



WE CAN
CHOOSE

THE POWER OF CHOICE

ISSUE 9 – WINTER 2021

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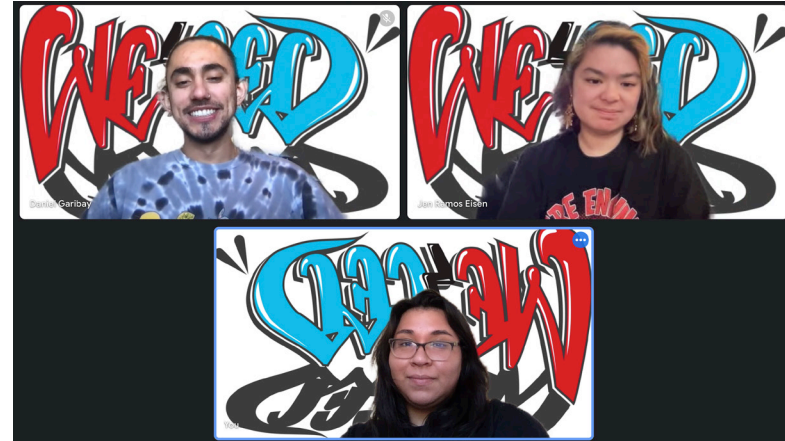
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FROM THE EDITOR,

In this ninth issue of the We 'Ced Youth Media Publication the stories reflected demonstrate that young people of Merced do not shy away from choices that are difficult. Having the ability to make choices has always been a privilege and with an amplified range of life threatening factors, such as being considered an essential worker, the privilege of choice has been more exposed. In a time where choice is influenced by many factors, including a global pandemic, political turmoil and a climate crisis, young people continue to face life's turning points such as transferring to college, coming out and living with grief. They manifest strength and confidence to make choices that will positively impact their lives and the lives of their community. As trusted adults mentoring the reporters of the We 'Ced Youth Media cohort we have been grateful to accompany the young people throughout their life stages and see the personal reflection as well as growth they have made through being storytellers with We 'Ced Youth Media. We are also grateful to the readers for following the stories shared by the youth of Merced and have faith that readers will continue witnessing the evolution of young people through our publications and events. Thank you.

THE WE 'CED TEAM



My name is **Akina Westmoreland**, I am 20 years old and my hometown is Merced, Ca and I am a story teller because I feel like it is important to hear people's voices and be able to hear the truth and speak the

truth and spread awareness about things that matter to my community. What storytelling means to me is being able to share stories to share peoples real life stories and experiences, as well as using storytelling to spread awareness about important things that go on in my community.



My name is **Cyana Price Gilkey** and I'm 17 years old. My hometown is Atwater, California and storytelling means a lot to me because it sheds light on the stuff that affects my community, life, and experiences.



My name is **Addison Shane**, and I am 12-years-old, and I am a 7th grader at Hoover Middle School in Merced, Calif.. I am a storyteller because I like to be able to share stories with other people. To me, storytelling means to share peoples stories, if they are true or not.



My name is **Raymi** & I am 17 years old and live in Merced. To me, storytelling means giving your perspective of an event and sharing it with your community. I tell stories to better understand my community and engage the members.



Natalia Stewart 14, Sophomore @Golden Valley High School

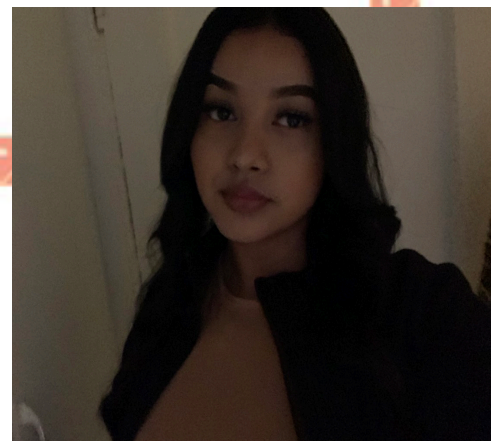


My name is **Elliot** and I'm from Merced and storytelling is cool because it is like freedom to do anything.



I am **Ana Quintana-Ceja**, 16, a senior at Golden Valley High School, and lifelong resident of Merced, Calif.. Storytelling has proven to me to be of great importance to me because it has shown me how much power comes from storytelling. After fearing for very long to make my story heard, storytelling

has given me the opportunity to share.



