UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

December 6, 2013
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Guardian Scholars Endowment

With the holidays only weeks away, most university students already know how they'll be spending their winter break. For them, going home to their families and celebrating the traditions that have been a part of their lives for as long as they can remember is simply a given.

However, 55 students in this year's freshman class at UC Santa Barbara are silently wondering what they will do — where they will go — when the residence halls close at the end of finals week. These students are former foster children, and many have no families to visit and no permanent place they can call home. In fact, for some of them, the four years they spend at UCSB will mark the longest period of time they will have lived in any one place.

So moved by this reality were UC Regent Hadi Makarechian and his wife, Barbara, they made a $100,000 contribution in 2012 and 2013 to support the work of the UCSB students and staff volunteers from departments across campus who serve as a network of resources for all 150 of the UCSB students who have aged out of the foster care system and are, quite literally, on their own. At UCSB and campuses throughout the country, these students are called Guardian Scholars.

"We are delighted to provide a small help to this huge cause, helping bright students that have overcome adversity in their lifetime and are at a prestigious school such as UCSB," said Hadi Makarechian.

For former foster youths Adeola Adeife, Alana Osaki and Joscelynn Murdoch, the holidays can be a reminder of how alone they are. Or would be, were it not for UCSB's Guardian Scholars Program. Last year, in collaboration with the program, the Makarechians hosted a holiday party for the UCSB and Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) Guardian Scholars who, having no families of their own, might have received few — if any — holiday gifts. With several friends of the Makarechians serving as the students' families for the evening, the event was a tremendous boost to the UCSB Guardian Scholars Program.

Following the overwhelming success of last year's Guardian Scholars Holiday Party, the Makarechians hosted a similar event on Friday, Dec. 6. It marked the beginning of a new annual tradition of bringing their friends together with the Guardian Scholars from UCSB and SBCC.

Recently, the Guardian Scholars Program at UCSB received another huge boost from a generous $500,000 challenge pledge from the Makarechians and a matching gift of $530,000 from the Conrad H. Hilton Foundation. The funds will establish an endowment for the ongoing support of staff to oversee day-to-day operations and take a more proactive approach than the volunteers are able to provide.

Assistance to the Guardian Scholars will come in the form of academic support, enrichment services, advocacy, career guidance, peer networking, housing and financial aid assistance and an emergency fund. These resources will enable these students to better navigate the university system in the absence of parents or guardians who typically provide guidance and support to their students throughout the university experience.

"These scholars may not have any family to depend on for an emergency situation or guidance," Makarachian said. "This gift will enable the university to play that role when the need arises."

"I'm very happy to reconnect with UCSB, particularly in the context of awarding a grant to support the Guardian Scholars Program, because it helps foster youth make the transition to life in a university setting," said Steven M. Hilton, president, chairman and chief executive officer of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and a UCSB alumnus ('74).

"Not only does the Guardian Scholars Program provide financial assistance to students in need, the program also makes sure they have access to mentoring and

emotional support," Hilton continued. "The goal is to help these resilient young adults achieve independence and reach their full potential. I'm particularly pleased to be able to help these deserving scholars at my alma mater."

"UC Santa Barbara and our community are so fortunate to have Regent Hadi Makarechian and Barbara give us original ideas, visionary guidance and generous financial support to develop and enrich our critically needed Guardian Scholars Program," said Chancellor Henry T. Yang. "We are also grateful to our alumnus Steve Hilton and the Hilton Foundation for enhancing and supporting our Guardian Scholars Program through the most generous and inspirational gift, in addition to the exciting commencement speech Steve delivered last June."

The national statistics on youth in the foster system are staggering. The average foster youth changes schools seven times — or about once every six months — and loses up to six months of academic progress with each move. Studies show that roughly 50 percent of foster youth drop out of high school, and of those who do graduate, only 6 percent will go on to earn bachelor's degrees.

With no one to turn to for assistance — emotional, financial or otherwise — former foster youth face a particularly rocky academic road; and that's where the Hilton Foundation and Makarechian gifts will be the most beneficial. "It will make it possible for us to identify the students earlier, before they're in crisis, and provide them the assistance they need," said Lisa Przekop, director of admissions at UCSB and one of the program's co-founders. "We'll have someone who can check in with them on a regular basis and see how things are going for them."

Proving the success of UCSB's Guardian Scholars Program, now in its sixth year, are the number of freshman who return as sophomores (84 percent) and the number who graduate after four years (64 percent). In addition, while excelling academically, the students actively participate in youth groups, conferences and college fairs, where they encourage high school and community college foster youth to consider higher education as a path to success.

"Foster youth scholars will know they are not alone in their endeavors to succeed, and that we all care for them and want them to achieve whatever they choose to achieve," Makarechian said.

"Guardian Scholars are unlike any individuals I've met," said Osaki, a senior who is completing a Bachelor of Science degree in aquatic biology with a minor in

geography. “They have passion, they have hope and they have perseverance. They’re dedicated and determined, and they face adversity and overcome it. And that’s really important because it brings out some true character values that I haven’t seen in any other situations.”

Putting the past behind them and looking toward the future is a common mindset among former foster youth, Osaki continued. “And the future holds whatever you let it, what you work hard to achieve. And I think most of the Guardian Scholars believe that, too,” she said.

Said Murdoch, who graduated this summer with a degree in sociology: “The most beneficial thing Guardian Scholars has given me is the opportunity to have one designated person, for example, in financial aid, who I can go to for help without having to repeat my long, drawn-out, I’m-looking-for-sympathy story. I don’t have to explain myself, which is awesome.

“It doesn’t seem like a big deal to repeat your story, but every time you do it takes you back to that place and you wonder, am I ever going to stop being a former foster youth? Am I ever going to stop being that person?”

For Adeife, who is majoring in global studies with a minor in applied psychology, the Guardian Scholars Program enabled her to reframe her experience with the foster care system. “Being in Guardian Scholars really helped me, even from that negativity, bring something good out of it, and be proud of who I was and who I am still. Being put into foster care was something that happened to me, but it’s not who I am. It doesn’t define me. And I can say the experiences I got from Guardian Scholars molded me into who I am now.”

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.