



## Press Release

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Resiliency and Maturity Earn Pioneer High Student Recognition from Board, Titan Community**

**WHITTIER** – Pioneer High School senior Lazarus Casillas endured great emotional hardship after the death of his mother six years ago, a struggle that spurred academic instability during his formative middle school years. Since finding a home at Pioneer, he has emerged as a student leader whose resilience and maturity serve as an inspiration to his schoolmates and the Titan faculty and staff.

Through his personal resolve and with copious assistance from the staff in the Student Well-Being Program – a District mental wellness program that provides students and their families with social emotional support – Casillas transformed himself into a model student.

“Lazarus Casillas is the epitome of the word resilience,” Principal Lilia Bozigian said. “As Lazarus has worked through his personal issues, he has continued to look for ways to keep himself motivated in school and fill the voids he was missing. His constant drive and dedication to self-improvement leaves us expecting great things from Lazarus.”

The Whittier Union High School District Board of Trustees on Feb. 14 recognized Casillas for his character and perseverance, awarding him an Award of Merit.

“To me, resiliency means to stay strong even when things are tough,” Casillas said. “Over time, we learn to get over those obstacles and make a decision of who we want to be in life. Pioneer has helped me in one way or another.”

Casillas, the second eldest of five siblings, credits the Student Well-Being Program for helping him through an especially rough period in his sophomore year when he struggled emotionally and was in much need of support. Casillas found a lifeline in the staff, who warmly welcomed him and lent a ready ear as he discussed his personal issues and received the professional care he needed.

Despite facing extreme challenges, Casillas rallied academically, pushing himself to enroll in honors and Advanced Placement classes. Building a connection with the Titan athletic staff, Casillas tried out for and made the varsity football team. Casillas was recently named “Most Inspirational Team Member” by the Titan football team.

Casillas expresses much gratitude for the Pioneer faculty and staff who provided him with a safe and secure environment that enabled him to realize a love for school. He called out his academic counselor,

Araceli Del Valle, Dean of Students Craig Fox and Titan football coach Chuck Willig for delivering the inspiration he needed to mature and grow as a person.

“The staff has always listened without judgment,” Casillas said. “I’ve always thought of them as family.”

Eager to continue his education, Casillas has applied to over a half-dozen universities, including UC Berkeley and UCLA, looking toward a future in law enforcement or family therapy.

The Student Well-Being Program was established in 2015 to assist in the total development of each student, incorporating emotional, physical, social and intellectual well-being to increase their academic achievement and support families to help their children succeed. The program includes wellness centers, counseling services and referrals.

“Lazarus Casillas is a prime example of the students our District vows to help every day, instilling in them resiliency and a will to persevere in and out of the classroom,” Superintendent Martin Plourde said. “The transformation Lazarus has made in his life in part speaks to the availability and dedication of our teachers and staff, who care deeply about our students.”

**PHOTO CAPTION:**

**022217\_WUHSD\_CASILLAS:** Pioneer High School senior Lazarus Casillas was recognized for his character and perseverance by the Whittier Union High School District Board of Trustees on Feb. 14. He is pictured with Pioneer High School Dean of Students Craig Fox, left, counselor Araceli Del Valle and Principal Lilia Bozigian.

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*The Whittier Union High School District provides all students with an engaging, quality standards-based instructional program delivered by a well-trained staff resulting in improved student achievement. Whittier Union High School District works to achieve and maintain excellence in providing a comprehensive education for all students.*

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