My name is **Laisha Fernandez**, I am 17-years-old and I don't really have a home town. I was always moving. I am a storyteller because of the stuff that I went through. I enjoy storytelling because it educates other people about myself. I think it's very important to get

to know people and really get to know where they came from.



I am **Malachi Sanchez**, I'm 17, and a senior at El Capitan High School in Merced, Calif.. Storytelling has been an outlet for me ever since I was a child, but I remember taking particular interest in it when I was in sixth grade. I had a lot of pent up emotions at the time, and it was a really good coping

mechanism for me to just vent it out through characters, and the hardships I made them face. These days I've taken my writing abilities and started using them to keep people updated on the current happenings in the world because I believe everyone has a right to information.

Hello, my name is **Ace**. I am 11 years old and my hometown is Merced. I'm a storyteller because I want to make a manga in the future. Storytelling for me is to write a story about many things, a true or fake story, fairies or about how lions live.



Nevaeh Mendoza, 17, senior at Merced High School in Merced, Calif. . For me, storytelling has been a creative outlet, and

has always been a way for me to express myself. What storytelling means to me is to display your thoughts and creativity in a written display, and to share these with others.

My name is **Sunshyne Bond**. I am 17-years-old, I graduated from Le Grand High School in Jun. 2021 in Le Grand, Calif. Storytelling to me is a way to express myself. I am a storyteller because it helps me understand whatever it is I'm telling the story about.



Hello! My name is **Rachel Livinal**, I am 19 years old and from Merced. I am a storyteller because I have always found strength in telling stories that aren't often told and I believe it is the key to a more informed society. To me, storytelling means giving people a voice, which is one of the most vital things we can have.

My name is **Brijeanae Foster**, I'm originally from Vallejo, Calif. just two hours north of Merced in the Bay Area. I am a storyteller because I have experienced so many things in my short 24 years of life and love finding new ways to share myself through my work. I have the ability to connect with others regardless of background and make connections that will go beyond words. I enjoy sharing experiences that other individuals may learn from so there is an opportunity to learn to be just as vulnerable. Storytelling is important to me because it allows us to essentially travel in time without the stress of physically being present in that moment but having the space to safely share and express.



TRANSFERRING OUT OF MERCED COLLEGE: *Confusion, a Mystery, Little Transparency*

by Rachel Livinal

I remember the day I got the email. The subject read, “A message regarding your admissions status” from the Cal Poly University Admissions in San Luis Obispo. It had been my dream school since my junior year of high school when I discovered all I ever wanted was to be a journalist. Up until that point, I was sure I would get in. I had all of the qualifications: I was a transfer student, I had a 4.0 GPA, 60 units to transfer with, and a ton of work experience. All I needed was an official offer. As I opened the email and read the contents, I realized that what everyone always told me was a 100% guarantee into the school of my dreams, was far from the reality I was now faced with.

Back in October 2020, I logged onto the Cal State University enrollment website. Even though applications weren’t required until around December, I’ve always been an early bird when it comes to things involving school, and especially enrollment in my dream school. This website led me on a trail of questions, asking for my GPA, the units I had taken and was planning to take, as well as some of my parent’s financial information. Nothing was out of the ordinary and I submitted my application about a month before the deadline. I decided to apply to five schools: [Cal Poly](#), [San Diego State University](#), [Long Beach State](#), [Cal State Fullerton](#), and [Fresno State](#), all in that order of preference. Although I was

beyond sure I would get into my first or second choice, I thought it was safe to have some backups.

Cecilia Medina, a current student and Merced College graduate at UC Merced, applied to five as well, being accepted into most of them, and choosing to attend the local UC because of the comfort of it. However, Cecilia did not get accepted into all of those schools, being rejected from UC Irvine and UC San Diego, two highly impacted schools. She explains her idea of why this might have happened,

“I am a pretty good student, but my very first semester [at Merced] College, I didn’t do very well,” Cecilia said. “We actually had a few family members pass away and it was really hard. I ended up getting all C’s my very first semester. So I feel like the C’s I have had, a little bit to do with why I wasn’t accepted... I did put it in my application for my reasoning, why, but I feel like that might’ve had something to do with it.”

