UC SANTA BARBARA

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Winter Wonderland

Holiday cheer was present in great measure at the Montecito Country Club for the fourth annual UC Santa Barbara Guardian Scholars holiday party, hosted by UC Santa Barbara Regent Hadi Makarechian and his wife, Barbara.

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 and otherwise — that enable the students to better navigate the university system in the absence of parents or guardians who typically provide guidance and support. Currently, about 140 students participate in UCSB's Guardian Scholars program.

"This is the most deserving student population on campus," said Makarechian. "Despite all the hardship and travesties in their lives, they came so far and made it to one of the most sought-after universities in the world. With a bit of help and recognition from the general public, they will be even more energized and continue on their path to a successful future. That is our goal for organizing this celebration dinner for them."

In addition to merriment and revelry, evening provided students the opportunity to meet potential mentors, teachers and maybe even employers who could have some impact on the next phase of their lives. The guest list featured a who's-who of UCSB luminaries, including Nobel Prize winners Shuji Nakamura and Finn Kydland, materials professor Steve DenBaars and sociology professor Victor Rios. Movers and

shakers in the community also were present to give the students the kind of exposure to society that could be useful to them in the future.

“I think it’s really important to give these students the opportunity to network,” said Lisa Przekop, director of admissions at UCSB and founding direction of the Guardian Scholars program. “The experience of being in a formal setting is another element that the scholars may benefit from. And it also lets them know that there are many people out there backing their success.”

If you ask Kajol Raju, one of the 61 scholars at the event, being thrown into the deep end of the networking pool was doing its job.

“It’s awkward and intimidating at first,” said the bubbly sophomore, who, like many of her peers, began the evening by standing nervously in a group, unsure of the etiquette of party chitchat and networking. “But then I met other people like me, and everyone is so nice,” she added. Little by little, nervousness gave way to sociability and, by dinnertime, to animated one-on-one conversations.

Now in its eighth year, the Guardian Scholars program has proved that even the smallest measure of assurance, guidance and connection can go a long way. Compared to their post-foster system peers, Guardian Scholars are far more likely to achieve success in their academic pursuits. 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.

“The University of California is about excellence and accessibility,” said UCSB Executive Vice Chancellor David Marshall. “So we pride ourselves in having a very diverse undergraduate population, and that includes an economically diverse population. About 44 percent of our students are first-generation college students, and it’s really important for us to be able to reach out to students who think they may not be able to go to college or who might not have the support to even aspire to go to a University of California campus.”

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.