

UNCOMMON GOOD

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Justice Makes a Joyful Noise



Photo by Gomez Family

Uncommon Good graduate Brenda Karina Gomez

Outside in the street they were beating on metal pots and shouting chants hour after hour. As it neared midnight, sleep was impossible. I was 400 miles from Uncommon Good at a professional conference in San Francisco. The ruckus was coming from the Marriot Hotel across the street where the workers were striking for a living wage. What I did not know at the time was that one of the people creating the din was one of our Uncommon Good students, Brenda Karina Gomez.

“I realized in high school that my voice had power and maybe I should be doing something bigger with it,” Brenda told me recently.

The daughter of an immigrant construction worker and a housekeeper from Mexico, Brenda was a student in our Connect to College program that prepares first generation students for college. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, she was galvanized to take action. She and another Uncommon Good student, Ivan Hernandez, and then Uncommon Good employee Jesus Sanchez, organized a rally in front of her high school which was the beginning of the Pomona Students Union, which went on to become a political advocacy group for the benefit of Pomona youth. And while many community groups were struggling to figure out how to get young people to register to vote, we decided to train some students to deliver the message to their peers. Brenda and Ivan took up the challenge and registered and pre-registered large numbers of their fellow high school students who would not have been open to hearing this message from older adults.

After high school, Brenda was accepted to the University of California at Berkeley. Majoring in sociology, she got involved with the Marriot Hotel workers strike, informing workers of their rights, talking to hotel guests about the strike, carrying signs, and lifting her voice (and her metal pot) with the others in a joyful noise, the song of justice.

In her second year of college, Brenda noticed that UC Berkeley did not have a space or club for queer and trans students of color, so of course, she simply started one. It is a space where these students can come for support, *[continued on page 6]*

Dungeons, Dragons and other Marvelous Marvels

Albert Einstein once said, “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be geniuses, read them lots of fairy tales.” If he were alive today he probably would add, “And let them play Dungeons and Dragons!”

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is an online game in which groups of players create an imaginative story together. Kids love it because it is an exciting creative activity they can do with their friends, blissfully unaware that it requires them to hone their writing and math skills as they create their characters and a mythical world under the direction of a Dungeon Master. Lessons in the sciences and social sciences can also be hidden within the game. Kids can learn about astronomy through having characters navigate celestially, botany and chemistry by mixing healing or deadly potions, politics by creating and overseeing governments, or psychology by learning how to work with the other characters’ personalities and agendas. You can even begin to teach a foreign *[continued on page 7]*



Dungeon Master Julia (top right) with her Dungeons & Dragons team

Photo by Julia Schneider



Photo by Kamdem Family

Dr. Nneka Kamdem

Dr. Nneka Kamdem’s Story

Dr. Nneka Kamdem can still summon up vivid memories of her childhood in South Los Angeles:

“Gunshots and sirens were slightly drowned out by the Latin music played every night by the residents across the alley. I later realized that drugs were being sold at a house across the street. This was where I grew up, in South Los Angeles, famed for the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. I was quite young then, but the aftermath of the riots, the burned down buildings and sheer destruction of my community, will forever be burned into my memory. Many of the neighborhood stores were lost that day, and in addition to the immediate devastation, as I drive down certain portions of Vermont Avenue even today, empty lots occupy the sites of many of those former stores.

“My parents, recent immigrants from Nigeria, were thrust into a new culture and language -without family or friends. Yet through all the hardships, they continued to make tireless sacrifices for their *[continued on page 7]*

What Do We Do?

Connect to College/CAUSA (CCC): Over 1,000 low-income students and their parents are served through CCC. Starting in the 4th grade, students are given one-to-one mentoring, tutoring, educational enrichment, leadership training, community service opportunities, and extensive help preparing for and applying to college. Parents are provided with social services, educational opportunities, and leadership training. 100% of Uncommon Good students go to college, even as 41.5% of their socio-economic peers are dropping out of high school. The CAUSA component of the program is an urban farm enterprise that produces organically grown fruits and vegetables for CCC families and the community at large.

