

**DR. CHRISTOPHER KAZANJIAN, '12**  
**College of Health, Education and Social Transformation (HEST)**

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“The most valuable thing I learned at NMSU is the value of relationships and how they can truly unlock one’s potential.”

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Dr. Christopher Kazanjian is a successful academic. Yet, as a child growing up in New Hartford, NY, he didn’t enjoy school, preferring instead to play in the snow. He learned about the world by adventuring with his parents: hiking, visiting museums and libraries, and taking cross-country trips.

In college, his professors encouraged Chris to pursue academia to realize his goal of changing students’ educational experience in a positive way. His experiences with diverse cultures in his hometown led Chris to focus his graduate studies on empowering historically marginalized populations with the skills necessary to achieve equitable opportunities and self-actualization.

Chris is succeeding, helping countless children through the Kidz ‘n Coaches after-school program. For his dissertation, he studied the original Kidz ‘n Coaches methodology, developed by his mentor Professor James Smrtic. Along with his wife, Sandra, in 2015 Chris established the program in El Paso.

Tailored for Latinx students, Kidz ‘n Coaches-El Paso brings together volunteer college-student coaches with elementary school students in prosocial, educational, culturally relevant—and joyful—activities that support social and emotional development through relationship-building.

For seven years, the program existed on Chris’ fundraising abilities and his personal support. In 2022, Kidz ‘n Coaches won the Rather Prize, an annual \$10,000 award presented in furtherance of work that improves Texas public education. He also received the “Power of One” Award from Ysleta Independent School District in 2018.

Chris’ list of mentors and inspirational heroes is long, starting with his parents. His uncle, Kenneth Kazanjian, taught him the value of formal education and how to develop mindfulness through activities like gardening and baking. He learned about grit from Arnold Schwarzenegger, empathy from Carl Rogers, perception from Claude Monet, and emotional expression from Jack Kerouac. Yet, Chris says “these were just concepts until I practiced them in real life, and NMSU gave me the forum in which to realize their meaning.”

Chris reserves his highest praise for canine companions Frosty and Cupcake. Through long walks, poochie cones, and playtime, they taught Chris what he considers the most valuable lessons that led to his personal and professional success: sincerity, creativity, good naps, and getting outside.

Chris wants his legacy to be that he promoted “social and emotional development alongside meaningful relationships so that future generations will know a kinder, more empathetic world, especially for children, animals, and nature.”

His advice for students? “Your career is a journey in which to contribute to this world and realize your potential. Learning to see the phenomena of everyday existence will help you engage your career with sincerity and fascination—like a child at play. This will ensure that you continue to grow and learn in your field.”