For me, I followed the same route of acceptance and rejections, being

accepted into every school that I applied to that was not highly impacted and competitive. But even though I followed the same route as Cecilia, I decided to take it a step further, and ask both of the schools I was rejected from, San Diego State and Cal Poly, [why I was rejected](#) as well as file an appeal with Cal Poly. Both schools told me that I had everything I needed, except for one thing: a class “required” in the Journalism program, my intended major, which I physically could not take at Merced College because of the school’s phasing out of the major. The root of the problem for me was access, and I didn’t want to go down without a fight.

According to a local journalist, Jen Ramos, [Merced College did host a journalism class at one point in time](#). Jen describes their experience back in 2005-2009.


“I remember towards the end of high school they kept cutting down the number of journalism classes,” Ramos said. “One semester seeing maybe four journalism classes and then the next semester only seeing three. And it just kept being less until there was none.”

[The final year Journalism was offered as a major at Merced College was in 2010, and it has never returned since. But why would they phase it out?](#)

“In general, not a lot of people were interested. It seemed like it was just there [as] an intro class [to] see how it was, but in general it just wasn’t something that people wanted to take.”

This transcends in all educational realms, as Ramos often noticed there not being a school newspaper that





stayed permanently. Throughout my high school years, Journalism took a rocky course, with El Capitan High School having a school newspaper all four years of my highschool career through sheer willpower by a select few to keep it running. Without that paper, there was no school newspaper throughout the entire district. Our Journalism class didn't even last more than a year. While it was there, students appreciated it, but since it didn't go with the educational goals of the high school as a whole, it was cut, never to return again.

Because of this, I was advised to major in English, seeing it as a similar major to Journalism. So for my case, what could I have done to ensure my admission at my dream school? According to Steve Clark, the only transfer counselor at Merced College, it would've meant a change.

"We can help them get the prerequisites for that program, but that's not really a transfer," Clark said. "That's more of students moving to a different community college."

I was able to go to Merced College for free due to the California Promise grant, which allows every student who goes to their local community college full time free of tuition fees for up to two years. If I had known I had to take this class, I could have moved to a community college which had the class, but there's a problem with that: **full tuition costs and a large uprooting in my life. Even then, admission is not guaranteed.**

The biggest change from my initial knowledge of the transferring process to my current state, is the ability to receive credits. When going to a community college, it is preached that admission to a four year, guarantees a student 60 or more credits, allowing them to start as a junior at their four-year. This is usually known as obtaining an AD-T (Associate Degree for Transfer), it is highly recommended in the community college community. But although it is said that you should receive all of your credits, that sometimes is not the case. Cecilia states,

"At the community college, I took statistics and that's a requirement for my major. And, at UC Merced, I ended up having to take sociological statistics, which is basically the same class. And they had told me that statistics would cover it and it would be fine."

Of course, under the impression that her Merced College counselors told her, she believed all of her lower division credits would transfer no problem, especially coming from

one local school to another, and possessing the same major, sociology.

"My counselor was the one that brought it up to me when she let me know that there are still like a few lower division courses that I needed to complete," Cecilia said. "I was under the impression I had finished all of my lower division, so it was a little bit frustrating because I'm currently taking a summer semester right now and I take at least four classes each semester at UC Merced."

These summer courses are not covered in financial aid, which ended up costing Cecilia \$1600, which she wasn't aware of, and might not have needed to take in the first place if she had known some classes wouldn't transfer over.

As for me, I was denied admission to my two dream schools of course, but I've also dealt with many frustrations in having credits transfer over to Long Beach State. Throughout the last two months, I have had to fight to get my AP credit transferred and my dual enrollment classes from high school, all involving jumping through many hoops, several of which led me to dead ends in never ending automated voice boxes or written requests which took weeks to receive answers.

According to UNIVSTATS, the rate of graduation from Merced College 30.47%. The transfer-out rate, meaning the number of students to transfer out to another institution (more than likely a four-year institution), is 6.24%. That is one out of every 5 students.

I've often wondered what a possible improvement could be to all these issues and the main root of it is misinformation. Clark not only happens to be the only transfer specialized counselor on Merced College's campus (there is one more on the Los Banos campus), but he also has stated that there could be more advertisement for academic counseling on campus. I found Clark from a friend, but without that friend, I would have been lost going into my last year on campus.

Furthermore, Clark explained that every slot of time in his work day is filled with students seeking help. Possible solutions could be found in hiring more counselors specialized in transfers, and more advertising of these specialized counselors, as well as the truths of a transfer from a community college to a four-year university. When it comes to education, students shouldn't be left in the dark and they should never have to try to figure out the incredibly complex enrollment system on their own.