Medicine for the Economically Disadvantaged (MED): This program helps idealistic doctors, dentists, pharmacists, psychiatrists and optometrists repay their sky-high educational loans, some over \$800,000, so they can accept the lowest paying jobs in the medical profession, those serving the poor in community clinics throughout the southland. MED also has a health career pipeline through which Uncommon Good students are introduced to careers in medicine and helped to prepare for medical school.

Pandemic Response: Since the pandemic, an emergency fund has been created to help families who lose their jobs and don't qualify for unemployment because they worked in the cash economy. In addition, our farm program has expanded to become a regional food pantry for the hungry, giving away tons of fresh produce and nonperishable food.

Whole Earth Building (WEB): This is Uncommon Good's office, a beautiful first-of-its-kind green building that was constructed by hand using little more than on-site earth, by Uncommon Good staff, children, parents, and hundreds of community members. It continues to receive visitors from every continent (except Antarctica!) who come to learn how to create buildings that keep people safe from natural disasters and do not harm the earth.

Teen Sells Candles to Help Support Family Through Covid Pandemic

By Kim Passoth, Los Angeles, Spectrum One News

As many families wonder how they will pay rent this month, some are coming up with creative ways to generate income.

One local teen started his own candle business after both of his parents lost their jobs and has already sold more than 100 candles.

Kevin Rodriguez, 16, is going into his junior year at Diamond Ranch High School in Pomona. He learned how to make candles during the pandemic by watching videos on YouTube.

"I really wanted to help my family out," he shared.

Making candles is something he wanted to try for years but thought would require big expensive machines. Once he no longer had to go into school he started researching and realized he could make them at home. "I had more time on my hands and my father was just at home helping around the house and there was no income," he recounted.

The teen used part of the COVID Emergency Grant given to his family by Claremont based non-profit Uncommon Good. Executive Director Nancy Mintie said they work with low income first generation students to try to end the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

"Most of the families we serve lost their jobs during the pandemic and so we decided to keep our doors open even when all of the other social service organizations around us were closing down," she stated.

The non-profit has given out 450 emergency grants in the last few months. They are selling masks made by one struggling family, as well as Kevin's scented candles.

"I really hope that I am able to inspire other kids to start their own business," Rodriguez added.

The \$10 price tag buys much more than just the handmade candle, it is an investment in Kevin's future and a way to help his family through this difficult financial time.



Uncommon Good student and candle maker, Kevin Rodriguez

Photo by Nancy Mintie

Politics for the People

Our young political activist, Ivan Hernandez, is the son of immigrant parents, his mother a factory worker and his father a butcher at a processing plant. The family reminds me of the old saying: Politics and sausages - you don't want to see how either of them are made! But the messiness of working for justice has not deterred our Ivan. We've known him since he was a little boy in the fourth grade when he entered our Connect to College program. We matched him with a wonderful mentor named Kenya, a teacher who had grown up in poverty and so understood the struggles of Ivan's family. He served as Ivan's mentor for eight years and the two remain friends.

Ivan first developed his leadership abilities as a member of our Teen Green youth environmental and community service organization. He served as the group's president, overseeing environmental clean ups and a rooftop garden. But it was the 2016 election that launched him into serious activism. With his friend and fellow firebrand, Uncommon Good student Brenda Karina Gomez, he staged a rally in front of their high school, forming a group which grew into the Pomona Students Union, a student advocacy organization. And after receiving voter registration education through Uncommon Good, he and Brenda led a successful youth voter registration drive, a feat that adult-led organizations had failed to accomplish in our region.

