UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

June 7, 2021

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Scholastic Achievement, Extraordinary Service

For their scholastic achievement, their extraordinary service to the university and the community, and their personal courage and persistence, three graduating seniors at UC Santa Barbara have been named winners of the university's top awards.

• **Ebelechukwu Veronica Eseka** is the recipient of the Thomas More Storke Award for Excellence, the campus's highest student honor, for outstanding scholarship and extraordinary service to the university, its students and the community.

• **Adalis Yamilet Rojas** is the recipient of the Jeremy D. Friedman Memorial Award, which recognizes outstanding leadership, superior scholarship and contributions to undergraduate life on campus.

• **Amanda J. May** is the recipient of the Alyce Marita Whitted Memorial Award, which recognizes a nontraditional student's endurance, persistence and courage in the face of extraordinary challenges while pursuing an academic degree.

These and other student award winners were honored Sunday, June 6, at a virtual awards ceremony. A recording of the ceremony is available online.

The 2021 Mortar Board Award, which recognizes the student who earned the highest cumulative GPA of the graduating class, was presented to Zihao Zeng. He has completed a bachelor of arts degree in economics.

In addition, Tianna White and Essence M. Wynter received the Yonie Harris Award for Civility in Public Discourse, which is presented to graduates who best exemplify the principles of free speech and respectful dialogue and who fosters a campus climate of civility and open-mindedness. Eric Xavier Palacios received the Michael D. Young Engaged Scholar Award, named for the vice chancellor for student affairs emeritus, which is awarded to students who have skillfully integrated their scholarly knowledge and/or values into action.

Other awards included the University Service Award, the University Award of Distinction and the Vice Chancellor's Award for Scholarship, Leadership and Citizenship.

Eseka, the campus's Storke Award winner, came to UC Santa Barbara as a freshman member of the Promise Scholars Program, which provides funding and resources to income-eligible students who demonstrate exceptional potential. Four years later, she graduates with a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology, with minors in history and professional writing. She will begin working toward a juris doctor this fall and plans to become an immigration attorney.

Eseka's academic excellence, sophisticated research, broad campus involvement and significant local and statewide achievements embody the character celebrated by the Storke Award. Over the course of her studies as a Promise Scholar and a College of Letters and Science Honors Program student, Eseka received numerous grants and created timely, original research. She was a Raab Writing Fellow, participated in the prestigious UCLA Law Fellowship and, under the mentorship of Associate Professor Mhoze Chikowero, conducted a grant-funded independent research project.

In addition to her academic work, Eseka serves as leadership development director for the Black Student Union; a notetaker and proctor for the Disabled Student Program; undergraduate student representative on the MultiCultural Center director search committee; a two-year resident assistant in Residential & Community Living; and a peer mentor for the College of Letters and Science Honors Program, the Black Scholars' Hall and the Promise Scholar Program.

As the Michael D. Young Intern in Student Affairs Academic Initiatives, Eseka contributed significantly to software modernization efforts that impact course planning, scheduling and student advising, and proposed a series of high-impact,

research-based practices to further increase graduation rates for low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students. She also serves as an intern for the assistant vice chancellor for enrollment services.

At the same time, she supervised a team of student staff working on the groundbreaking Scholar Retention Program, which supports re-entry students who had been academically disqualified or otherwise dropped out complete their degrees.

Eseka worked as a summer legislative intern for U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, served as the chairperson for the Coalition for a Better UC, and organized campaigns in support of administrative and state bills, lobbying in Sacramento for their passage. She has shared her time, experience and insights through various speaking engagements, including as a panelist for the UC-wide Financial Aid Leadership Institute and as a presenter at Parents and Family Weekend and at the 139th meeting of the UC Santa Barbara Foundation Board of Trustees.

Completing a double major in political science and English in just two and a half years, Friedman Award recipient Adalis Yamilet Rojas also devoted her time at UC Santa Barbara to serving her fellow students, making extraordinary and sustainable contributions in the areas of student mental health and wellbeing.

Rojas distributed self-care packages to students, produced videos with Health and Wellness to address anxiety and body positivity, allocated $10,000 to a COVID-19 task force for emergency student funding and produced content for the campus’s new Wellbeing website.

In addition, she leveraged her role as an Associated Students Senator to create and direct a Student Mental Health Task Force and a Well-Being Peer Program to support incoming students and make all students aware of mental health resources available to them.

The pandemic presented new challenges for Rojas, but also provided opportunities for her to pivot from on-campus projects to virtual ones. She organized a community YouthWell panel, aimed at high school students, that focused on social justice, she represented the university to prospective students during virtual recruitment events, and she participated in undergraduate research with the Department of Political Science.

In the words of her nominator, Rojas “has taken the energy that already existed among student leaders, added to it and coalesced it into a sustainable structure that will remain after she graduates. In this way, she is, by definition, a great success.”

With deep humility and without need for recognition, Whitted Award recipient Amanda J. May served students in recovery throughout her time at UC Santa Barbara. Building on her own life experiences, challenges and recovery journey, she dedicated herself both as a member of the Alcohol and Drug Program and on her own schedule, offering an ear to students in need and to creating more inclusive spaces to support students in all stages and choices around recovery from substance use.

May’s insights and ideas helped guide Gauchos for Recovery over the past two years as the program moved from a primarily 12-step abstinence-based group to an open recovery model, which included students considering other recovery pathways. May was able to pave the way for individuals of all identities and backgrounds to be welcomed into the recovery space and programs. In addition, recognizing the unique challenges faced by certain identities, she created a new women’s/non-binary recovery meeting that allowed attendees to explore their needs.

With staff at the Alcohol and Drug Program, May recognized the need for an opioid prevention and response program and underwent training to educate others on the use of Naloxone, the opioid overdose reversal drug. She trained fellow students on implementing peer-to-peer distribution and education on appropriate use.

Even during the pandemic, May’s passion for her work continued as she shifted to online meetings and events, carefully navigating the issues of setting up supportive space where rules and agreements were met despite participants’ disparate physical locations.

May completed her bachelor’s degrees in history and sociology and plans to attend law school.

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.