WHAT IT TAKES TO FEEL LIKE ME

by **Malachi Sanchez**

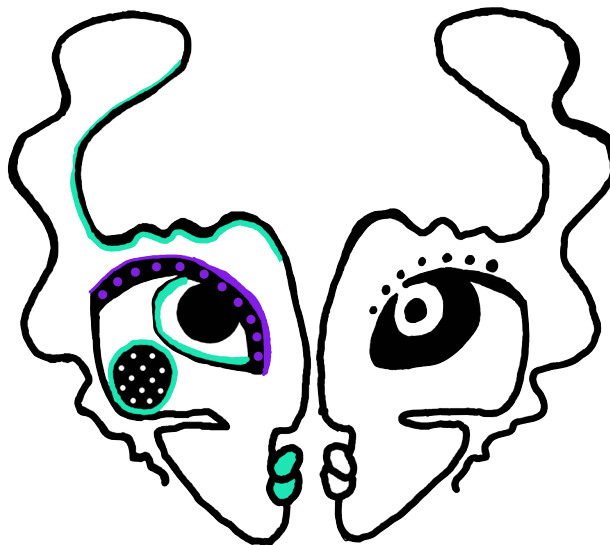
When you have an especially religious family, certain things are expected to be stigmatised. [Pre-marital sex, abortion, atheism, having bad mental health, and in my case especially, anything related to being lgbt.](#) And as the stories usually go, children brought up under these conditions tend to go out of their way to explore them. Both of my sisters are bisexual, and it seemed almost easy for them to figure that out. Unfortunately, it was never that easy for me, everything always seemed so much more complex than just my sexuality.

One day, a long time friend of mine and I were having a sleepover. It was something we did all the time, them, their brother and I. But something odd happened this time. When addressing me and their brother, [my friend used “he” when they were referring to me.](#) They apologized profusely, and I brushed it off with a laugh, but something about it stuck with me. I’d known since sixth grade, after many crushes on fictional characters I’d forced myself to have so I’d fit in with the other girls at my school, that I liked more than just boys. I’d settled with lesbian, seeing as I’d never had a crush on a boy before, but was open to changing that if I ever needed to.

But now, during this sleepover during my freshman year of high school, was the first time I’d questioned my gender identity.

It seemed like I had scaled a mountain to be comfortable calling myself a

lesbian, so I wasn’t excited to try and conquer what gender identity I was comfortable with, but I am nothing if not determined. [I wanted to explore all parts of myself, and try my best to know myself inside and out.](#) If that meant figuring out my pronouns, then so be it.



I’d always been vaguely uncomfortable looking at myself in the mirror, but I had always chalked it up to self esteem issues, something else I’d always struggled with. I was always overly conscious about my chest, trying my best to cover it in big hoodies or wearing eye-catching pants to draw people’s eyes there instead of to my shirt.

I wasn’t really sure where to start when trying to figure out my identity, but I started by undressing, and looking at myself in the mirror. What parts of me did I like, what parts of me could I not bear to look at, and why? Starting with my face, I looked at my hair: short, about chin length. It used to be really long and tangled because I could never


bring myself to brush it. It was better short, but it still made me feel bad, I didn’t like it that much. My face as a whole though? I liked that. My lips are full, and my eyes are a nice shape. I look cute when I smile. I liked my face then, and I still do all these years later.

[Moving to my chest, I didn’t like one bit of that.](#) I went out of my way to hide it more often than not. When I was doing this, I remembered odd things I’d done in the previous years to hide it: binding with the wraps given to me when I fractured my ankle in 6th grade, wearing two sports bras when I was in seventh grade even though it was hard to breathe. I’d always wanted my chest to be flatter, no matter what. Maybe I should have realized I wasn’t cisgendered sooner.

Moving lower still, my stomach was cute. A bit round, but I liked it that way. I was told regularly I give good hugs, and I knew my size added to that. I like my stomach. Lower than that I entirely skipped; I didn’t need to stare at it to know I hated what was in between my legs and everything that came along with it.

