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Perris Honors Students of the Year

The City of Perris honored four graduating high-school seniors for their outstanding academic achievement while overcoming personal challenges, commitment to others before self and desire to obtain professional skills that will improve the lives of peers, the public and society.

The event was the annual Perris Valley and Menifee Valley Chambers of Commerce Student of the Year Awards, which took place May 16 at the Lake Elsinore Diamond.

The honorees include 2017 graduates of the California Military Institute, Heritage High School, Paloma Valley High School and Perris High School.

Perris Mayor Michael Vargas and City Clerk Nancy Salazar represented elected officials at the 18th Student of the Year ceremony. Vargas urged the seniors to consider returning to the Perris Valley upon graduation and making their professional lives close to home.

"Come back to your communities and share your experiences with others," Vargas said. Vargas said he fought back tears as listened to the personal stories relayed by the four students, who overcame speech impediments, constant moves, shyness and a lack of self-confidence on their way to academic and personal success.

"This ceremony is one of the highlights of my year," Vargas said. "This is what high school is all about. I wish them all success and I know that with their personal character, strength and discipline, they will achieve their goals. The quality of these young people is incredible."

Riverside County School Superintendent Judy White echoed the mayor's words.

"Today is special and I want you to know that we really, really care about you," White said. "We salute you, we commend you. We know you will be the best you can be because of what we see in you."

Each students received a scholarship of \$3,300, an engraved mug, an engraved ballpoint pen, a medallion and numerous certificates and proclamations from municipal, regional, state and national officials.



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas addresses the Students of the Year during a recognition ceremony. The Mayor urged the students to consider returning to the Perris Valley after graduating college and advancing their careers whole improving their community.

The honorees included:

- Samuel Arda, 18, California Military Institute:**
 Samuel will attend UC Merced, where he plans on studying biology and clinical psychology with the ultimate goal of becoming a psychiatrist. He chooses to work with people suffering from mental and emotional challenges because "they are the most under-represented in medicine."

"I want to change that," he said.

Samuel volunteered at Perris Christmas and Veteran's Day parades, the CMI Memorial Honor Detail and took part the school's "Treats for Marines," which involved traveling the USMC base in 29 Palms and presenting goodies to children separated by their parents' military deployments. He captained the CMI volleyball team and plays the piano and flute. As part of his interest in psychiatry, Samuel spent a week last summer in Washington D.C., studying at Howard University Summer Enrichment Summer Academy.

CMI Principal Michael Rhodes called Samuel "resilient, dynamic, thoughtful, driven, an awesome young man." Rhodes said that Samuel's career choice gives hope to the down-and-out, voice to the silent and healing to the hurting.

"He supports those who are broken and hurt," Rhodes said. "He wants to be a doctor to ensure the well-being and happiness of others."

- Melissa Lopez, 18, Heritage High School:**
 Melissa will begin studies at UC San Diego in September, where she will study chemistry and biochemistry and minor in Spanish. Her ultimate goal is to become an orthodontist.

Melissa said she employs a simple tactic to excel at academic studies and extra-curricular activities like ballet, contemporary and hip-hop dancing: Work hard enough and success will follow.

"You don't have to be the smartest person to succeed but you have to work the hardest," Melissa said.

Heritage principal Frank Arce said Melissa overcame stuttering but never sought or wanted sympathy from others. Arce called Melissa "incredible," "extremely inquisitive," "the best of the best," a student with an "infectious personality" and a young woman "who will do amazing things with her life."

"She will succeed," Arce said. "She will do amazing things with her life."

Melissa tutored and mentored younger students at Heritage High School as part of her participation in the Link Crew program. She also hand-crafted bracelets for orphans. Melissa thanked the community for its support, saying events like Student of the Year "shows its cares a lot about its students."

"It's nice to be recognized," Melissa said.

- Mia Alexandra Munoz, 18, Paloma Valley High School:**
 Mia will attend UC Irvine with plans to study bio-medicine with hopes of becoming a Speech Pathologist. Mia graduates high school with a 4.23-grade point average, which includes completing eight advanced placement courses as well as a number of extra-curricular activities.

Mia is president of the school's Interact Club, a student leadership organization, as well as president of the Paloma chapter of the California Scholarship Federation. Principal Don Williamson said Mia exhibits "integrity, class and a joy about her that lights up the room."

But it wasn't always easy. Mia said her family moved around a lot when she was young, making it difficult for her to plant roots at any one school. She was called a follower, someone lacking self-confidence. Mia is active in the Canyon Lake Community Church, where she has helped feed the homeless. Mia lives by the motto of 18th Century religious leader John Wesley: "Do all the good that I can, by all the means that I can, in all the ways that I can, in all the places that I can, at all the times that I can, to all the people that I can, for as long as I can."

- Azreal Daniel Sanchez, 17, Perris High School:**
 Azreal will attend San Francisco State University, where he plans to study pharmaceutical sciences with the ultimate goal of becoming a pharmacist. He joined the school's Associated Student Body (ASB) as a freshman and took an active role in organizing activities at the campus, including the annual blood drive and relay for life.

He also helped organize a "teen safe driving" event at the school, played varsity baseball and ran cross-country for the Panthers track team and earned membership in the National Honor Society.

Azreal said he is most proud of organizing Perris High School's "Sports Challenge," a day in which special education students get a chance to play football, basketball and other team sports.

School administrator Adriana Lepe called Azreal a "natural leader whose heart beats integrity" and a "mentor for his peers." Teacher Jose Rodriguez said Azreal exudes "strength under restraint," noting that he commands the respect of his peers with quiet presence.

Azreal thanked his family for their support and said he is motivated to succeed to honor his dad, who had to give up his dream of attending college to support the family.



Heritage High School's Melissa Lopez, California Military Institute's Samuel Arda, Paloma Valley High School's Mia Alexandra Munoz and Perris High School's Azreal Daniel Sanchez at the annual Student of the Year Ceremony.

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