After high school, Ivan was accepted at the University of California at Berkeley, where he is majoring in political science and minoring in public policy. He joined the Associated Students of the University of California and advocated for the demilitarization of the campus police and the admission of more students of color. The college administration pushed back, saying that they would have to hire city police if the campus security force gave up their guns. Ivan pointed out that the school says it wants more students of color, but when these students come to the UC Berkeley campus they see a sea of white and Asian faces and police walking around with guns, not a very welcoming sight for young people with traumatic histories of police abuse in their communities. He added that as a volunteer who leads tours for prospective students of color, he was not even being given a room in which to host the students, but instead had to sit outside with them on the ground, signifying how little importance the university was giving this effort. And when Latinx and Black students do enroll, many do not stay because of the lack of support and general feeling that they don't belong. There is no resource center for Latinx students, many of whom are first generation college students, and there are relatively few professors of color. Of Ivan's 16 professors so far, only 3 have been Latinx or Black.

Ivan has worked on a number of political campaigns, but has grown disillusioned with the politicians for whom he worked and whom he had considered his political mentors.

“I’ve watched as these older politicians and mentors have fallen into complacency and respectability politics. You work on campaigns of people you think will change things and then they disappoint”



Ivan testifying about student health before the CA State Assembly

Photo by Hernandez Family



Uncommon Good graduate Ivan Hernandez at UC Berkeley

“I’ve watched as these older politicians and mentors have fallen into complacency and respectability politics. You work on campaigns of people you think will change things and then they disappoint,” he laments.

So when COVID caused UC Berkeley classes to go online, Ivan returned to his hometown of Pomona and resumed his local organizing with like-minded youth. He is on the Board of Directors of Gente Organizada, the community organizing nonprofit started by former Uncommon Good staffer Jesus Sanchez. With the other young people of Gente, he is challenging the City of Pomona's policy of giving youth services money to the police instead of to organizations serving young people. They created a Youth Commission and are demanding that the city include a line item in its budget to fund the commission, which would oversee spending for after school programming, teen leadership training, support for student organizations, and investments in youth services.

“I’ve been organizing in Pomona since 2016,” he told us, “but these last months have brought a new wave of energy and faces. Black Lives Matter has had an impact. I’ve been surprised by the level of engagement of others. Even some of my friends from high school who used to be conservative supporters of the state and unquestioning supporters of the police, have been speaking out. There’s a lot of unlearning that needs to happen in our families and communities so that they understand that Black Lives Matter is about collective liberation, not preferential treatment of one race.”

I asked Ivan what his personal experience was with police harassment and racism. He responded: “It’s like a low-grade fever that is always there in the community and that you know could spike at any time.”

He has come to believe that the burden of creating a society anchored in social justice is one that will fall on the shoulders of his generation. He wants to go to law school and become a public interest lawyer, using the law to change unjust systems, break cycles of violence, and help young people to find their voices and passions. “Some young people don’t yet feel a need to get involved,” he admitted, but then added with urgency, “but at this time in history, you HAVE to be involved!”

Photo by Hernandez Family

Nightmare Becomes American Dream

Impoverished, with no hope for education or a future, she undertook the physically arduous and emotionally traumatic journey by foot through the vast Mexican and US deserts. Her dream was to come to this country, learn English, earn citizenship and become a teacher. But the obstacles she faced didn't end when she entered this country. She found work cleaning houses but remained mired in poverty and struggled to learn the difficult English language, so different from her native melodious Spanish. Her harsh existence was sweetened a bit when she fell in love. But when someone very close to her was deported, she gave up and lost faith in a better life for herself.

Yet hope was reborn when she gave birth to her daughter, Melanie. She got involved as a volunteer at Melanie's school and pushed her to be a good student. She found her way to us at Uncommon Good and enrolled her daughter in our college access program.

Melanie Andreo has been making the most of her mother's sacrifices. She first began to work for social change as a youngster in the 7th grade. Family members and the parents of her friends were being racially profiled by the police and deported by immigration agents. She joined organizations speaking out against racist profiling and on behalf of immigrant rights. In high school she had an inspirational history teacher, Ion Puschila, who validated her emerging activism. With his encouragement, she volunteered for a youth voter registration drive, and attended community events advocating for educational justice and equity.

