

# Walla Walla student leader goes from broken to brave

By SHEILA HAGAR

Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — By 12:20 p.m. on a recent Wednesday Azuccha Ledesma, best known as “Zuci,” is heading for lunch at College Place High School.

As crowded as the cafeteria becomes upon the chime of a three-tone bell, Zuci is easy to keep track of in her signature pink shoes, backpack and almost-pink hair.

Zuci is also this year’s Associated Student Body president, and the title brings its own recognition among her peers.

Once Zuci has settled in with her chef’s salad — picking out the parts she thinks might be too calorie-laden — she lists off the numerous ASB events she is in charge of over the school year.

“We have 17 events that we do,” Zuci noted, explaining that as president she oversees them all. “It’s a lot of responsibility, making sure nothing slips through the cracks. I’m the glue.”

Before she could hold things together, however, Zuci was a broken girl who needed mending herself. That’s when her school, its principal and one determined older sister kept the teen from becoming one more dropout statistic.

Zuci began school in the College Place Public School district not long after her family arrived from Mexico when she was 4 years old.

A freshman when the new high school opened, Zuci was part of the wave of enrollees arriving at the building with see-through walls and classrooms physically designed to foster creativity.

School had long been a sanctuary. After her parents divorced, Zuci was often left in charge of her little brother while their mother worked



Greg Lehman/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin via AP

**In this Jan. 31 photo, Azuccha “Zuci” Ledesma, center, ASB President at College Place High School makes her way through the lunch line at the school, in College Place, Wash.. Eating healthy is part of Zuci’s transformation from wayward pot-smoking student to being on a path to medical school.**

evenings. Her mom dated some, but one relationship really took hold about the time Zuci was entering high school. The man on the other end of the internet connection moved to College Place with his two children to join her family, Zuci said.

“I said ‘Danger’ right away,” she recalled. “I didn’t feel comfortable.”

Her mom, however, seemed fully invested in the new relationship. So Zuci began staying away from home, sometimes going to her older sister’s house after school.

“My mom wasn’t supporting me emotionally,” Zuci said. “Every single day my house felt less and less like home.”

Her mother’s boyfriend made it known he didn’t consider Zuci part of the family; that life would be easier if she didn’t live at home.

“That was a really clear moment. I was afraid of him hurting me,” Zuci said.

## Crisis point

Maybe drugs would heal the pain rejection had left in her heart, Zuci recalls thinking. She began smoking marijuana.

Once high school started, it didn’t take long to get caught — not when the teen decided the restroom in the new school building was a good place to get high.

Principal Kirk Jameson well remembers the day. He and his staff had received a heads up on Zuci, Jameson said.

“We look at the incoming class for as much information as possible,” he said.

In the high school’s debut year, staff had fewer than 100 students to watch, meaning they could keep a closer eye on all of them, he said.

“We were just watching her, trying to figure out a way to work with her,” Jameson said of Zuci.

Then they received word that someone had been smoking pot in the restroom. A small school census made

finding the culprit a quick process. Once confronted, Zuci quickly folded, he said.

The freshman was presented with two options: take a 45-day suspension, which basically terminates a student for the semester, or choose treatment and five days of suspension.

“We call it the ‘45 to 5,’” Jameson explained. “I will reduce it to five days if you choose assessment and treatment. I don’t want the kids out, I want them back. But I want them back clean.”

That “consequence stick” is heavy on purpose, Jameson added.

“We call it ‘creating the crisis,’ because once they are caught and they are faced with a 45-day suspension. I’ve only had one student take that suspension,” he said.

The approach works best, however, when the student is in a supportive environment, which made Zuci’s situation tricky.

Yet that’s not how the young teen herself saw things.

**“I don’t want the kids out, I want them back. But I want them back clean.”**

— Kirk Jameson, College Place High School principal

Her mom had never come to school conferences or noticed when Zuci was failing classes; she couldn’t be counted on this time, either.

This moment would hinge on Zuci’s decision alone, and she saw no choice other than treatment. The teen first got help at Serenity Point Counseling, then at Trilogy Recovery Community.

## The path forward

Zuci began living with her sister’s family at age 16. Although just four years Zuci’s senior, Alicia Abarca possessed the parental nurturing her sibling needed. Abarca began attending Zuci’s parent-teacher conferences and had no problem spelling things out.