Knowing what I knew, I asked my friend to test out different pronouns and names with me over a period of months. I figured out I’m a boy, use he/him pronouns, and settled on a new name that I finally felt actually fit me. [It was liberating, finally knowing who I am.](#)

But, now that I knew, what next? The first thing I did with the new knowledge was come out to my at-the-time girlfriend. It wasn’t easy, and I kept pushing it off. I pushed it off, in fact, for four months. I’d known her for nearly two years, but I still didn’t tell her for a very long time. I asked her to take a walk with me, and after some



background storytelling and benign conversation, I told her my name and my identity. I wanted her to know, and she was happy I told her. That was in the middle of my sophomore year of high school. *She went home that night and did research on how to best support me, asked the next day if I preferred being called cute or handsome, things of that vein.* It felt incredible to have someone call me by my real name outside of my friends house. Almost like it made the whole thing real, I'd finally figured out why I was so uncomfortable in my skin and someone was finally saying to me "I support you."

Not many people in my family would be able to find out, I knew that for certain. My dad is a preacher, my mom a worship leader, my grandparents are long time church attendees. It wasn't practical, so I never planned on telling them. My older sister, however, was different. She's a bit slow on the uptake, something she readily admits, but when she told me she was bisexual, I knew that even if she didn't understand, she'd support me. So one night, towards the end of my sophomore year, I told her.

She was surprised, asked me how long I'd known, and what it was like. I explained everything to her, the constant discomfort, the weird feeling of even living in my own skin. I ended up crying that night, and so did she. *It was a really big weight off my chest,* and hearing her call me her little brother in front of her friends gave me a sense of euphoria I'd never knew I could even achieve.

For a really long time, that was it; I hadn't come out to anyone new, and the only other change I'd made was realizing I was asexual after researching different labels and finding

that asexual fit me surprisingly well. Telling my parents wasn't something I anticipated doing until I had moved out, seeing as they aren't very supportive of LGBT people.

But something changed going into my junior year of high school. I'm not sure what, but I was tired of only being called my name around my friends. *I wanted to be called my real name any time I was away from my family, and the first step to doing that was telling my teachers.* All of my teachers seemed nice enough, and within a few weeks I was sure they would be understanding.

I started with my computer graphics teacher, final period of the day, and worked backwards. Eventually, all my teachers knew, whether it be from an email or telling them after class, and they all were understanding. I was pleasantly surprised, but happy that everything went smoothly. There would be an occasional slip of the tongue, but the teacher would correct themselves and apologize right after.

When that happened, I truly thought I was completely satisfied. My sister knew, my friends knew, and my teachers knew. I was happy and satisfied like that, which is why I was surprised to be called into the principal's office one day. He said my math teacher had told him about me being transgender, and I went stiff. I was scared they were going to tell my parents, or get me into trouble. I think he saw my fear, because he was quick to reassure me that everything was okay. He said that a member from the school board was coming down to the school to help me with the proper procedures and paperwork for this situation.

I was confused, what did that mean? The principal explained that, once the

paperwork was completed, I wouldn't have to come out to my teachers again next year, and they could put my real name on Aeries. I didn't want that second part to happen, which I vehemently explained to him, and I was told that everything would be worked out later in the day at my meeting with the board member.

When I met with the man from the school board, he asked me for my preferred name and pronouns, and explained all the benefits from having this documented. It was mostly the same as what the principal had told me earlier. The only uncomfortable part of the meeting was when he said that if they put my name on Aeries, and my parents see it, it could open up a conversation for us where I could come out to them. "It's not good to stay in hiding, it takes a toll on everyone," he said. When I explained how dangerous that could be to me, however, he did lighten up and promise that whenever the office called home they would call me my legal name, but teachers would refer to me as my preferred name. I was a bit sad I had to go as far to explain why I couldn't be outed, but I was happy when I finally got through to them. It was a big weight off my shoulders.

Since then, nothing has really changed. My teachers are still respectful, correcting any slip ups, and my safety is still ensured. Knowing I have such supportive people around me has definitely made finding and coming to terms with who I am a lot easier. I'm really grateful that I've been able to start feeling more comfortable in my skin. It will still be a long process, but the steps I've made over the last few years are nothing to sneeze at either.