After graduating from high school, Melanie was accepted to Pitzer College in Claremont, where she is majoring in Chicano Latino Studies and Sociology. As a college student, her activism has intensified. She has worked for farmworker rights, and helped

with a protest and boycott that forced a dairy corporation to provide healthcare for its injured employees. She has raised money for stranded asylum seeking families at the southern border. She's worked with the student organizations Gente Organizada and the Pomona Students Union, along with the ACLU, challenging how millions of dollars meant for programs for low-income students, foster youth and English Language Learners in the Pomona schools were instead being used for police. Their efforts resulted in \$2 million being redistributed away from police and towards mental health school counsellors, arts and music programs, and resources for foster youth.

Melanie's goal is to be a professor at a college with a high enrollment of first generation students. She wants to create lessons around books written by people from her community, and teach students how to work for social change and give back. Her mother could not realize her own dream of becoming a teacher, but how sweet it must be to see that dream blossoming in the life of her daughter!



Uncommon Good graduate Melanie Andreo

Photo by Andreo Family

Helping Others Find Their Voice



Uncommon Good graduate Alexis Sanchez

Alexis Sanchez is a tall, thoughtful young man who graduated from our program this fall to study at the University of California at Davis. He is interested in becoming a speech pathologist, motivated by his experience with his nephews who have speech impediments.

Yet even as a high school student, he left a positive mark on his community. "One of the things I learned at Uncommon Good was how to express my feelings, and how important that is to mental health," he told us.

This past year, he saw the usual stresses of poverty in his family and community escalate dangerously due to the pandemic. Domestic violence, depression and despair blanketed his world as people he knew became sick or lost jobs. Uncommon Good gave his family an emergency grant when his father became unemployed, but he wanted to do something for those who had no one to turn to. He joined with other young people in his hometown of Pomona, and lobbied his city and school district to reallocate money from police and school security to mental health resources. When the Black Lives Matter movement erupted in Pomona, he joined the effort to combat anti-Black racism in the Latinx community, a long simmering problem which was being fueled by the Spanish language media which was labeling BLM activists as looters.

His activism brought about an unexpected benefit. "I learned that taking action on behalf of other people was also the best way to deal with my own stress and fears," he told us.

After he earns his degree, Alexis says that he'd like to return to Pomona. "People think of it as a depressed place," he said. "But I know its rich culture, art, and great people, and I'd like to keep giving back to my community there."

The Elders of Activism

Many of our students are getting involved in the vibrant, largely youth led movements that are striving to change our world for the better. One, though, is taking a different, but also important path. Sam Gutierrez is now a senior at the University of California at Berkeley, where she is an ethnic studies major with an education minor. She started college with the idea of becoming a teacher. But a work study assignment in the school's ethnic studies library opened her eyes to the fascinating career of a historical archivist. She poured over audio recordings of social justice protests and rallies from the 1960s and 1970s, worked with the donated archive of professor and queer activist Trinity Orduna, and collected historical art from Latinx and Indigenous artists. She became fascinated with the history of social activism and the importance of not losing the lessons from this past. She also came across some quaint surprises in the course of her work, such as the front page story in a major newspaper from simpler times about a cat that got stuck up a tree.

When asked about the social movements of today, she commented:

"This is a time to be motivated and to build off the momentum and take action. There is a temptation, of course, to give up and go off planet. But we need to do the opposite. I know I can help either by teaching directly or by lifting up voices that have been silenced, through the preservation of their history."



