

GABRIEL

When AHA! first offered the AHA! Peace Builders program to local junior high schools, Gabriel was a painfully shy eighth grader longing for a “tribe” where he felt seen, accepted, and engaged. Gabriel was adopted from Guatemala, lived with his family in Israel, and eventually settled in Santa Barbara. The transition was not easy as he struggles with a physical disability and a processing disorder. Gabriel’s mother had long hoped he would be able to participate



in AHA! programs and from his first Peace Builder meeting at school, he has been an enthusiastic and loving presence in all AHA! has to offer. As his mother Lisa wrote following Gabriel’s first year with AHA! *“Participating in AHA! Peace Builders has been life-changing for my son. AHA! has helped Gabriel thrive and grow in a truly safe and nurturing environment. At this very vulnerable developmental stage, AHA! has become Gabriel’s tribe—a kind, intelligent, creative group of socially conscious friends.”*

Though initially very quiet, Gabriel quickly warmed to the AHA! facilitators and us to him. The summer following his 8th grade year, he was an active participant in a Social Justice group and has continued in AHA! programs every semester since. Gabriel’s contribution to AHA!’s Littlest Little Farm has been so ardent, we created an “Internship” title with him in mind. His love of the natural world is clear from this quote *“This program has impacted my self esteem and confidence tremendously. It has taught me how to grow—like a little seed growing into a beautiful flower. With my mind and soul I fell in love with Mother Earth. I also appreciate being able to work alongside others—learning and watching—but mostly having fun!”*

To watch Gabriel grow in confidence and sense of himself in the world has been magical. Gabriel has become one of my go-to teens when I need a quote or testimonial. He is a rare teen boy who is more enchanted with the natural world around him than with video games. While school was a struggle for him, his determination to do well enabled him to thrive during COVID and, with the encouragement of AHA! facilitators and his supportive family, he enrolled in SBCC’s Middle College High School where he is flourishing. In addition, he is a sponsored surfer and a surf instructor at Surf Happens, mentoring younger youth in the way AHA! staff mentors him.

Gabriel was also a participant in our first Digital Cleanse and fully embraced every activity with a delightful exuberance. To watch him bond with the other teens in such an easy and vulnerable way was truly heart warming—we are deeply proud of the young man he has become and are confident that he will have a positive impact on the world.

