

people |

Vibrant, driven, curious: Paula Garcia breaks boundaries

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As a first-generation and formerly-undocumented Latina, Garcia intends to spend her life representing minority groups in the technology industry after earning her bachelor's and master's degrees and eventually her PhD.

"My dad and mom brought me to the United States from Mexico with \$500 in their pockets when I was three years old," senior Paula Garcia said. "Things there were very violent — they still are — and they did not want to raise me in a place where I would not be safe, so we moved here. Their sacrifice is my main motivator."

Garcia's passion in her four years at MVHS is clear: she is an AVID student and Burwen scholar, a dedicated athlete, AP and honors student, leader of several clubs, and an employee at Empoder, among others.

Even in light of challenges that her family has faced, Garcia was al-

ways "responsible, enthusiastic, and smart," as her mother, Ari Tellez, describes her.

At age six, Garcia took on the roles of older sister, tutor, and mentor after her younger brother, Arturo Garcia, was diagnosed with autism at the age of two.

"At the time, [my husband and I] had to work very long hours to pay for [Arturo's] therapy, and [Paula] was always ready to help him with homework," Tellez said. "He has some sensory issues, and she always found the right thing to do to calm him down. She even did her own research about ways to help him."

During these therapy sessions, the siblings of patients would wait with nothing to do. Garcia was the oldest in the group, and she took it upon herself to make a change.

"She started bringing books and crayons, just something to give the kids who were stuck there just like her," Tellez said.

Because of Garcia, the kids interacted with each other more. She

brought the group of families closer to each other, allowing for the formation of a tight-knit community connected by a common therapy group, common goals, and Garcia's positivity.

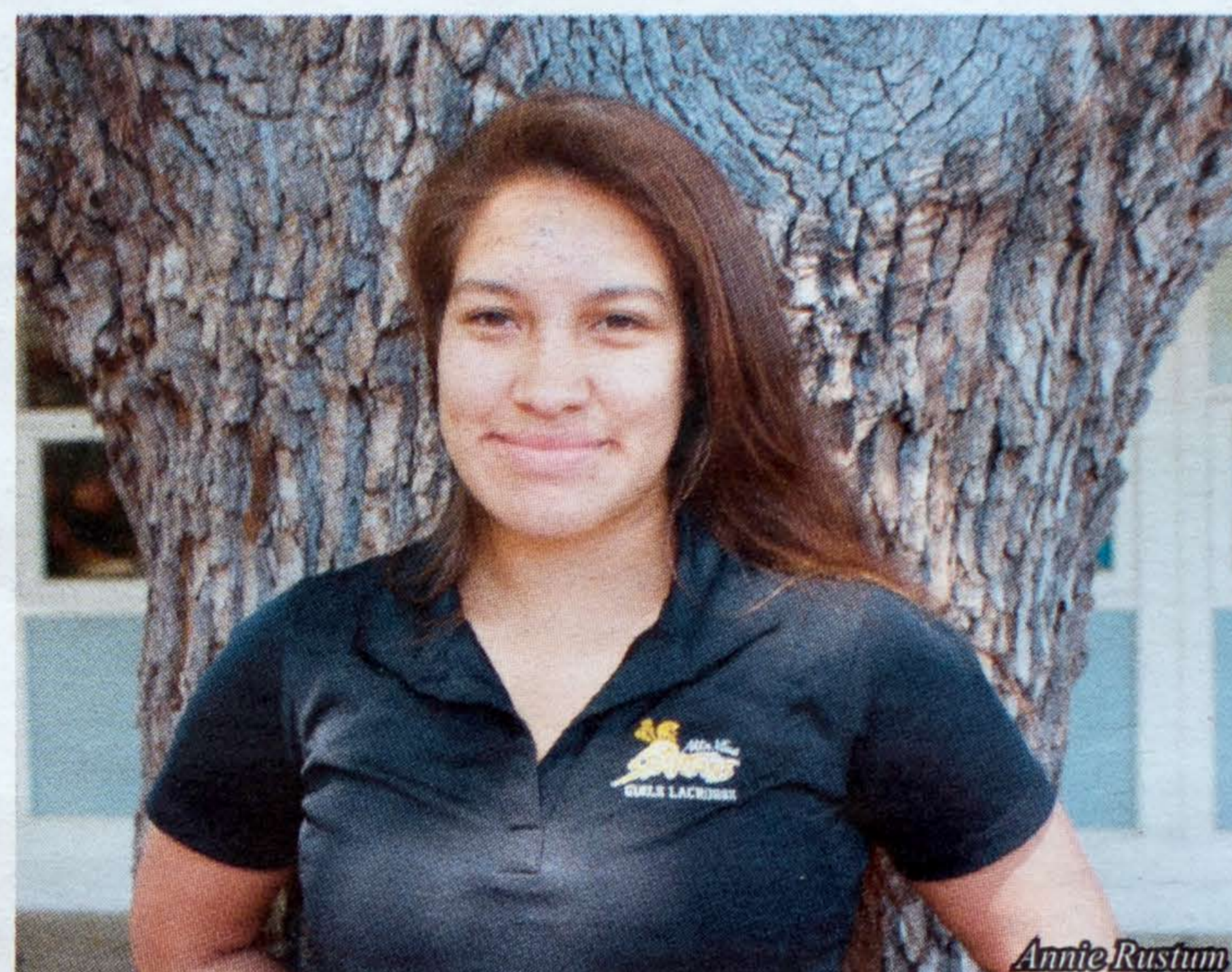
Garcia considers her relationship with Arturo to be a two-way street; as she mentors him, he motivates her to pursue her passions.

"I want to show him that anything is possible, and that hard work does lead to success in the long run," Garcia said. "[That includes] going to college and doing something that impacts someone other than myself."

This drive is apparent today in Garcia's extracurricular and academic work.

In 2016, Garcia won the AVID Burwen scholarship, an award providing mentorship and financial support for college. This was unsurprising to her AVID teacher, Tami Kittle.

"[During] the first tutorial we had as freshmen, she was on top of her



GARCIA

tasks, asking higher-level thinking questions, and helping other students in her tutorial group," Kittle said. "It seems like everything she puts her mind to, she is successful at, no matter how difficult it is; she is just such an amazing individual."

Along with being in the AVID program itself, Garcia is also a member of the AVID site team, which consists of faculty members and students. This group meets monthly to discuss ways of closing the achievement gap at MVHS.

Prior to the summer of 2016, before Garcia's senior year, she had planned to study chemistry at a four-year college. However, her experience that summer with the organization Empoder, which seeks to empower low-income communities through education in computer science, reshaped her aspirations.

Garcia found her passion in simultaneously teaching middle-school girls computer science and guiding them on the path toward breaking glass ceilings.

"I identified with the heartbreaking stories [the girls] shared with me about the challenges they faced

because I too have experienced fears of deportation, parents who work multiple jobs and cannot help with homework, and the lack of privacy in overcrowded apartments," Garcia said.

After high school, Garcia intends to go a four-year college and major in computer science.

Over the years, Garcia has grown to be more outgoing.

"I was really shy as a child, and I think part of that was due to growing up undocumented, but when I turned fourteen I received [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] (DACA) status which allowed me to become this outgoing person," Garcia said.

DACA status protects recipients from deportation for a period of two years and also makes them eligible for employment authorization.

Garcia and those closest to her credit much of her success throughout high school to one central philosophy: optimism.

"Take advantage of all the opportunities that are given to you and believe in yourself," Garcia said. "Believing you can do something is very powerful."



GARCIA (far right): Pictured with two fellow Burwen Scholarship finalists at a Burwen Education Foundation event.