Uncommon Good graduate Sam Gutierrez

Photo by Andreo Family

Changing the World Through Art and Activism

I don't think I've ever told her this, but if ever I've met a person who could be half human and half from the faerie kingdom, it would be Violet Luxton. From the time I first met her as a young girl in our Teen Green youth group, I recognized that she was an extraordinary soul, deeply connected with Mother Earth and passionate about social justice. Violet comes from a Latinx-Native American-Irish lineage. From her Latinx heritage, Violet was shaped by the stories of her elders who battled racism in the student movements of the sixties and seventies. From her Indigenous family line she learned to value native cultures and resolved to dismantle oppression in all its forms. From her Irish ancestry, well, that's the faerie part...

Today Violet is an artist, musician, kundalini yoga teacher and activist. This summer she created art and social justice programming which she offered to our Uncommon Good students. As she tells it:

"In the past two years, several women in our community were discovered missing or murdered including one 15-year-old student of the Cherokee Nation, living in Los Angeles. She was a singer, activist and young leader in our community who contributed a great deal to the Claremont Colleges through her art and activism. A couple weeks following her death, I approached Tongva Elder Julia Bogany about the violence in our community and asked what type of events we could host to provide an outlet for healing and expressing the difficult emotions we were going through alone. (The Tongva are the tribe that first lived on the land in our region.)

"I immediately thought of painting a mural on Pitzer's campus because it is the only college that currently allows outdoor art, and—believe it or not—much of my social consciousness and politicization is a direct result of my observing murals on campus. One in particular comes to mind. Somehow I made it to my freshman year in college without ever learning about the 5,000+ women who had been found missing or murdered in Juarez, Mexico. One day, I was casually walking to my dorm room from the McConnell Dining Hall and came across an image that would change my life forever. It was the scene of a fictitious game show with a well-dressed male host flashing pearly white teeth and pointing to the words 'Pay no attention to the 5,000 murdered women behind the curtain —Juarez, Mexico.'

"My curiosity was piqued, and I immediately went to my computer to look up the story behind the artwork. 'It must be a mistake,' I thought. The cognitive dissonance began to grow as I grappled with unanswered questions in my head like: How could 5,000+ women of color be murdered in the 21st century and the police not find the culprits? Why wasn't this on the news? Why wasn't this being discussed more in public? These harsh realities coupled with the fact no one had ever mentioned them in school was a pivotal moment in my awakening to the larger of systems of oppression that erased not only Indigenous culture but actual Indigenous human beings from this Earth.



Artist and activist Violet Luxton



Tonga elder Julia Bogany (left) at Uncommon Good ground breaking

Photo by Nancy Mintie

"I realized then that art was a powerful vehicle for sharing information on violence, poverty, and the plight of oppressed people. I also learned art could exist outside the confines of academic pedagogy where these stories were getting lost or dissected into ineffective narratives that discussed topics like sustainability, violence, poverty and Indigenous land sovereignty in silos when the reality is, we cannot have effective conversations about any of those topics without addressing that the mentality behind the extraction and exploitation of the Earth is also the same mentality that enables the exploitation and murder of black and brown bodies. In the words of LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation, 'The abuse of women is well known in history, and tells you a lot about what is happening on our earth.'

"Now, history was repeating itself in Claremont and the classrooms of the Claremont Colleges were not prepared to adequately approach these issues. I turned to art once again, to bridge the gap. Not only was the knowledge of violence in our community being erased at an alarming rate, there was no space on campus where Elders in Residence and Claremont College Native/non-Native community members could meet in an intergenerational and culturally driven way to process and heal from that violence. I also knew that there existed an immense body of talent in the form of local Native dancers, actors, artists, musicians and activists whose work needed to be supported and showcased in a meaningful way. Tongva Elder Julia Bogany suggested the mural depict the Tongva story of "No-Moon" and "First-Moon" because it was traditionally used to teach Native women how to empower each other and was one of the first stories Tongva people used to prevent violence against women in their community.

