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April 6, 2016

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Los Nietos Eighth-grader Overcomes Physical Challenges to Help Lead MESA Program to Regional Competition

Whittier, CA – Los Nietos Middle School eighth-grader Jared Avalos lets his imagination soar each time he meets with classmates for the school's Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement MESA Program, escaping all his day's real challenges.

MESA is particularly meaningful for Avalos, who has trouble walking due to a neurological condition called transverse myelitis. Avalos is unhindered, however, when exploring math and science. His talent for both is helping LNMS send six teams to the MESA Regional Competition on April 8 at UC Irvine.

"I have a lot of fun in MESA because it gives me a chance to create with my friends, and also compete," said Jared, an honors student with a 3.8 G.P.A.

Jared will be competing in the Mouse Trap Car and Prosthetic Arm categories as he engineers projects with his classmates. Los Nietos Middle School has a strong tradition of MESA, which is a part of the school's Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) coursework strand, and has reached the MESA prelims and regionals competitions in each of the last five years.

Jared's road to the competition has been more challenging than most. Three years ago, he suddenly lost the ability to walk, confounding his family. Only after several tests was he diagnosed with transverse myelitis.

Each morning, Jared wakes up an hour early to stretch his legs, an exercise he repeats each evening. He attends physical therapy three times per week and has shown steady improvement. Jared can now walk with the aid of a walker, though he typically travels in a wheelchair. His obstacles have done little to curb his love of soccer and video games like Dragon Ball Z – the kind of game he would like to design someday.

"He never complains. He knows this is just an obstacle in life that he will get through with the help of God, family and the community," said Sergio Avalos, Jared's father. "His experience has helped him relate with others and have empathy, because everyone experiences their own challenges."

Avalos confronted his son's challenge by volunteering at LNMS during all of last year, helping Jared through physical exercises throughout the day.

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"Sergio was always around our campus helping out and assisting Jared in physical education," LNMS Principal Shanonn Zelaya said. "Our District is all about family and the Avaloses are an important part of ours."

Jared is working toward a strong performance this week at the MESA Regionals, though he has already scored a high mark with his community and fellow competitors.

"Jared is a shining example that our children can overcome any obstacle with the right support around them," Los Nietos Superintendent Jonathan Vasquez said. "Our MESA Program is meant to inspire our students to produce their best, but in Jared's case he is inspiring our program."

PHOTO CAPTION:

040617_LOSNIETOS_JAREDAVALOS: Los Nietos eighth-grader Jared Avalos with his mother, Nora, and his father, Sergio. Jared has excelled in the MESA program and beyond despite a neurological condition that makes walking difficult.

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