultural Center's Board of Directors, surprised three Tulare County teachers with the news that they had been selected as Educators of the Year.

Chinese people around the world mark the occasion of Confucius' birthday in late September by recognizing exemplary teachers. Each year, members of the Chinese Cultural Center hold a dinner celebration at their event center in Visalia to honor one elementary, one middle, and one high school teacher.

"This year's winners are exceptional teachers who have a gift for engaging students in real world learning," said Hire. "The positive difference they make in the lives of their students will be remembered for years to come."

The winners of the 2023 Educators of the Year Awards are:



**Renee Carson, Sixth-Grade GATE Teacher**

Westfield Elementary School, Porterville Unified School District

A veteran educator with 31 years of teaching experience, Renee Carson is a sixth-grade GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) teacher at Westfield Elementary School in Porterville. She is able to uniquely challenge her students each day, working together with them to make sense of the content and have robust discussions on a wide array of topics. Although Mrs. Carson is a veteran teacher, she continues to expand her craft for the benefit of her students. She has the same expectations of herself as she does for her students – continue to learn and share that knowledge with others. As a result, parents feel they have a true partnership in educating their children with Mrs. Carson.

Mrs. Carson is the driving force behind Westfield Elementary students' success in the annual Tulare County Science & Engineering Fair. She works with students, beginning in the fourth grade, to develop projects that are often award winners. She also serves as a coach for the school's Reading Revolution team.

Mrs. Carson also has a heart for service. Her administrator reports that she is among the first to suggest to others how to support a student, family or colleague in need. As an example, she offered the use of her home to her principal and her family when they were without water and electricity during the March 2023 flooding in Springville.



**Monica Robles, Seventh- and Eighth-Grade Mathematics Teacher**  
Burton Middle School, Burton School District

A teacher for 13 years, Monica Robles serves as a seventh- and eighth-grade mathematics teacher at Burton Middle School in Porterville. Administrators praised her for her engaging teaching methodologies, which are different from what students might expect to see in a middle school mathematics classroom. Ms. Robles loves teaching for the “aha” moments she sees in her students as they realize new concepts.

Considered a master teacher in lesson planning, understanding data, the learning needs of her students, and transition times, Ms. Robles uses real life, hands-on lessons involving cooking and model building to engage her students. Students are up and out of their seats, taking control of their learning and opening themselves to a growth mindset. Through this type of instruction, Ms. Robles is able to bridge learning gaps. Students in her classrooms have shown the greatest academic gains in mathematics across the school site as she continues to push herself to grow as an educator.

This year, Ms. Robles is the department lead of the mathematics team. She supports her colleagues with mentorship, department structure, and a focus that all of her peers appreciate. Ms. Robles’ colleagues consider her teaching abilities with the highest regards.





**Renee Thornburg, Agriculture Teacher**

Woodlake High School, Woodlake Unified School District

A graduate of Woodlake schools, Renee Thornburg returned to teach at Woodlake High School (WHS) in 2019. Since her return, she has helped the agriculture program consistently grow in size and student interest, refining its course pathways to meet student and school needs. She has also taught dual enrollment classes at WHS through College of the Sequoias and serves as the FFA (Future Farmers of America) advisor, traveling with students throughout the state and to the national convention.

Her classrooms are dynamic and exemplify great instruction, combined with numerous hands-on activities that consistently motivate and encourage students. Additionally, Mrs. Thornburg builds solid relationships and finds ways to reach all students, even those who have struggled in other classes. Students who have had behavior issues in other classes routinely have no issues in Mrs. Thornburg's class, and often use success in her class as a springboard to greater educational success. If she notices a student is unproductive, unmotivated, or disruptive, instead of viewing them as a problem, she thinks, "how do I reach this student and make a difference?"

Additionally, Mrs. Thornburg serves as a mentor for new teachers. Outside of the classroom, she often volunteers to be part of any committee that will improve student learning at Woodlake High School.

**Recognition Event**

“The Chinese Cultural Center chose to celebrate local educators on Confucius’ birthday as one of its community service events and to honor the greatest educator the world has known,” said Jay. “We, as members of the board of directors, believe that education holds the key to our future. Confucius’ message of knowledge, benevolence, loyalty, and virtue not only guides the daily lives of many people in China, but other parts of the world as well.”

The Confucius Birthday/Educators of the Year Awards event is not open to the public. A tribute video profiling the three honorees will be shown at the Confucius’ Birthday dinner September 21 and available on the TCOE website afterwards. For more information on the Confucius’ Birthday/Educators of the Year Award, contact Marlene Moreno at [marlenem@tcoe.org](mailto:marlenem@tcoe.org).

Photos above – (top) Renee Carson of Westfield Elementary School in Porterville (center) is the Elementary Educator of the Year. (middle) Monica Robles of Burton Middle School in Porterville (second from right) is the Middle School Educator of the Year. (lower). Renee Thornburg of Woodlake High School (center) is the High School Educator of the Year.

