

School Related Employee of the Year supports special needs students in and out of school

Samantha Lopez was a food service worker in a local school when her career took a sharp turn.

Lopez, whose son is on the autism spectrum and has other needs, was meeting with his teachers and other staff about five years ago. One of those staffers encouraged her to work directly with ESE (Exceptional Student Education) students. That conversation spurred Lopez to get her state certification, and she's been working as a one-on-one ESE paraprofessional ever since.



Rawlings Elementary School 5th-grader Zylar Mason is the student who has benefitted from Lopez' love, support and expertise for more than four years, both during and outside of school hours. 'Auntie Sam' has become like a member of his family.

"They know I'm protective of him and that I treat him as one of my own," she said of his family. "They trust me to make sure that he is safe, loved and cherished."

Keeping Zylar safe includes addressing his physical needs, which can include tasks from administering medications to handling tube feedings. Lopez works with his mainstream classroom teachers to help him meet his academic goals. She's also committed to ensuring that Zylar doesn't miss out on activities with his peers, including field trips, school carnivals and participating in the safety patrol.

"Ms. Lopez never lets Zylar's exceptionalities shut him out of what the typical 5th-grade student experiences," said Rawlings Elementary principal Dr. Stella Arduser. "Ms. Lopez has made that happen for him and also modeled what acceptance and diversity mean to our school and community."

Even with the significant responsibility of working with Zylar, Lopez is always willing to support other students and teachers.

"She is always willing to ask 'What do you need?' or 'How can I help?'" said 4th-grade teacher Ricky Liebig. "And she does this all with her own responsibilities and obligations to manage."

Lopez' support of students, particularly special needs students, extends beyond the Rawlings campus. She works with a local Facebook group for families of special needs children, providing advice and support and advocating for the wider community to accept and embrace children with disabilities.

"It's in my soul," she said. "I believe I was put in this community for a reason, to advocate for special needs children, to encourage people to be more welcoming. I want all kids to feel loved."

For her work on behalf of children, especially those with special needs, Lopez was selected as the districtwide School-Related Employee of the Year for 2024. She was one of 45 honorees for this year's recognition program. All of them will be recognized at an upcoming celebration sponsored by Florida Credit Union, Scorpio Construction, and many other community donors.

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