"Then...the pandemic started, and once again we saw the disparities of socioeconomic inequality rear their ugly heads. In addition, it was triggering epigenetic trauma from the many pandemics Indigenous people have survived in the past. And then the public murder of George Floyd happened, coupled with the Black Lives Matter movement and larger protests making the need for community engagement quite clear. Elder Julia and I collaborated to plan workshops this summer focusing on Indigenous women's history and the tools that could be culturally transferred for dealing with violence, poverty, isolation and disease that enabled indigenous people to survive these same forces of oppression for hundreds of years. In addition, I was able to recruit Afrofuturist artist Jessi Jumanji to do a workshop on Afrofuturism and Afro-Indigenous solidarity and resistance.

"Elder Bogany and I then reached out to musician/muralist Joe Galarza who was planning a course on "Art as Activism" at Redlands University to paint the mural (as he has painted several for Pitzer in the past) and teach Claremont College students how to create their own works of art and healing work while in isolation. Joe gladly agreed and we set out to find a location. I thought about it for a while and one place kept coming up, the Scott Hall wall adjacent to the Twin Brother's Mural. Not only would the Twin Sisters Mural be a nice compliment and balancing act to the Twin Brothers mural, together they would form a corner of Native visibility and become a vehicle for representing the fact that Native people have always been the "corner stone" of the Claremont Colleges. The mural could also act as an "attention magnet" to raise awareness of the contributions Indigenous people have made and continue making to our community including the knowledge bases they share that contribute to classroom curricula, to the little known history that local indigenous people actually built portions of the Claremont Colleges.

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Changing the World Through Art and Activism

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- The 1st workshop will focus on the life of Juana Maria and deal with isolation in the pandemic as Juana Maria is famous for living 18 years on one of the Channel Islands alone before being captured by Spanish forces. We will look at how she survived and tools for staying healthy while socially distanced. In addition, the first workshop will also highlight the famous Tongva healer “Azusa” after which the Southern California city is named. We will look at Azusa’s life and role as healer for her people then discuss ways we can all be healers in our communities during difficult times.

- The 2nd workshop will focus on Victoria Reed, the first Tongva woman chief, and Toypurina, organizer of a revolt against the San Gabriel Mission. In this workshop, we will discuss their unique approaches to leadership and skills we can take from them to better organize our own communities around social justice and equality.

- The 3rd workshop will cover the Twin Sisters Story and the mural itself with the theme of Afro-Indigenous “Resilience Against All Odds.” We will make shell necklaces that represent the shell in the story given to the Tongva as a symbol of resilience and medicine against violence and disease in the community. Participants will get to discuss the story and walk away with their own symbol of hope and healing through tough times. The story also combats feelings of isolation and invisibility that can haunt indigenous people in a society that does not “see” or properly recognize them. In the words of Elder Julia Bogany, ‘Tongva women never left their land, they just became invisible,’ and ‘Sometimes we’re missing even when we’re in the room.’

“I also have several ideas about long term showcasing of art/activism in addition to the workshops that have already been mentioned like a virtual Zoom concert with local Tongva/Chumash rapper Jessa Calderon as she performs powerful songs about women’s experiences with violence and healing and this can provide funding to local indigenous women artists under growing financial hardship from the pandemic. I also plan to fundraise to host a virtual viewing of the play “Menil and her Heart,” one of the best productions I have ever seen—produced by local Cahuilla Tribe sisters active in the community centered

around death, loss and healing in indigenous people face in everyday life. A few weeks ago I learned Luke Madrigal, the father of the Madrigal sisters that produced the play recently passed from Covid-19 and now am even more determined to find ways to support our community and their contributions to art and activism as a whole.

“I welcome your beautiful thoughts on anything that resonates. All are welcome to collaborate and create virtually.

In Love and Solidarity,
Violet



Photo by Joel Henner

Violet meditating on roof of Uncommon Good’s Whole Earth Building

Justice Makes a Joyful Noise

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companionship, food, wellness programming and legal help. She named it “De Colores” (a traditional Mexican folk song loosely translated as “All the Colors”) as a way of honoring diversity. She is too young to know that “De Colores” had been an iconic song of the California farmworker movement, but it was nice to hear that it was once again being repurposed as a social justice soundtrack! Brenda’s project is a great success, with 70 students participating and three interns to help her run the center.