POWER

by Akina Westmoreland

Ever since I was young, how I elected to deal with loss was difficult for me to fully grasp. As a kid I didn't understand the chaos that happens in life. **As time passes you grow up and see that everything slowly makes sense somehow.** As a kid one has a wall of innocence that shields you from all the violence, death and sadness. As one grows up the shield breaks and it's a feeling I could never really accept, it came with the realization that my life is going to change. As I was growing day by day, month by month and year by year I experienced death myself. When I was born I was diagnosed with absence seizures (formerly known as 'petit mal' seizures), it wasn't until I was older that I learned the correct term for the seizures. Due to the lack of resources and information provided to me from physicians; I knew them as silent seizures, my family always called them "granny seizures".

I also learned, according to cdc.gov, **'silent' seizures affect about two of every 1,000 people.** Absence seizures are caused by abnormal and intense electrical activity in the brain. Stress could cause me to have a seizure and everytime i would have a seizure my mother would tell me that I died. I've died nine times in my life from the seizures. Those will always be the first experience with death I have ever had. It almost feels like I've been in a race with a lion.

I've grown up and I have been a more observant person. I used to always watch people around me and how they chose to deal with the pain of loss in their lives. It wasn't always positive, many times their coping strategies just made things more painful and were negative. I used to try to do the things my family would do to cope with their anger, loss and sadness. I thought those ways would work for me but I never really understood that the difficulties you come across in life take time to heal and can be helped with positive coping strategies. My life has always had an intimate relationship with death and as I get older and live my life

death is like a lion that follows me around waiting to spring and catch its prey.

For me, death always waits until the right time to pounce, as if I haven't suffered enough. Death can happen randomly and I never know when it's going to happen. Death in my life has a cycle that happens in 3's so when I lose one person in my life two more people leave as well. Time passes and it feels like good things are all that happen in the present moment but then death, with its lion claws, will cut into my life. Crashing my joy. Only to bring me down again into this black hole full of sorrow, emptiness, sadness, anger, and confusion. everytime i go down this hole it almost feels as

if I'm preparing for the worst. **It's my sad truth and it's never going to be an easy process to accept for me but my relationship with death has always been a rollercoaster.**



This past year has also been a roller coaster for us all! I know I am not the only one who has experienced death, in 2020 alone, specifically in California there have been 68,087 (as of Sept. 26) deaths according to the CDC due to Covid-19. While I have had an ongoing experience with death, the people who have lost significant others to Covid, this may be the beginning for them to create a relationship with death. As we continue to lose loved ones or parts of ourselves to circumstances; it is a part of life. Death is a topic that can be uncomfortable due to the emotional

toll that it requires people to endure and overcome for many different circumstances.

In the United States, there have been over 686,639 (as of Sept. 26) people who have died because of covid.

It's something that we are all experiencing and keep experiencing. We are all experiencing death collectively, whether it's sacrificing our normalcy. Death is very personal to us all and I don't always have the right words or methods to keep me optimistic but often times when I think of my mother, that is the best motivation for me to stay alive and continue coexisting with death. What helps me continue is understanding that being vulnerable is a strength and a part of healing.

WHAT POSITIVE PERSONAL CHOICES HAVE YOU MADE FOR YOURSELF?

Sunshyne Bond 17 Le Grand, Calif.

A positive choice I've made for myself is going to the **gym** during the week at 8 a.m. This is a positive choice for me because when I workout, I feel healthy.



Laisha Fernandez, 17

Positive choices I've made for myself is getting into **school activities** more. I've joined a club this year and I'm trying out for **softball**. I'm trying to get out of my comfort zone and try new things. Having fun this year is one of my goals.



Nevaeh Mendoza, 17

A positive choice that I have made for myself is to **become more open with the people around me**. Since childhood I've been a more introverted personality, and it hasn't led to any personal growth. Just recently, within the past year I have grown so much as a person just by changing my closed off mindset. That same mindset made me miss so many opportunities when I was younger, purely out of fear of other people. Now that I have gotten myself out of this I feel like I'm already making changes for the better, interacting with my peers, and teachers, and being more involved.

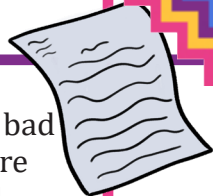
Raymi Boza

Positive personal choices I have made for myself are **making a schedule** where I do things that I enjoy, and things that will benefit me in the future. Someone that motivates me to make positive decisions for myself are my parents and the people I surround myself with, such as my friends.