“She told me, ‘If you’re going to live here, you’re going to be a good kid,’” Zuci said.

College Place High School echoed the directive, she noted, crediting the high school’s college and career adviser Anabrenda Blethen with helping the student find her academic path.

Blethen, Zuci said, “asked me what I wanted to be, and I said a surgeon. She asked me how I was going to get there. That was the part I didn’t know.”

Zuci knows now. It takes communication, work, engagement with your community and believing in yourself, she said.

Take her art project last summer, for example. Zuci wanted to paint two of

the school’s bathrooms in intergalactic themes, but she figured there was no way the administration would go for it. Still, she persevered.

“I came up with my pitch. I had my budget and my previous art experience. I presented the budget to ASB to pay for materials,” Zuci said.

She got the official nod and spent about 50 hours turning two large restroom walls into celestial spaces — meanwhile working her regular job at Fast Eddy’s drive-in restaurant in Walla Walla.

Art continues to drive Zuci. As she waits for college acceptance letters to arrive — one has already landed from Seattle Pacific University — Zuci is combining plans for a career in medicine with that love of drawing, paint and color.

The senior student has dreamed up a way to help sick kids get the healing power of art when they most need it. She wants to create art kits and accompanying videos to send to hospitals for pediatric patients and their parents.

Zuci also developed a survey for parents to find out what would be most useful, then petitioned four Northwest hospital administrators to lend support to the idea.

It will cost about \$600 to create 50 kits, but her high school experiences all point to succeeding — with her own efforts and the help of others, Zuci said with a smile.

No matter where Zuci starts college in the fall, she will be the first in her family to do so, she said. And when she tries to explain her life turnaround to people, it always comes back to her sister and her school experiences.

“This school helps you pick a route,” she said. “Sometimes people like me start going off the route. This school helps you get back on the route.”

## ELK: Helped kids understand the concept of public land

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has to do some revision.

“Some techniques, you really just have to be out in the woods and find out how animals react,” he said.

And, he said, the quality of the call doesn’t guarantee you’ll be attracting an elk.

“People are getting so good at these, it’s really hard to tell,” he said. But, he said, being a good bugler doesn’t necessarily mean you can fool an elk.

“Some of the worst calls I’ve heard have been from elk,” he told the crowd.

Representatives of several groups, including the U.S. Forest Service, Oregon Back Country Hunters and Anglers and Umatilla County Search and Rescue, were at the event, talking to kids about conservation and safety.

There were also several activities, such as skull and track identification, a BB gun shoot, an archery range, and presentations for how to use trail cameras and film hunting trips.

“My favorite part of today is going to be archery,” said James Montee, 12, as he and his friends waited in a long line to go to the archery range.

Montee and his friends,



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

**Brooke Boothman, 7, of Athena, tries archery Saturday at the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Outdoor Skills Day at the Pendleton Convention Center.**

Elijah McLaughlin and Jesse Acosta, are in the process of taking hunting safety classes now. Some of the organizations tried to help children understand some of the broader concepts of outdoor recreation.

“The places where we go hiking, camping, fishing — do you guys do any of

that stuff?” Jesse Salsberry of Back Country Hunters and Anglers asked a pair of three-year-olds, who nodded.

“A lot of time when you do that, that’s on public land,” he said. “That means everyone in the U.S. shares that land, from people in New York to right here in Pendleton.”

Bill Welch, also of Back Country Hunters, said it can be challenging to get kids to understand the concept of public land.

“We try to tie it in to what kids like to do,” he said.

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## BOUNDS: Second nomination to the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court

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he is chair — in an email stating that “the objectionable words and views recited from three or four of my college op-eds do not reflect the views I have hewn to as a lawyer and, frankly, as a grown-up.”

In the email Bounds, now 44, called the words he wrote years ago as a Stanford University student “tone-deaf” and “mortifyingly insensitive.” He did not return a message from the *East Oregonian* by press time.

The op-eds came to light through a report by the liberal advocacy group Alliance for Justice opposing the nomination of Bounds, who is considered politically conservative.

Many of the quotes highlighted in the report came from a piece in the student-run *Stanford Review* titled “Race-Think: A Stanford Phenomenon?” The op-ed describes the characteristics of group-think — including rationalizing a group’s actions, stereotyping the group’s opponents and pressuring dissenting members to conform — and criticizes the “Multiculturalistas” on campus for similar “race-think” and for seeing themselves as “universally and unbearably persecuted.”

