



Villa client Mario poses with pride outside his workplace The Huntington Rose Garden Tea Room.

## A World of Possibilities: Mario Hits His Stride at The Huntington Library

Articles by Katherine Evans, Villa Esperanza Services Grant Writer

It's midmorning at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, and the kitchen of the Rose Garden Tea Room is abuzz with activity. Staff bend over trays of delicate pastries. Over the clang of dishes and spray of water hoses directives are exchanged. For Mario Ahumada, the bustle is welcome. As the Tea Room's dishwasher, he thrives off the kitchen's energy. A coworker breezes by and Mario asks, "How many people for lunch?" The reply comes quickly: eighty-seven. "Eighty-seven is easy," says Mario, unfazed. He preps the industrial washer and rolls up his sleeves, ready to get to work. "It's kinda like going in a car wash!" he exclaims.

Mario is one of seven Villa clients with intellectual/developmental disabilities working with Bon Appétit Management Company,



**Mario in his element enjoying the bustling atmosphere of the kitchen.**

The Huntington's dining and catering service responsible for the campus's vast network of eateries. Villa's partnership with Bon Appétit began at two other local businesses: DreamWorks Animation and Woodbury University. The experience went so well that Villa explored the possibility of joining Bon Appétit's crew at The Huntington. Renowned for its contributions to the humanities, arts, and botanical science, The Huntington soon added another notable distinction to their record: they became a proud ally for individuals with special needs. With The Huntington's vision and support, Villa's partnership with Bon Appétit blossomed. Michael Greene, director of Villa's Pasadena Employment Services Program explains, "It's down to finding the right people and connecting them with the right opportunities. The whole process of applying, interviewing, understanding the organization and their culture—we take that on so that by the time our folks get to the job they know the routine and expectations."

For many individuals like Mario, navigating the job market is a daunting prospect. Villa's Employment Services Program offers participants the chance to experience the pride of earning a paycheck and develop self-reliance. Partnerships with businesses like Bon Appétit are literally life-changing for Villa's

clients and Mario is no exception. Before joining the team, he was earning sub-minimum wage as a janitor, but he yearned for a job that was more challenging and more lucrative. After an in-depth intake process with Villa that took into account his individual goals, strengths, and past experience, he completed a three-day assessment in the kitchen. With preparation from Villa's job coaches, Mario passed the test with flying colors and quickly distinguished himself as a positive addition to the crew.

Mario couldn't be happier. "I love this job," he says. "I've got a lot of good friends here. I've been here almost two years now." He has enjoyed the beautiful campus—so immense that he nicknamed it Huntington University—and likes the work environment. "It's peace and quiet here," he says. "But in the kitchen, it's more noisy!" Once Mario settled in at the new job, he treated his girlfriend to a meal at The Huntington's Tea Room and stroll through its Rose Garden. "We went everywhere," he recalls. "It was pretty cool!" Mario even saved up his earnings to purchase an electric bicycle that he rides to work each day. Reflecting on his success thus far Mario explains, "Sometimes I have problems understanding about things and that's why I need some assistance...sometimes I don't understand, but at least I always try."

It's that can-do spirit that has made Mario such a valued asset in the Tea Room kitchen. When Mario falters, or the activity in the kitchen becomes overwhelming, he receives the guidance he needs from Villa's dedicated job coaches. Mario also has the support of The Huntington and his Bon Appétit cheerleaders—cheerleaders like Randy Shulman, The Huntington's vice president for advancement. "Mario is an important part of our food services team," says Randy. "We are delighted that Bon Appétit, our food services partner, has brought him aboard and glad to have him as part of The Huntington extended family." Bon Appétit Director of Operations Bobby Bogner echoes Randy's sentiments. "Mario is enthusiastic and happy to be working and those are two qualities I wish I had in every employee," says Bobby. "Working with the Villa staff, the benefits far outweigh any difficulties we've had...I'd encourage other people that have the opportunity to utilize this service and to recognize that they can improve their communities, not just their workplace."

## **MARCH - DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY MONTH**

## **APRIL - AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH**

Check out the wonderful ways our community partners celebrate all abilities:

- Aquarium of the Pacific - Abilities Night, March 24
- The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens - sensory garden experiences for all ages
- Rose Bowl Aquatics Center - the Stingrays swim team for children with developmental disabilities



**Villa student Sofia and her classmates enjoy Villa's summer swim program at the Rose Bowl Aquatics Center thanks to the generosity of the Rotary Club of San Marino and other generous donors.**

# Room to Thrive: Girl Scout Helps Early Intervention Clinic

Sixteen-year-old Gaby Ledis knows the meaning of multitasking. As a junior at Westridge School for Girls, she has rigorous academic and extracurricular commitments and competes on both the varsity tennis and lacrosse teams when she's not playing the violin with the school's chamber orchestra. But Gaby is undaunted by her challenging schedule. In fact, she has chosen to add to her plate by tackling the most prestigious achievement in Girl Scouting: the Gold Award. "The goal is to solve a community problem not only in the short term but long term as well, and to make the world a better place," Gaby explains.

