

From the Margins: Centering Woodburn Success Stories

This is a moment that put so much in motion. This was the first time that an audience beyond Woodburn got to hear the brilliance of Belen, and the response was electric. Her whole family attended, and their collective pride helped me realize the magnitude of this moment.

The Portland Book Festival led to so many more opportunities to perform and share our Woodburn stories rooted in triumph and a belief that when we are our most authentic version of ourselves, we are at our best.

Belen has a voice that moves all the Tias to tears. Now, she is thriving at Yale University.



Belen Mendoza Cortes performs at the Portland Book Festival in front of a standing room only crowd. November 5, 2022



Jose Paredes performs at the Vocal Justice National Youth Summit in Chicago, Illinois.

When Jose Paredes walked into Vocal Justice class on day one, I thought it was a mistake. In our first community circle, we could barely hear his voice. When I asked him if you wanted to be in the class, he put his head down, pressed his lips together, and just gave me a nod.

Fast forward seventh months, Jose won a trip to Chicago to perform his poem about being the son of a Paletero. A few weeks later, we'd learn that Jose won a full-ride scholarship to attend Willamette University.

We are reminded to never underestimate someone, and always give young people a chance to grab the mic and share their story with confidence, power, and purpose.



K'Lynn Bryant is a force of nature. She commands the spaces she is in and speaks with confidence, pride, and vulnerability.

She's already a published writer, and she's performed at the Portland Book Festival.

On October 22, 2024, she opened for Ta-Nehisi Coates who has won countless awards included the MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as the Genius Award. Her poem asked all two thousand people in attendance to truly see her, and her command of the stage gave us no choice.

K'Lynn dreamed of attending Howard University in Washington DC, one of the most prestigious HBCUs.

Success isn't always linear, and while we are heartbroken for K'Lynn in this moment, We're 100% confident that she will find tremendous success in the future.

Born and raised in Nicaragua, Valeria Ruiz Tapia moved to the United States as a sophomore in high school. Despite being placed in an English Language Development class, she still enrolled in AP Literature and AP Government, earning As in both classes—and all the rest.

Valeria is arguably the most successful writer in Woodburn High School history. Her work has been published widely—most notably by the American Academy of Poets where you will see her name alongside Ada Limón, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Richard Blanco.

However, Valeria is so much more than a great writer; she thinks deeply and leads with her head and heart.



Valeria Ruiz Tapia performs the title poem of Literary Arts annual anthology of Oregon student writers at the 2024 Portland Book Festival. November 2, 2024

Karl Price graduated from Woodburn High School with the class of 2024 where he was the class's valedictorian and athlete of the year.

Karl was always 100% unapologetically his true self, and he confidently shared his thoughts and beliefs even when they were vastly different from his peers. He didn't hesitate to speak about his deep faith and desire to live the life that God had intended for him.

Karl got into his dream college, Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah; however, he delayed his entry so he could serve his mission in Argentina.

As you can see in the photo, Karl isn't the largest person, but I've yet to meet someone with a bigger heart and commitment to serving the world.



Karl Price, 2024 WHS Valedictorian, is seen here working on a service project during his mission in Buenos Aires, Argentina. December 2024.



“I think it’s powerful hearing from someone with a similar background. In a small town, you’re really only exposed to a handful of careers. I want these kids to know what’s out there for them.”

—*Thalia Padilla-Lazos*

Dr. Thalia Padilla-Lazos grew up in Woodburn watching her mom use traditional medicine to help members of her community. After graduating from the University of Oregon, she went on to medical school at Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland.

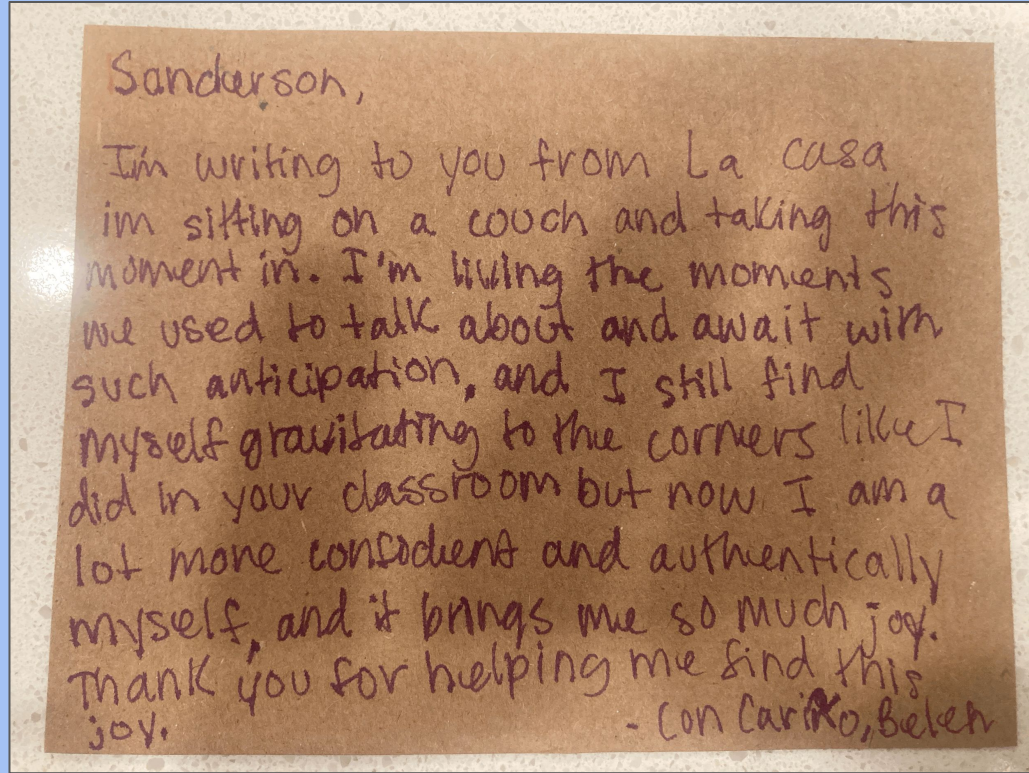
The Oregon Association of Latino Administrators annually bring together educators and leaders to learn, share, and be in community with others who are patient about serving the Latino/a/e community.

However, the vast majority of the presentations and sessions are adults talking about young people.

Woodburn Vocal Justice amplifies the voices of students as they are the presenters while attendees become the students, learning about the power of counternarrative storytelling to reclaim our stories and push back against the forces of oppression that want to silence us.



Students from Charles Sanderson's Vocal Justice class pose at the Oregon Association of Latino Administrators Conference.



Above; A handwritten note from Belen Mendoza Cortes to her former teacher Charles Sanderson. September, 2024. Right: Belen Mendoza Cortes performs in front of two thousand people at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall.