“Race-focused groups foster race-think, and the only way to rid our multicultural community of race-think is to rid it of these invidious factions,” he wrote in 1995. “We should be cheered, however, to know that our task is not impossible. The existence of ethnic organizations is no inevitable prerequisite to maintaining a diverse community — white students, after all, seem to be doing all right without an Aryan Student Union.”

Alliance for Justice also criticized Bounds’ views on campus sexual assault from an opinion piece Bounds wrote for the *Stanford Review* during his time as an opinion editor titled “Reasonable Doubts?” The piece argues that universities should not expel or otherwise punish students accused of

sexual assault unless their guilt can be proven “beyond a reasonable doubt.”

“Expelling students is probably not going to contribute a great deal toward a rape victim’s recovery; there is no moral imperative to risk egregious error in doing so,” he wrote in 1994.

Alliance for Justice also cited pieces in which Bounds criticized students protesting a union-busting hotel and mocked the idea of “sensitivity” after a group of intoxicated athletes vandalized a statue celebrating gay pride.

Before the Alliance for Justice report came out, a bipartisan review committee from Oregon ranked Bounds as one of four top judicial candidates for Ninth Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals. The other three were Medford trial attorney Kelly Andersen, Portland appellate attorney Thomas Christ and Assistant U.S. Attorney Renata Gowie.

Bounds was born in Umatilla and grew up in Hermiston before graduating from Stanford and then Yale. He spent time in commercial law in Portland, was a federal prosecutor for the District of Columbia, served as an assistant to the President on domestic policy and is currently an assistant U.S. attorney.

His sister Lorissa Bounds is Walden’s chief of staff.

When he was tapped for nomination, 15 Oregon senators including Bill Hansell sent Merkley and Wyden letters of support on behalf of Bounds, along with the Oregon Criminal Defense Bar, the Oregon Wheat Growers League, Hermiston Mayor David Droztmann and Pendleton Mayor John Turner.

This is Bounds’ second nomination to the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The first time Wyden and Merkley refused to turn in the “blue slip” that Senators customarily turn into the Senate giving their OK for the nomination process to begin.

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## SCHOOL: Online survey was made available to all district staff members

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meetings that the proposed schedule would disrupt testing for elementary school students and teachers, as well as make it difficult for teachers who have children in different districts.

“Especially at the elementary school, we feel we’re devalued,” he said. “The Ed Council never came back and got feedback from teachers. It’s my impression that they didn’t intend for things to change.”

Linn said that while the district said it wanted to make a decision that was best for all students, he didn’t feel that was the case with this choice.

“We feel this prioritizes high school sports kids over academics at the elementary school level,” he said.

Rocky Heights teacher Shanna Evans also read a

**“We feel this prioritizes high school sports kids over academics at the elementary school level.”**

— Josh Linn, Rocky Heights Elementary School teacher

prepared statement opposing the schedule change.

Loretta Fitterer, president of the Hermiston Association of Teachers, which designates the Educational Council in its collective bargaining agreement, spoke in favor of the calendar change in her statement to the board.

School board members said while they knew the decision would make some upset, they felt they could not ignore the Educational Council’s decision.

Board member Ginny Holthus referred to a letter Linn had sent to the board, outlining his concerns.

“Regarding the comments on sports — we’re making the recommendation based on the fact that they’re students first,” she said.

“It’s difficult to set aside the time that the Ed Council spent,” added board member Josh Goller.

Board chair Karen Sherman acknowledged that some would be negatively affected.

“But we need to make sure we’re doing best not just for high school kids,” she said. “It’s not just based on sports. It’s based on how it impacts all kids.”

Sherman and Mooney said that an online survey

was made available to all district staff members.

Gomolski said he had heard comments from many people in the past few weeks.

“You’re right,” he said to the teachers present at the meeting. “It always seems like we’re doing what’s best for high school sports kids. At this point, I don’t feel comfortable voting for it.”

Linn said he was disappointed with the decision.

“A lot of community members will be negatively impacted,” he said. “This is going to be an every-year issue. We’ll have to try to influence the Ed Council next year.”

The 2018-2019 school year is now scheduled to start Aug. 27 and end June 10. Winter break is scheduled for Dec. 24 through Jan. 4, and spring break for April 1 through 5.