Brenda returned to her family’s home in Pomona when her classes went online. Because of the pandemic, her father’s construction jobs fell away and people stopped paying her mother for house cleaning. We gave Brenda one of our COVID emergency grants to help her family during this time and to enable her to continue her studies and community work. This summer she was doing research with the University of Chicago about how young people in Pomona are involved in their community and how their lived experience shapes their civic engagement, a subject close to her heart. In addition, she assisted as an ally with the All Black Lives Matter marches and organized a March for Queer and Trans Lives and resource fair at a local park. She organized an ethnic studies webinar and is working for Gente Organizada, a community organization started by former Uncommon Good staffer, Jesus Sanchez. She is passionate about human rights and about educating her community to overcome its anti-Black racism and homophobia.

Brenda plans to become a professor and wants to mentor young people to help them to their find their voices as she has done. She also plans to continue to work for more resources for low-income communities such as affordable housing, and help to start businesses for people like her own grandma, who would like to be able to sell her delicious tacos.

When I asked her if she thought she could make a difference in the world, she shot back, “I already have!” She added, “I already have made a difference but I can do more. I can’t change the minds of people who are racist or anti-immigrant, but I can strengthen my community, especially now in this time when people are waking up, organizing, and demanding their fair share of resources.”

I believe Brenda is right. Our time seems ripe for big changes. Black Lives Matter became a mainstream movement in a matter of weeks, the kind of change that would have taken a whole generation to develop just a short time ago. To see charismatic young leaders rising up to ride and direct these winds of change is thrilling and a cause for renewed hope.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Brenda Karina Gomez

Dungeons, Dragons and Other Marvelous Marvels

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language by sprinkling in names, terms, descriptions and dialogue in a second language. Perhaps surprisingly, many studies have shown that kids not only improve academically by playing the game, but there are mental health benefits too, especially in a time of isolation, by connecting children to each other in a fun activity.

We learned all this recently from my Executive Assistant, Francesca Twohy-Haines, who it turns out has been leading a secret double life as a talented D&D Dungeon Master. She introduced us and our kids to the game and its benefits, as part of our efforts to keep them learning while their schools are shut down. She recruited a friend to help, Dungeon Master Juli Schneider, so more kids could play.

Once Francesca and Julia explained the game to our kids, their imaginations took off as they created the characters they wanted to be. These included “a kind and helpful Elf”, a potato farming cleric on a mission to find the best potato recipe in the land, a Void Creature with 19,999 siblings from another dimension whose mission is to return his people to earth from which they had been banished, a boy playing a girl who was trying to escape from being dispatched into a bad arranged marriage, a warlock who receives his magic from extraterrestrials and who grew up in servitude so his mission is to create economic justice in the land, and a ghost masquerading as a human in a suit of armor who is “always fighting for justice!”

Reading between the lines of their character descriptions, I also hear echoes of the hardships that they and their immigrant families are facing in their real lives. Many of the kids say that their character’s deepest fear is losing their family. One says that she was separated from her family at age nine. Another says his deepest fear is having no money. Another boy reports that his character (a royal spy elf) is working hard so his family can live closer to him.

Francesca got the ball rolling by creating an initial story line and a land composed of islands with names all in Italian that each describe a part of a dragon. (The kids figured out on their own what she had done by identifying the language and translating it!) Julia reports that the kids get so excited by surprise twists in the story, that she can see them on the Zoom screen jump out of their seats in amazement, or drop their mouths open in astonishment.

Julia says that she loves seeing how the game is bringing the shy kids out of their shells, and helping the rowdy ones experiment with risk taking and its consequences in a safe environment. Julia, who is a full time college student with a physical disability that causes her chronic pain, was particularly touched by one of the boys who grew concerned because his D&D group did not have access to any characters that were healers. His solution was to



Photo by Francesca Twohy-Haines

Dungeon Master Francesca (top right) with her Dungeons & Dragons team and a rendering of a scene from their imaginary world

recruit a healer priest to help his group, in return for allowing the priest to proselytize his religion!