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## Heather Albanez wins Brent Rast Award



When you hear the thumping of guitar strings and the humming of Billy Ray Cyrus, you know what time it is for Terra Bella Union School’s AcCEL students.



Last Thursday, Heather Albanez organized her AcCEL students around the Rotary Stage at the Porterville Fair and when the DJ hit play for Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road", Albanez stood by like a proud mom recording the students' popular performance.

"That's always been a thing in my class," Albanez said with a smile. "Always the fair performance. The kids will start talking about it... even tomorrow they're going to ask, 'What are we gonna do next year?'...They're just really into it. They've always been into it so it's almost like a rite of passage."

Albanez's pride in her students and her career is what always shines through and keeps her going. Her hard work and care are what have led her to become this year's Brent Rast Award winner. The Brent Rast Award is presented annually by TCOE's Special Services to one exceptional teacher of students with profound needs.



"It means a lot," said Albanez. "Cause I feel I put a lot of work into what I've done over the years and I really, truly love my job, and I love the students. And that's what I'm ultimately here for."

Following in her mother's teaching footsteps, Albanez began her teaching career as an instructional assistant in 1999 before getting her credentials and becoming a classroom teacher at the LB Hill Center in Porterville in 2006. She began working for Terra Bella in 2010, in a K-8 combination class, where she blends various grade bands of curriculum, focusing on the communication abilities and behavioral needs of up to 15 students at a time.

Along with the fair performance, Albanez does her best to include her students in as many opportunities and events as possible.

"She has built a strong relationship with her school site," read Katrina Smith, the Porterville Area AcCEL program manager, at the awards ceremony. "Her students participate in many campus events, including turning the classroom into a haunted house for the school Halloween party every year. She takes her sixth graders to SCICON for a week, and has choreographed student performances for a variety of events."

That relationship with her students, their parents, and her work is a constant reminder for Albanez on why she got into teaching special education.

“I just love it,” she said. “I love coming to work. I love being around the students. I think having that relationship with the students and the parents is very important. Terra Bella is very unique in the fact that you’re there from kindergarten through eighth grade. I have these students for a very long time. So they become almost like my own children.”

Photos above:

~ Heather Albanez, far right, poses with her students after their performance at the Porterville Fair's Special Friends Day.

~ Heather Albanez, center, records her students' Lil Nas X's Old Town Road performance at the Porterville Fair's Special Friends Day.

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## Tulare student-athletes honored for their good sportsmanship



In partnership with the Kiwanis Club of Greater Tulare, TCOE's CHARACTER COUNTS! Program recognized this spring's Pursuing Victory with Honor (PVWH) student-athletes at a breakfast on Tuesday. The Kiwanis Club of Greater Tulare recognizes student-athletes, nominated by their coaches, each season for their sportsmanship.

The awards included a certificate, a PVWH pin, a PVWH shirt, and a lawn sign that read "An Athlete of Character Lives Here." Below is a list of the Pursuing Victory with Honor award winners along with statements from their coaches.

### **Mission Oak High School**

#### **Eliana Fajardo, Girls Track**

Coach Bryson Beavers said, "Eliana embodies the qualities of our program. She is the glue that holds the team together. I have never seen her have a dull moment in terms of character. She does what is asked of her and is the epitome of what MOHS Hawks are all about."

#### **Jett Freitas, Boys Golf**

Osama Hamid, Mission Oak's athletic director, read a statement prepared by Frank Gutierrez, the school's boys golf head coach. "This man is a natural born leader. His presence takes negativity away and turns things positive. He has a future ahead of him where he can do anything he wants to."

### **Tulare Union High School**

#### **Ava Olson, Girls Swimming**

Coach Tim Elick praised Ava Olson as an athlete with, "a heart of gold." The school record holder helped Coach Elick by teaching younger athletes to swim. "She never complains," he said. "She will complete an hour and a half of practice, go home to eat, and then head to work out with her club team."

#### **Lance Nourian, Boys Swimming**

Coach Elick said, "Lance works his tail off, yet he is one of the nicest, politest, and most respectful young men I've known." Coach Elick shared an example of Lance's dedication, saying, "During a meet, Lance set a personal record, but the clock broke. Instead of accepting the time, he decided to re-swim the race by himself two minutes later. In the second race, he set another personal record."

### **Tulare Western High School**

#### **Yareli Sanchez, Girls Swimming**

Coach Jenna McGuire said, "Yareli embodies the sweetness on our team. She is a mentor with a calming effect on her teammates. She is also willing to help with anything, including technology, and serving as a mother figure at times. With a career in medicine in mind, she will be an asset to society and her community. She is a true joy."



