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The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

Holiday cheer and yuletide spirit were present in equal measure when UC Santa Barbara Regent Hadi Makarechian and his wife, Barbara, hosted the third annual Guardian Scholars Holiday Party at the Montecito Country Club.

The event, which has become a holiday tradition, brings together members of the Santa Barbara community with UCSB's Guardian Scholars, students who have aged out of the foster care system and are, quite literally, on their own. The Guardian Scholars program serves as a network of resources — academic, financial, emotional or otherwise — that enable the students to better navigate the university system in the absence of parents or guardians who typically provide guidance and support.

The program also gives them a sense of family and of shared experiences. For Andre Taylor, a third year theater major who entered the foster care system when he was just a year old, Guardian Scholars represents a place where he can be himself, "surrounded by people who have the same stories I did."

"The program makes it so much easier to be a student at the university because you have these people who have similar stories to yours and empathize and do want to help and want you to become something," Taylor said. "As foster children, most of us are told that we won't become anything as we're growing up because people don't love us. So to have a family structure finally is what makes the Guardian Scholars program the greatest program of all time."

And the holiday party? “I love it,” Taylor exclaimed. “I love it because we get to meet people we never thought we were going to meet in our lives and to make the kinds of connections that can last a lifetime. And that’s one of the most powerful things —meeting people and interacting and knowing these people are here because they want to be, and they want to help us.

According to Makarechian, that’s the whole purpose of the event. “The members of the community get together with the students and they bond with one another,” he said. “This connection with the community is very important. Aside from the members of the community providing gifts and so on and so forth, really it’s to show the students that they aren’t alone. There are people who care about them and want to see them succeed.”

Lisa Przekop, director of admissions at UCSB and founding director of the Guardian Scholars program, agreed and noted the emotional significance of the party. “The students have the opportunity to meet a lot of interesting people who might later become mentors or other important resources to them,” she said. “But beyond that, some of these kids have never been in a formal situation like this before. So this gives them a really special holiday. And what touches me the most is the holiday spirit. I see these students having the experience of a lifetime. They’re crying, they’re hugging, they’re happy. It really is what the Christmas spirit is all about.”

Sometimes the connections the students make with community members take on a life of their own. Such was the case for Adeola Adiefe and Marcela Kieler, who met at last year’s holiday party. “We sat at the same table and we hit it off,” Kieler said. “We stayed in touch and she even came and visited us in Arizona.” When Adiefe graduated from UCSB last June with a degree in global studies, Kieler and her daughter were invited to attend. They talk once a week, Kieler said, text one another far more often than that, and have become good friends.

Kieler was a guest at the party this year, ready to connect with another group of Guardian Scholars. “I think it’s a very nice cause,” she said. “They’re very sweet kids who have gone through some really hard times and often they’re just trying to reach out to people and have a sense of community.”

The event included a reception followed by dinner and dancing to music provided by DJ Gavin Roy. Guest speaker Derek Clark, author of “Never Limit Your Life” and the book series “I Will Never Give Up,” gave the keynote address. Clark, who spent 13

years in the Alameda County foster care system, used his own experience as the foundation for his talk on cultivating drive, focus, courage and the mental strength to overcome adversity and fear.

Student speaker Andre Theus, a fourth-year sociology major specializing in contemporary globalizing trends, is particularly interested in the transnational processes and interactions that bring the world together across traditional national boundaries. In his talk, Theus shared some of his struggles and emphasized the role the Guardian Scholars program played in helping him overcome the challenges that accompany his personal history. “Guardian Scholars, to me, are the best students,” he said. “They value their education and work hard to stand next to and excel just as well as students who have had certain privileges that allowed them better opportunities. Guardian Scholars are proud and stand strong, and when I walk across the stage in June, my accomplishment is a win for all of us.”

While the holiday party provides valuable opportunities to the Guardian Scholars, the students aren’t the only ones who benefit from the connections made and relationships formed. The community members who participate stand to gain as well. “They want to help us, and we can help them in a way, too,” Taylor noted, “by teaching them through our stories.”

And that, he concluded, is what the holiday party is all about.

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.