

In a place like Woodburn it can be easy to assume that everyone shares the same story: immigrant roots, similar cultures, families and similar struggles. But when you look closer, you realize that within our community and shared experiences, each person carries something uniquely their own.

There's authenticity and power all around. In the way people are kind to each other, in the way they celebrate their roots, hold on to their traditions, in the art they create, the hospitality they show, the resilience they carry without mentioning it or maybe even without realizing it. So many stories that may seem ordinary at first but are actually full of extraordinary people. This slideshow made me reflect and reminded me that even if sometimes our backgrounds overlap, our voices, dreams, and journeys are all deeply personal. If we listen closely and try to see others fully, we begin to understand the richness and beauty that lives in each person's story. And there are many in Woodburn.

Sandra Lopez is a Mexican American who grew up in Woodburn and has strong roots in Oaxaca. She speaks both English and Spanish, goes to Chemeketa Community College, and works five days a week at a local gym, where even through her work uniform, I can see her unique style and special spark. Her story may sound like many in Woodburn, but she is far from ordinary. Sandra is a true artist in every sense, from her unique thrifted outfits to her growing collection of film and video work, her creativity shows in everything she does. She is thoughtful, expressive, and full of care, and there is something magnetic and unique about the way she moves through the world, she creates art because she's passionate and not because she expects anything from it, but still, she works with several vendors, brands and people who ask her for promotions. More than just creative, Sandra is kind and always ready to help and advocate for others. She is the sweetest and one of the most talented people I know, and she reminds me that being soft, smart and authentic is a strength, and that there is unexpected beauty in stories we think we've already heard.



Sandra posing for her film collection of Mexico. This is the only picture where she is not behind the camera but she did all the creative direction.

During my first year in the U.S., when I didn't know anyone and lunch felt like the loneliest part of the day, Quetzalli sat next to me. She didn't just offer me company that year but also a sense of belonging. A Mexican American student from Woodburn, Quetzalli has straight A's and plans to attend Chemeketa to stay close to her family, but her education goes far beyond the classroom. She is deeply connected to her culture, dancing Danza Azteca alongside her family since very young, playing instruments, and performing in mariachi with a grace and pride that radiates. Her sweetness and pride in who she is is inspiring in a world that often pressures young people to assimilate or shrink themselves, especially those with indigenous heritage. Quetzalli does the opposite. She is a reminder that culture is not something to hide, but to celebrate, and her story showcases the importance of connecting with our native indigenous roots, something not a lot of people do, making her extraordinarily unique and beautiful.



Quetzalli presenting with her group of Danza Azteca at the Yakima National Indian Reservation.

Mr. Sanderson is the kind of teacher whose impact can't be measured by awards, although he has them. However, what makes him extraordinary goes beyond lesson plans. He is not a regular English teacher who will show you the steps to write an essay or lower your grade for not having a clear thesis. He highlights the value of writing from the heart and speaking one's truth, leading to many of his students constantly winning significant local and national awards throughout the years, more than any other teacher in Woodburn High School. He has played a direct role in their success, not just as a teacher, but as someone who believes deeply in their voices.

In his Creative Writing and Vocal Justice classes, he creates something rare: a space where students feel truly seen and heard. As a Vocal Justice Teaching Fellow and the 2020 Oregon Teacher of the Year for the Willamette Region, he is constantly evolving, but his mission stays the same: to help students become powerful storytellers, advocates, and leaders. He is constantly encouraging students to reflect on themselves, understand others, and build real empathy and that belief he holds and shows in authenticity has changed lives, including mine. Mr. Sanderson doesn't just teach writing; he teaches people how to take up space, use their voice, and write their truth with courage.

Woodburn High School may seem like a regular school, but in reality it has one of the most extraordinary teachers there is.



Charles Sanderson poses with his student Enrrique Vazquez at Woodburn High School's graduation ceremony. June 8, 2024