



## Villa Teachers Soaring Above The Mission for a Brighter Future!

Article By Jordan Paggett, Villa Esperanza Services Community Engagement and Volunteer Coordinator



Sal, room 4 teacher (left) and Kahlea, room 6 teacher (right), in front of the S. Mark Taper Multipurpose Room and Tracy & Dick's Schoolhouse.

In the early 1960s, a devoted group of mothers came together to create a loving haven for their children with Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities. One mother transformed her home into an informal school brimming with warmth and compassion. Fueled by love and determination, this small coalition set out on a mission to empower their children through personalized education and unwavering support. Fast forward 63 years: The Villa School continues to serve the Pasadena area and has undergone major renovations. However, the mission remains the same: "Providing love, care, and hope for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families." Much like those mothers, today Villa's school has welcomed dedicated educators who are the heart of Villa School and are making transformative impacts in students' lives. The Villa School is now comprised of a team of exceptional special needs teachers, united by the goal of elevating Villa to new heights. Each day, Villa teachers and instructional aides create a nurturing sanctuary where understanding meets knowledge.

Villa's teachers have diverse backgrounds and have been inspired by different life experiences that have informed their teaching. Two Villa teachers uniquely discovered their love for teaching students with disabilities while spending

time abroad. "I volunteered in Uganda, where I helped out in schools and classrooms. That's when I discovered my true love for education," shares Kahlea, a high school teacher. Sal, a middle school teacher, recalls his transformative junior year abroad: "I took a course called Parenting and Childhood in Scandinavia. My host mother had a son with Down syndrome, marking my first experience interacting with someone who has a disability." Sal reflects on their bond: "All the son wanted was a hug and to play FIFA. This experience solidified my desire to become a special education teacher; it truly opened my eyes."

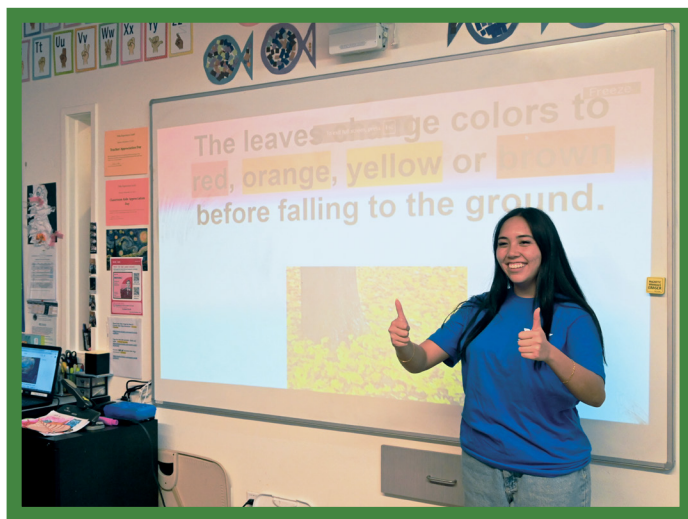
Villa educators bring a genuine sense of care and commitment to their classrooms, fostering teamwork among both peers and mentors. At Villa, the classroom experience is notably enriched by dedicated instructional aides who deliver crucial one-on-one support tailored to meet each student's unique needs, typically outlined in an Individualized Education Program (I.E.P.). This legal document details a child's specific educational requirements and how they will be addressed. This personalized approach improves teaching strategies and helps provide various learning styles, ensuring that every student feels valued. "I believe that the positive energy from our staff resonates profoundly with the students," Kahlea notes. "Their enthusiasm reflects our own, creating a dynamic and motivating learning atmosphere."

**"I want my students to express themselves freely and communicate their needs."**

Khamir, an instructional aide in Room 4, expresses the joy of his role: "I've been with Villa for almost 10 years. Connecting with different kids, understanding their individual personalities, and bringing us all together has kept my job incredibly fulfilling." Together, our teachers and aides nurture a vibrant community where every learner is empowered to thrive.

When students are surrounded by these enthusiastic teachers and aides, it creates an environment ripe for achievement. Our educators are eagerly contemplating their aspirations for this school year. Sal emphasizes the importance of autonomy and self-advocacy in his classroom. "I want my students to express themselves

freely and communicate their needs," he shares, explaining that through the use of TouchChat, an innovative communication app designed to support individuals with speech and language difficulties, more students have opportunities to advocate for themselves.



