

Bonita Unified

SCHOOL DISTRICT

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NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

June 5, 2023

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Bonita High School Alumna, Cornell University Student Named School's First National Merit Scholar

SAN DIMAS/LA VERNE – Bonita High School Class of 2022 graduate Verena Padres was in an unusual place when she received the news that she had been named a 2023 National Merit Scholarship winner – Cornell University, where she was assisting in the college's Alpha Cubesat research project.

Padres, who has dreamed of working for NASA since reading a book on female astronauts in elementary school, was one of approximately 840 students across the United States to be named a National Merit scholar, receiving \$2,500 to help cover the cost of her higher education. She is also the first Bonita High School student to ever receive the National Merit Scholarship. Padres, along with her twin sister Ashley, graduated from Bonita in three years; both now attend Cornell.

"We decided on Cornell because of the opportunities," Padres said. "It's a really great engineering school, they have research labs and project teams that you can get involved with, even as an undergraduate, with hands-on experience that can lead to internships and jobs in the industry. I plan to major in mechanical engineering with a minor in either astrobiology or robotics."

As a freshman at Bonita High Padres enrolled in APEX, a cross-curricular honors program limited to 100 students, and took courses in English, science and technology. Padres greatly enjoyed the project-based learning concept, which allowed her to tap into her creative side without setting strict limits on how she came up with solutions for her assignments.

Wanting to expand her knowledge on aviation and rocketry, Padres and her sister joined the Civil Air Patrol at Brackett Field in La Verne, where they received orientation flight training and participated in the Team American Rocketry Challenge (TARC), building model rockets that can lift off and touch down while protecting a raw egg. With their Civil Air Patrol team, the twins earned a trip to the TARC national finals in Virginia in 2022.

Padres was just a freshman when COVID-19 hit, bringing in-person instruction and extracurricular projects to a halt. She liked the idea of graduating early as a way of setting herself apart from her classmates on her path to higher education. Padres considers it a blessing that she is able to attend college with her twin sister.

"We decided to come together primarily to support each other, especially since we were moving to the other side of the country," Padres said. "Although we have different ways of processing information, we understand each other well. I can explain things to her so that she can understand it, and she can do the same for me. We make a great team, and wanted to use that to our advantage while going through the difficult engineering courses we are facing."

MORE

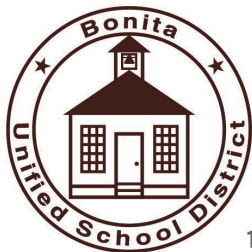


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Padres is enrolled in Cornell's Sibley School of Engineering, and found a home at the Space Systems Design Studio, conducting research for Alpha Cubesat, a light sail-carrying, cube-shaped satellite that is designed to be a stepping stone to our nearest star systems. Alpha will carry the world's first retroreflective solo-flying light sail in a future mission to the Alpha Centauri star system.

Padres is set on a career in space exploration, either in research and development or as an astronaut. Padres is especially inspired by NASA astronaut Christina Koch, who served as flight engineer on the International Space Station for three consecutive expeditions, set a record for longest single spaceflight by a woman with a total of 328 days in space, and who is currently the Mission Specialist for NASA's Artemis II flight to the moon. This summer, Padres will serve an internship with the JPL Mars sample recovery team.

The National Merit Scholarship is an annual scholarship program, for which students qualify based on their Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test scores. Among those named National Merit Scholar recipients are United States Supreme Court justice Elena Kagan and former Microsoft CEO and current Los Angeles Clippers owner Steve Ballmer.

"At a time when her former schoolmates are getting ready to receive their diplomas, Verena Padres has already completed a year of college and is involved with a space exploration project that could greatly enhance what we know about our solar system," Bonita High School Principal Kenny Ritchie said. "Congratulations to Verena on receiving a National Merit Scholarship. She and Ashley serve as role models for all students who want to achieve at the highest levels."

PHOTOS:

BUSD_MERITSCHOLAR1: Bonita High School Class of 2022 graduates Verena (left) and Ashley (right) Padres stand in front of the clock tower at Cornell University. Verena was recently selected as a 2023 National Merit Scholar, receiving \$2,500 to help pay for her college education. Verena is majoring in mechanical engineering and working toward a career in space exploration.

BUSD_MERITSCHOLAR2: Bonita High School Class of 2022 graduate Verena Padres was named a 2023 National Merit Scholar, receiving \$2,500 to help pay for her college education. Verena (left) and her twin sister, Ashley (right), both attend Cornell University after graduating from Bonita in three years. While at Bonita, Verena and Ashley were members of the Civil Air Patrol, where they received orientation flight training and participated in the American Rocketry Challenge.

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