A family member's recent diagnosis with autism inspired Gaby to pursue her Gold Award project with Villa's Occupational Therapy Clinic. In partnership with the occupational therapy team, Gaby has helped pave the way for the opening of a new early intervention space focusing on the needs of children from birth to age three. Her project includes building furniture and equipment, creating an under-the-sea themed mural for the space, and promoting Villa's early intervention programs with a flyer of her own design. Gaby is also creating a combination whiteboard/mirror that will allow children to develop their fine motor skills while drawing and encourage imaginative play. Director of Occupational Therapy Amy Jensen, M.A. is quick to praise Gaby's work ethic and maturity. "I've been really impressed," she says. "When Gaby started with us the early intervention space had just been vacated by a high school classroom and needed to be remodeled. She's seen this project progress and has been an instrumental part of the process."

Early intervention services are critical because the brain is most malleable in the first three years of life. If therapists can intervene when delays are just starting to become apparent, outcomes are better in the long term. Villa's new space will allow the Occupational Therapy Clinic and Hjelte-Phillips Speech and Language Center to expand their early intervention reach by up to 15 new youngsters. Having both early intervention occupational and speech and language therapies available in one centralized location also presents a rich opportunity for collaboration. "I can tell my colleagues in Speech this is what I'm observing in a session, this is what I'm addressing, and vice versa," says Amy. "We can be interdisciplinary in our approach and that's invaluable."

When Gaby reflects on her project's impact at Villa, she can hardly contain her glee. "It is amazing to think that the things I'm doing are helping therapists to impact these children's lives and teach motor and speech skills," she says, the excitement building in her voice. "Before this project I wanted to major in pre-law with an advocacy focus and minor in psychology. Now I'm considering doing something with occupational therapy. I've never been the type to be very confident, but I've learned what a strong woman I can be through this process. I'm beyond grateful. "Thanks in part to Gaby's contributions, Villa's youngest children are empowered now, too. They finally have room to thrive in a new, inviting space.



Girl Scout Gaby goes for gold in the new Early Intervention Clinic.

## EARLY INTERVENTION (EI)

EI is for children ages 0 to 3 with developmental delays or risk for developmental delay. Villa's occupational therapy (OT) program targets sensory motor, fine motor and gross motor, visual motor and sensory processing skills children need to be successful at school, home, and in the community. EI services influence children's lifelong learning potential.

For an evaluation or information, contact Villa's OT director Amy Jensen, MA, OTR/L, 626-449-2919, ext. 140 or [AJensen@VillaEsperanzaServices.org](mailto:AJensen@VillaEsperanzaServices.org). Villa is a regional center vendor for OT and speech therapy services.



During his EI session, Benny works on his motor skills.

## VILLA ESPERANZA SERVICES DIRECTORY

### PASADENA

2116 E. Villa Street  
Pasadena, CA 91107  
[www.VillaEsperanzaServices.org](http://www.VillaEsperanzaServices.org)  
[info@VillaEsperanzaServices.org](mailto:info@VillaEsperanzaServices.org)

#### Main Number

626-449-2919

#### Villa Esperanza School

626-449-2919, ext. 119

#### Hjelte-Phillips

#### Speech & Language Center

626-449-2919, ext. 176

#### Occupational Therapy Clinic

626-449-2919, ext. 140

#### Community Integration Program (CIP)

626-398-4435, ext. 1

#### Employment Services

626-449-2919, ext. 161

#### Adult Residential Program

626-449-2919, ext. 113

#### Independent Living Skills (ILS)

626-398-4435, ext. 1

#### Dimensions Adult Day Program

1990 E. Walnut St.  
Pasadena, CA 91107  
626-346-9109, ext. 103

#### Adult Day Program (ADP)

1757 N. Lake Ave.  
Pasadena, Ca 91104  
626-398-4435, ext. 1

### WEST REGION

Community Conscience  
Human Services Center  
80 E. Hillcrest Drive, Suite 206  
Thousand Oaks, CA 91360

#### Main Number

805-446-1939

#### Community Integration Program (CIP)

805-446-1939, ext. 112

#### Employment Services

805-446-1939, ext. 112

#### Independent Living Skills (ILS)

805-446-1939, ext. 107

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# VILLA ESPERANZA SERVICES

*Where Hope is Hard at Work for Individuals  
with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities*

2116 East Villa Street  
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[www.VillaEsperanzaServices.org](http://www.VillaEsperanzaServices.org)



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Meet Tommy, James, Greg & Carson

One lives in his own apartment.

One attended college.

One retired from work.

One is an actor.

All part of Villa since they were kids.

# See the potential; Villa does.



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