UC SANTA BARBARA

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Breaking Barriers

With a new academic year underway at UC Santa Barbara, so too is an inaugural chapter for recent graduate Alexis McCurn. After spending a decade studying sociology, she's now teaching the subject as a freshly hired lecturer in the campus department where she earned her master's and doctoral degrees.

It's the latest great leap in her enduring but sometimes rocky relationship with education. Diagnosed in high school with a learning disability, McCurn had to fight harder to achieve what came more easily to many of her peers.

"I was always wondering why I spent so much time studying to still get a C; something just wasn't right," McCurn recalled. "Discovering I have a learning disability was good news. It wasn't me.

"I will say it's tough to be learning-disabled and be in grad school, but I'm so glad I've done it," added the newly minted Ph.D., an ethnographer whose dissertation examined public interactions of young women in inner-city Oakland. "Now I can tell other students: 'You can do this. I know it's tough and the way you learn may be different, but you can do it. There are people out there who believe you can do it and want to help.'"

McCurn encountered just such a person while studying at UC Santa Barbara: Lady Leslie Ridley-Tree, a prominent philanthropist and campus benefactor whose latest generous gift to the campus provided $500,000 for scholarships. The Lady Leslie Ridley-Tree Endowment Fund is meant to benefit outstanding students facing a

barrier to education — whether it be financial need or learning disability. Ridley-Tree has been supporting such students at UCSB since 1998. During this period, more than 220 UCSB students have benefited from Ridley-Tree's generosity.

"Our campus is deeply grateful to Lady Leslie Ridley-Tree, who is serving as co-chair of the Campaign for UC Santa Barbara," said Chancellor Henry T. Yang. "With her generous support for scholarships, she is making a meaningful difference in the lives of deserving students. Lady Leslie has always had a big heart for helping students, including those with special needs. She has helped hundreds of students over the years, not only with financial support but with care, encouragement and mentoring. She is an inspiring role model for our students, as well as a model of philanthropic leadership in support of higher education."

Said Ridley-Tree: "I believe in education. I believe that the only way that one can progress in life is through knowledge, and that the easiest way to get knowledge is through education. For many people it's not available. In my life, I've always, always tried to help make it available in some way. That's been an earnest drive within me."

An honorary alumna since 2012, Ridley-Tree is a UC Santa Barbara Foundation trustee in addition to her role with the campaign. Her philanthropy to the campus also includes support for UCSB Arts & Lectures and the Department of Music.

But it was her desire to offer an extra boost to struggling students that first inspired Ridley-Tree to give to the campus. The scholarship fund is a natural fit for the former educator and community activist who once had trouble in school herself.

"It was always hard for me because I was the kind of student that was, quote, 'never working up to her potential,'" Ridley-Tree recalled. "I was probably dyslexic but nobody knew it. Life can change completely for these students when they're put in the proper classes, or given the right resources. But you have to be given that chance.

"There are so many bright people who don't get a chance," she continued, noting the impact of financial disadvantages as well as learning disabilities. "Education helps so much. Education is the key to everything and it doesn't matter what kind. Sometimes people feel they're learning something they're never going to use. I always say to young people: 'You will find that you will use everything you learn along the way. Nothing is wasted.' That's a wonderful surprise in life."

For Alexis McCurn, the support — both moral and financial — that she received from Ridley-Tree was a surprise in itself.

“The Ridley-Tree scholarship was such a lifesaver for me,” McCurn said. “It truly made it possible to get things done in a reasonable amount of time and be able to progress through the program like everybody else. It made a huge difference. The very existence of this scholarship says to learning-disabled students: ‘You guys are a priority. Your learning is a priority.’ And I’m really grateful for it so much.”

Ridley-Tree attended Columbia University, the University of Madrid and the University of West Los Angeles. For seven years, she was director of a community center on New York City’s West Side and established the first Head Start program, as well as the Bridge Academy for teens expelled from public school. She is chief executive officer and chair of Pacific Air Industries in Santa Monica, and a trustee of the Ridley-Tree Foundation. She and her husband, Lord Paul Ridley-Tree, shared the Philanthropist of the Year Award presented by the National Society of Fund Raising Executives in 1994 and the Santa Barbara News-Press Lifetime Achievement Award in 1993.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.