spotlight
BRIDGES PROJECT FOR EDUCATION

meet
santana rael
Respect and Acceptance

SANTANA RAEL is a 2011 graduate of Questa High School, a 2015 graduate of The University of New Mexico, and a Civil Design Engineer at Los Alamos National Laboratories. Before any of this, though, she became a mother.

"I had my son [Javan] in March 2010,” Santana told us, “and then started my senior year of high school in August.”

It wasn’t quite the way she’d expected her life to unfold. Although neither of her parents had attended college, they advocated strongly for their two daughters’ education.

Santana’s father passed away when she was nine years old, but when her dad was alive, his goal for her was to be valedictorian. And Santana’s mom insisted that, pregnant or not, her daughter was going to college. Santana laughed, recounting the story. “I looked at her with my 16-year-old attitude, and I said, ‘Who said I wasn’t?’” Determined, motivated, and hardworking, Santana threw herself into her studies while she cared for her infant son.

Questa is a small community twenty miles north of Taos, and counseling resources are limited. Fortunately, Santana’s mom had heard about Bridges Project for Education on the radio.

"Working with Bridges was amazing,” Santana said. “When I was writing essays, it can get really personal. Joleen said, you have to tell your story. I said, I don’t want to tell my story! People know I have a kid, I’m stereotyped for it, I’m labeled for it, and it’s awful.” But owning her own story—recognizing the strength, commitment and determination she showed, and understanding how those qualities could translate across domains —helped her understand herself better.

With help from Bridges and the support of her family, Santana went on to land substantial scholarships and to advance in her chosen field. In 2016, she married Francisco “Kiko” Rael, Javan’s father. Together they continue to encourage others to reach for their dreams by pursuing higher education.
SANTANA SAYS:

"When my son came along, all the stereotypes and labels got thrown at me. I hated that feeling. [But when] I went to see Bridges, it was like getting away from all that labeling. Joleen saw me as, this is my client. Very respectful. Very professional. When you’re a young teenager and you get treated like an adult – it made me feel more comfortable."

Bridges Project for Education welcomes all interested students, regardless of background, age, academic standing, family circumstance or postsecondary choice.
"For me it was like a kind of therapy," Santana said. "Figuring out who I am, accepting the situation I was in. And growing from it."

Santana met with Bridges once a week for help throughout the process of applying to college, and she recognizes that the value of those meetings stretches far beyond just the information she acquired and skills she developed. "For me it was like a kind of therapy," she said. "Figuring out who I am, accepting the situation I was in. And growing from it."

She was a dedicated parent of a young child. She was a straight-A student who racked up 33 college credits—the equivalent of an associate’s degree—while she was in high school. By the end of her senior year, she was salutatorian of her class, graduating with thirty thousand dollars of scholarship money.

Santana credits Bridges as instrumental to her success. "Bridges welcomed me with open arms," Santana recalls. "That's truly how I felt, how comfortable I felt working with them, in my situation."

Bridges was "able to answer general questions about college, starting from what is it? To how do I get in? To applications, scholarships, to financial aid – the whole 360."

And the skills, tools and techniques she learned working with Bridges continue to be valuable to her. "At first I was really resistant to getting any help, because I always thought I could do it on my own. But after the Bridges experience I was more open to doing other programs," Santana said. She was awarded two scholarships from the LANL Foundation and landed a prestigious internship at the Los Alamos National Labs. Later, "using the same tools that Bridges taught me," she said, "I got an engineering scholarship for $25,000 from an engineering firm."

Her experience has made Santana a strong advocate for Bridges and the services the organization provides. "I'm excited for the future of Bridges," she told us. "I think the program is so helpful, and it reaches so many people."