Ana Quintana-Ceja, 16

Senior at GV - Positive choices are difficult especially in a world with so much hate and bad things going on. I would be able to make more positive choices for myself if we had a world where everyone was making positive choices for themselves and others. Despite that, I have been able to make small positive actions because I have control over the actions I make. One positive change I am proud of is **participating more in my classes** like by answering the questions and leading the class discussion. I know that it feels good to be a leader at school and hopefully this small but positive change I do can help others to possibly also make positive changes.



Ace

Some positive choices that I made were making **new friends** and doing my **school work**. My friends Mars, Emma/Gemini are the ones who motivate me to make positive choices in my life.



Natalia Stewart

One of my main positive choices I've made for myself is to **hang around and socialize with people I like** and know because that is my main thing in my mental health being around people who bring me up and give me constructive criticism instead of just criticizing me or letting them put all of there negative emotions on me or using me as a stress ball for there own personal feelings and ways to cope. What would motivate me to make positive changes in my life is knowing how positive feelings feel so it's easier to motivate myself and strive to do those things to make me happy mentally and physically.

WHAT WOULD MOTIVATE YOU TO MAKE POSITIVE CHOICES FOR YOUR LIFE?

REMINDE ME OF ME

by **Brijeanae Foster**

I've always considered music to be a powerful means of connecting with those that came before me. Music has been there for my family in the saddest and most rewarding of times. From everything to holidays, BBQs, funerals and birthdays. Growing up in the Bay Area in Vallejo, heavily influenced me to want to continue building community and looking out for one another. [Wednesday evenings and Saturdays on Georgia Street, where I witnessed live music set the tone for the way I would love and interact with any one set in my path.](#) It shaped my music taste and shaped my worldly experiences which prepared me to be who I am today. Coming to college in the Central Valley is something I will continue to reminisce on and celebrate through my love of music. I took the time to find out what music means for me and what it offers me, which is a great gift of groundedness. My music taste is all across the board, which led me to several directions and experiences in my life.

Some experiences of significance are from my time as an undergrad here at UC Merced, I really stepped into a new level of my love for music. This was shortly after switching majors and becoming one of the first students to take on the Global Arts Studies major. We covered a variety of topics that coincide with understanding multimedia's connections when referring to colonialism, globalization, commercialism and industrialization. [I learned not only the deep history behind music and its hold on society, but the important role it continues to play in my life.](#)

As a UC student, I found comfort in music that also applied into my personal life. I remember countless stressful and also happy memorable situations that music helped me through.

Music is therapeutic, comforting, motivational and critical to forms of expression. Every low point I have reached throughout my youth and early adulthood, I turned to music for comfort before I turned to another human.

I remember turning to music after my first experiences with psychosis and manic episodes. After being hospitalized and not properly guided by doctors towards next steps dealing with my circumstances, I turned to music because they only tried to give me pills I had no idea about. I had to make my own way of coping and understanding what I needed to make it through some nights until I found an appropriate psychiatric doctor to meet my needs. Music speaks to me in ways that sometimes no one else can, it gives me advice and answers and doesn't

expect anything back in return. It connects me back to who I remember I was before any uncontrollable thoughts swarmed my mind. I see music as a means of time travel and healthy release.

[Time traveling through music is something I knew was real, but I discovered and witnessed first hand while being an assistant researcher on a Music Memory project during my 2019 summer program UROC-H.](#) I helped collect stories of long time Merced residents throughout the community, some of which have been in Merced for more than 40 years. They reminisce on days way back when they would cruise on 16th Street, a local street in the community that was a gathering place in Merced. At the time it was one of the only spaces for youth to meet up and socialize in Merced.

Music opened a gateway of memories for these participants. It blew my mind to hear memories triggered by music that they knew from the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s from several genres and cultural backgrounds. One participant within the Hmong community here in Merced mentioned how they remembered "Fairgrounds hosted Hmong New Year and the Annual Fair " when they were a young child. The critical need for music as we age is something I took from that summer.

Music is therapeutic, comforting, motivational and critical to forms of expression. Every low and high point I have reached throughout my youth and early adulthood, I have turned to music before I turned to another human. Here is a playlist I turn to when I begin to experience my manic episodes, just to remind me of a time in the past where I felt my best! It grounds me and snaps me back into reality with every track. Feel free to tune in for a listen and follow on Spotify:

Navigating a world that breaks me down for the sake of capitalism day by day just to scrape up money to live on a planet that was gifted. From having to hold down more than one job, finishing college with little to no possibility of finding a position in my area of study and to not being provided reliable health insurance. Access to medical insurance for mental health, and dental are extremely important. My body is literally deteriorating in a system crafted to benefit from creating circumstances that turn people into "successful zombies." When things can't be handled right away I turn to music because the other solutions are not readily available.