## Jordan Lozano, Boys Tennis

Coach Andrew Reynoso called Jordan Lozano, “honest to the core.” In a high school sport with no referees, “Jordan plays with integrity that the sport requires” in both singles and doubles matches that last for hours. Coach Reynoso is delighted to have Jordan return to the program next year as a senior.

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## Migrant families attend annual Health & Education Fair



Last Saturday, the Tulare County Office of Education’s Migrant Education Program – Region VIII hosted its second Annual Health & Education Fair. Over 100 migratory parents and families from throughout Tulare and Kings counties attended the fair at the Mooney Boulevard Administration Building to hear from special keynote speakers. Esmeralda Rodriguez, a school social worker with Visalia Unified School District, and Yolanda Valdez, superintendent of the Cutler-Orosi Joint Unified School District, provided the keynote presentations.

In addition, parents were able to participate in health screenings courtesy of Altura Centers for Health and obtain information on community services at information tables staffed by 25 local agencies.

Migrant Education Program area administrators provided demonstrations of summer services to migratory families that were in attendance, with students able to participate in hands-on activities related to the programs they attend this summer. Migrant specialists Gloria Garcia and Yecenia Mariscal led planning efforts for the event.

For more information on upcoming Migrant summer programs or community services, contact Anabel González, Migrant Education director, at [anabelg@coe.org](mailto:anabelg@coe.org).

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## Around the County

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### Dinuba, Tulare FFA win state championships



This month, Dinuba High School and Tulare FFA (Future Farmers of America) teams won state titles at the California FFA Finals hosted at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

Dinuba won the championship in Nursery/Landscape and had several top individuals as well. Senior Lauryn Sotelo was first high individual overall, junior Alonso Soto was



second high individual, sophomore Elizabeth Quintero was fourth high individual, and senior Mariah Enriquez was sixth high individual.

In individual, sub-category scoring, Sotelo placed first, Soto second, Quintero third, and Enriquez fourth in Identification. In General Knowledge, Quintero was third and Sotelo fourth. For the Transplant sub-category, Quintero placed first while Soto and Enriquez tied for fourth.

As a team, Dinuba placed first in Identification and Transplant, and second in General Knowledge.

Nursery/Landscape is a career development event contest where students must identify various types of plants, materials, and tools from a list of 335. They take an industry-based, general knowledge test in various areas including plant physiology, soil science, insects, landscape design, cost estimating, and lawn, to name a few. They also judge a class of trees, shrubs, and flats, and rank best to worst from an industry standpoint. They then give a verbal set of reasons on two of those classes explaining why they ranked them in that order. The last component is a live transplant of a plant from a smaller to a larger container where the student is scored based on the practicum itself and the verbal explanation.

Dinuba coach Nicole Borba reported that this was Dinuba's third state title in four years for Nursery/Landscape and the team will represent California at the national competition in October.





From Tulare FFA, five students won the state title in Agricultural Issues: Avery Starr, Jillian Garica, Olivia Machado, and Gianna Fernandes from Tulare Western High School, and Megan Farrenkopf from Mission Oak High School.

The purpose of the agricultural issues forum is to present a current issue to a public audience; therefore, professional ethics and standards are to be considered. Ignoring truthful information, falsifying needed information, using unreliable sources, and plagiarism are violation examples which could result in disqualification.

“These young ladies spent many hours preparing and practicing for State Finals,” said Dakota Romans, the Tulare FFA advisor. “We are excited for them to represent California FFA and our chapter at the National FFA Convention in October.”

For more information about these FFA teams, contact Dinuba’s Nicole Borba at [nicole.borba@dinuba.k12.ca.us](mailto:nicole.borba@dinuba.k12.ca.us) or Tulare FFA’s Dakota Romans at [dakota.romans@tulare.k12.ca.us](mailto:dakota.romans@tulare.k12.ca.us).

Photos above:

*Dinuba High School’s FFA team (top) and Tulare FFA (bottom) both won state championships at this month’s California State FFA Finals hosted at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. Dinuba won in Nursery/Landscape, while Tulare FFA – made up of Tulare Western and Mission Oak High School students – won in Agricultural Issues.*



## MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

Promoting mental health awareness on your campus is a proactive and positive way to start a conversation and show support for students and their families. Throughout the month of May, we will share information from [this](#) handout that includes strategies to create a positive mental wellness culture at your school and at home, as well as resources to support mental health and wellness.

### Family Mindfulness Schedule

Another way to improve one's mental health can be by spending time with family. [Here](#)'s an example of things to do with family throughout the week.

**Monday** - Family Homework Night

**Tuesday** - Family Breakfast

**Wednesday** - Family Cleanup Night

**Thursday** - Family Leftover Night

**Friday** - Family Game Night

**Saturday** - Family Outing

**Sunday** - Family Dinner



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To receive the News Gallery Week, sign up [here](#), or contact Jennifer Fisher at [jenniferf@tcoe.org](mailto:jenniferf@tcoe.org) or (559) 733-6172.