**Kahlea showing off her SmartBoard during an academic lesson.**

Kahlea highlights the significance of practical life skills that extend beyond Villa's walls. She believes learning essential tasks like using kitchen appliances and simple cooking can empower students long after they graduate. "We conduct cooking lessons every Friday, allowing them to gain confidence in preparing meals for themselves," Kahlea explains, revealing how these sessions equip students with valuable skills for independence.

At our organization, the support for our students extends far beyond the dedicated efforts of our teachers. We proudly offer three specialized services designed to broaden our students' futures through targeted knowledge and skill development. One standout resource is the Hjelte-Phillips Speech & Language Center, which plays a crucial role in fostering communication skills and vocational training. Through one-on-one engagement, the center provides tailored support to help students develop Functional Communication Skills, enabling them to navigate social opportunities with their peers effectively.

We also offer Occupational Therapy through our clinic, which provides comprehensive services tailored to a wide range of challenges. Our program is designed to foster the development of essential skills such as fine motor skills, gross motor skills, hand-eye coordination, and regulation skills. These skills are crucial for success not only in school but also at home and within the community. Both Speech



**Khamir, aide in room 4 giving insight on his work experience.**

and Occupational Therapy provide early intervention for children aged 0-3 to school-based support for individuals aged 4-22.

In addition to our dedicated Speech and Occupational Therapists, we are proud to have a skilled Behavior Interventionist team on board, ready to assist our students with any behavioral challenges they may face, whether in the classroom or during service sessions. Our Behavior Interventionists play a crucial role in enriching our students' learning experiences. They focus on teaching alternative strategies for social interactions, teamwork, and work with OT to help with behavior regulation. By fostering these essential skills, they help create a supportive environment where students can thrive both academically and socially.

The collaboration between our teachers, aides, and specialized therapists exemplifies our commitment to an all-inclusive education. Together, we are dedicated to showing our students that it truly does "take a Villa" to support their growth and development.

As a Villa student steps into Sal's classroom, they'll spot cozy bean bag chairs nestled in the back, ready for sensory stimulation. In Kahlea's class, you'll catch her leading music therapy sessions with her students or overseeing creative projects that adorn the walls. One standout project is the "About Me" assignment, where kids share personal insights about themselves to help

forge friendships among their classmates.

**"I am very proud of you and I love being your teacher."**

When given the chance to inspire their students for the rest of the year, each teacher shared a powerful message that encapsulates their goals. Sal addresses his students: "Every day we show up—remember, it's all about the journey! Consistency is our secret weapon, and I'm thrilled to be on this path with you." Kahlea shares her own words of encouragement for her high schoolers: "I am very proud of you and I love being your teacher. Thank you for always trying and giving your best work. I hope the best for you in life and that you'll have all the opportunities in this world."



**Sal giving a tour on the display of student artwork and assignments.**

Villa extends a sincere thank you to all our dedicated teachers, instructional aides and therapists for their unwavering commitment to our students. We are thrilled to have such passionate and skilled educators who propel Villa's mission forward. With this fresh perspective on what special education at Villa School encompasses, we hope the community keeps in mind Judy Blume's powerful words: "Our fingerprints don't fade from the lives we've touched."

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### VILLA ESPERANZA SERVICES STAFF APPRECIATION



At Villa, we are proud of our amazing team of over 260 dedicated employees who tirelessly ensure the comfort and safety of your loved ones. Their hard work and compassion foster an environment filled with love and hope that transforms lives daily. Through all of our programs, from the school to each of the Adult Services, we thank our staff for the continued dedication to serving our community.

Irene Albeck, previous Villa teacher, current Villa Guild member and Villa parent remarked: "From the beginning Villa Esperanza has been a part of our family and our support system, providing a strong sense of community and friendships. The continuous progress of programs to meet the needs of our son has been a blessing. Villa is the fabric of our family! We are interweaved together to make a beautiful pattern of awareness of our strengths and our ability to lace these strands into a strong investment into the future."

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