[I know I am deserving of happy memories and experiences as well.](#) Music is a part of that journey. That summer as an intern was so fulfilling to me and encouraged me to dive into my own music memory project.



Youth ARPA Rally 2021

On Oct. 18, 2021, Merced young people led a Rally outside Merced Civic Center with the help of the [#FundOurFuture](#) coalition to urge the City of Merced to invest \$3 million of the \$27 million American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in a sustainable youth employment jobs program and a youth guaranteed income program. The coalition is composed of different organizations such as We’Ced Youth Media, Young Revolutionary Front, 99rootz, Youth Outreach and Learning Institute (YOALI), Power California, Affordable Housing Coalition and local young leaders, adult allies and community members. After months of the [#FundOurFuture](#) team canvassing in the neighborhoods of Merced, showing up to Merced City Council and ARPA budget meetings voicing their demands, and doing surveys – City of Merced decided to invest \$1.25 million out of the \$27 million in a Youth Jobs program. Additionally, they also decided to invest \$6.5 million for affordable housing, \$250k for a youth prevention program, and \$1 million stimulus for essential workers. This totalled over \$7 million in investment due to coalition demands. The [#FundOurFuture](#) coalition will continue to fight for a youth guaranteed income program that will serve 250 youth between the ages of 18-24, especially those who are impacted by the juvenile, foster, and criminal justice systems.





El Dia de Los Muertos is a time to honor, remember and nourish the souls of our loved ones who have died and to celebrate their lives on the days of the year when their spirits are believed to return to our world. It is celebrated the first two days of November by setting up an ofrenda, which is an altar designed to remember the departed loved ones. The ofrendas usually include photos and possessions of the deceased along with flowers, candles, calaveras, and their favorite food and drinks. Merced Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) hosted their first annual Dia de los Muertos community altar led by Merced youth on Nov. 2, 2021 at McNamara Park in Merced, Calif. Community members brought photos of their deceased loved ones, participated in a [remembrance circle where they shared the names and memories of their loved ones that had passed](#). Per custom, tamales, pan and coffee were provided. A safe, beautiful space was created where laughter, stories and tears were welcome. YLI is expected to have a 2nd Annual Dia de Los Muertos celebration this year. Stay posted.

DIA DE LOS MUERTOS 2021

SKATING COMPETITION



On Dec 4, 2021, Young Revolutionary Front hosted a skate competition at McNamara Park in Merced, Calif. in order to bring the community closer towards health. [The skating competition brought out a vaccine clinic with the help of Valley Onward and Merced County Public Health in order for the community to get tested, get their vaccine and booster shots.](#) The Central Valley Brown Berets also were present and hosted a warm clothes drive within the skating event in order to distribute clothes to Merced's houseless encampments. There was food, drinks and Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) provided as well as a raffle that included two skateboards and a speaker. Additionally, the youth came together to continue to advocate for youth investments from the city's ARPA allocations, whose demands included the creation of a youth employment program and a UBI program for system-impacted youth.





For about 2 months, YLI youth participants from Moving Forward, Young Revolutionary front and We'Ced Youth Media gathered at the YLI office in downtown Merced to plan and coordinate Merced's first Winter Solstice Ceremony. During planning sessions, youth led rehearsals and art sessions. Youth were guided by YOALI elders in the significance of the cultural practices to prepare for a Winter Solstice Ceremony. [Winter Solstice is the moment](#)

[during the year when the path of the Sun is farthest from the earth.](#) Indigenous cultures believe that the ceremony is offered to thank the sun and mother earth for providing and to offer strength for its return. On December 18th, 2021, Merced held its first Winter Solstice Ceremony at Boys & Girls Club of Merced hosted by Merced young people, Youth Leadership Institute, Maestro Robert Castro (YOALI), Mexica danzantes from across the Central Valley and Bay Area, and were joined by families, residents, City Council members Bertha Perez and Jesse Ornelas, and United Way who provided covid tests. Winter solstice was important for the young people of Merced to host to honor Indigenous practices, to gather and create community, to share the knowledge which offered a new experience and gave residents a chance to reflect on the significance of the ceremony for Indigenous people.

WINTER SOLISTICE 2021