Julia, whose mother is a teacher in a particular realm of hell that requires her to teach public school kindergarten children online, said that her mother commented that the schools are required to teach informational writing, but not storytelling. As a result, students don’t learn this important life skill of making something interesting by telling stories about it, but D&D gives them the chance to use their imaginations in this way, perhaps for the very first time.

“The kids are also missing their friends so much because their schools are closed and they can’t go anywhere. This game gives them a way to connect with their peers. Some of them are signing on early for the sessions, just to have a chance to talk to each other. It seems to be filling a psychological need for them,” Julia reported.

Initially Francesca and Julia had only intended the sessions to go through the summer, but once school started, the kids begged for them to continue. On a survey about their experience, they said over and over how much fun they were having, in an effort to convince us to continue the games. So we bowed to their lobbying, have continued the sessions and are recruiting college students and volunteers from the community so that we can involve more kids.

I only hope that someday we’ll give all our teachers the freedom to infuse their lessons with joy-filled fun, the way our wise Dungeon Masters have done this summer. Perhaps then we’ll find that we have a bunch of little Einsteins in our classrooms!

Dr. Nneka Kamdem’s Story

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five children. They saw nothing but potential in me and enrolled me in a medical magnet high school - far from my underserved neighborhood - with ample resources, where my interests in math and science grew.

“I started to notice that my friends turned to me when they needed a tutor or a person to talk to about their future. I realized that I could reach out a hand to help others in my community by becoming a great role model. Once I found medicine, I finally had the vocation necessary for me to channel this devotion.”

Now a pediatrician at the Hubert Humphrey Comprehensive Center in South Los Angeles near her childhood home, Dr. Kamdem is living her dream of serving her community as a physician. In addition, she is active in the community benefit programs of the Charles Drew University Alumni Association that combat systemic racism and poverty. But her good works also span the globe. She is a board member for the Children Are Royal nonprofit organization that is dedicated to helping orphaned children in her ancestral Nigeria. She also has participated in medical mission work in Nigeria, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Vietnam. One experience in the Dominican Republic stands out in her memory:

“As I’m measuring the height and weight of a young boy I ask him, ‘So tell me, what do you want to be when you grow up?’ ‘I want to be a doctor like you!’ he proclaims. We continue our conversation as he waits for me to check his mother’s glucose. He excitedly describes his love of school and the amazing friendships he has made. As he experiments with my stethoscope – astonishing himself with the sound of his own heart beat – I instruct him on the steps necessary to achieve his future goals. Later on, he hugs me before he and his mom made their journey back to the ‘slums’.”

Dr. Kamdem is just the kind of physician that we seek to support through our MED program that eases the burden of excessive educational debt that plagues many doctors. Dr. Kamdem is a recipient of a MED grant through the LA Care Elevating the Safety Net

“They saw nothing but potential in me and enrolled me in a medical magnet high school - far from my underserved neighborhood - with ample resources, where my interests in math and science grew.”

Physician Loan Repayment Program. She explained the difference that this is making in her life and work:

“I would like to sincerely thank everyone involved with making the loan assistance program a possibility. My passion lies with primary care for underserved children. Unfortunately, choosing such a career is accompanied with compensation that isn’t comparable to that of our other colleagues within the medical profession. It can be a difficult decision to make, especially when drowning in student loans after many years of education and training. Your contributions makes it more feasible to dedicate oneself to underserved communities.”

I’ve actually kept the best bit for last. Incredibly, Dr. Kamdem is not only saving the world one child at a time, but is also the mother of two toddlers, with another baby on the way! I can only imagine the great ripples of positive change that are flowing from the life of this one extraordinary woman!

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