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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**PRESS RELEASE**

**High Achieving Foster Youth Who Exemplify Academic Success Take Center Stage at the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual “Celebration 2013” Graduation Ceremony on Tuesday, June 4<sup>th</sup>**

**Nearly \$900,000 in scholarships to be awarded to 180 youth including aspiring biologists, entrepreneurs, psychologists, attorneys, FBI agents, doctors, pilots and social workers.**

(LOS ANGELES, MAY 30, 2013) —180 young adults will proudly take center stage to celebrate their many successes on Tuesday, June 4, 2013, as part of the 24th annual “Celebration 2013: Honoring the Academic Achievements of Foster Youth.” This unique event begins at 7 p.m. at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, located at 111 South Grand Avenue in downtown Los Angeles. Mark Ridley-Thomas, Board Chair of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors will address the graduates. Guest speaker David Ambroz is a nationally recognized leader in numerous aspects of philanthropy, child health, child education, and child welfare. Daisy Gonzalez, a former foster youth, Celebration Alumnus, and second-year Doctoral student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Sociology, will share her insights with the graduates.

Hundreds of friends, foster parents, and family members will applaud and cheer as the proud graduates march across the stage to honor this significant milestone in their lives—an occasion marked by academic achievement and triumph over adversity. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Director Philip L. Browning are among the invited guests.

**Below are eight of the many personal and moving stories** of the “Celebration 2013” graduates. If you would like to interview any of these remarkable youth or other youth involved in Celebration 2013, please contact Neil Zanville or Dominique Robinson with the DCFS Office of Public Affairs at (213) 351-5886.

**The Celebration graduation starts at 7 pm. Celebration graduates will be available for interviews as they arrive at the Disney Concert Hall at 2 p.m. and from 4:30 – 5, the graduates profiled below will field questions from the media in our Green Room. Media will be allowed to film a rehearsal of the students taking the stage at 3 p.m. During the**

*“To Enrich Lives Through Effective and Caring Service”*

actual ceremony, media will only be allowed to film from the back row of the Disney Concert Hall. If you plan to cover the event, please let us know in advance when you will arrive.

**Jenna Shelton** (Accepted at UC Berkeley; 3.98 GPA; Career Goal: Psychology)

Jenna has spent her life struggling with **cerebral palsy** and challenges at home. She's had **25 surgeries and 7 years of extensive speech and physical therapy**. Her speech therapy has allowed her a degree of independence to express herself in a manner she chooses. And she expresses herself magnificently. Says Jenna, "Life cannot be wasted harboring resentments from the past. We look at others as catalysts of our sufferings and focus too much on what or who has caused a problem." She plans on becoming a speech therapist or clinical psychologist, using her insights and empathetic skills to alleviate the pain of others—"to become a voice for the voiceless." Jenna has earned an impressive 3.98 grade point average and will be attending UC Berkeley. Says Jenna, "Whatever I do with my life, I will be sincerely happy bringing a little ray of light into someone's life each day I live. Watch me thrive!"

**Michelle Salas** (Accepted at Biola University; 4.17 GPA; Carrer Goal: Medical Career)

**Michelle's mother was an illegal immigrant involved with drugs and criminal activity.** Michelle was placed in 8 different foster homes and by age 10, was struggling with severe depression, anger and suicidal ideation, fearful that her life would follow her mother's path. Her 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher saw something special beyond the young girl's pain and, together with her husband, became Michelle's foster parents and later legal guardians. With a stable home, love, and support, Michelle's self esteem grew and she came to believe that she had a future. In addition to a full schedule of advanced placement and honors classes, she immersed herself in school activities including drama, French club, salsa, club, and varsity cheerleading. She was selected as her school's 2012 Homecoming Queen. Michelle was recently informed that **she is 1 of only 106 students nationwide to receive the prestigious Horatio Alger National Scholarship**, awarded to students who have achieved academic excellence, (4.17 grade point average) while overcoming adversity. Her arduous journey has inspired her to work with those less fortunate in third world countries and she's planning on a medical career at Biola University.

**Gardenia Centanaro** (Accepted at Columbia University; 3.48 GPA; Career Goal: Social Worker)

Gardenia is a renowned champion pole-vaulter, having established numerous state records. But behind the firm handshake & pleasant smile is a young woman who has overcome many obstacles, determined to succeed against all odds. She is 1 of 9 children and since birth has been in 12 different foster homes. **Her mother struggled with drug and alcohol abuse, leading to an overdose which Gardenia witnessed as paramedics' attempted to revive her.** Born with drugs in her system, Gardenia was lucky to escape any ill effects but her brother died at age 10 due to drug-induced health problems. That tragedy sharpened her resolve to persevere, regardless of challenges she faced. When she was 6-years-old, her 19-year old sister assumed the role of mentor, protector and became her legal guardian. As the captain of the highly regarded Roosevelt High Track & Field Program, she routinely establishes new heights as a much awarded champion pole vaulter. Gardenia couldn't afford

the \$400 to purchase her own pole, so she had to borrow from other schools, wash cars & mow lawns to purchase her own poles. For the last 3 years, she has established new pole vault records in Riverside County; became the first pole vaulter in the Big 8 League to compete in the State Meet and is currently regarded as the favorite to win Southern Section Division 1 Pole Vault Title. **Gardenia is currently ranked the #1 pole vaulter in California.** Out of 800 seniors at her high school, she is only 1 of 7 who will compete at Collegiate Level-1. She's a star in the classroom as well, taking honors classes and advanced placement courses. Her 3.4 GPA has earned her acceptance at Columbia University where she hopes to become a social worker and help children like herself.

**Carin Duriez** (Accepted at UC Davis; 4.1 GPA; Career Goal: Biologist)

It's telling that Carin likes to quote Darwin: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change." And Carin has successfully adapted to some of life's toughest challenges. She grew up in a household with drugs, alcohol, and guns and was forced to fend for herself. **At age 4, she was accidentally shot in the back,** suffering permanent nerve damage in her leg and back which limits her mobility. She was placed with her siblings in foster care. Her father's long-term battle with alcohol added to the chaos. She turned to school and food for solace, struggling with low self-esteem and anorexia nervosa. **At one point, she weighed only 78 pounds, barely hanging on to life, requiring hospitalization.** She received treatment which successfully resolved her eating disorder and she learned new ways to cope with her feelings. Her homes have changed and new conflicts will arise, but now Carin is up to the challenge. She is dedicated to securing a college scholarship to pursue a medical career. With a 4.1 GPA, in the top 10% of her class, she will undoubtedly succeed.

**Maria Silva** (Accepted at CSU Fullerton; 3.13 GPA; Career Goal: FBI Agent)

On her way home from school, **Maria heard a car crash and found her younger brother lying on the pavement bleeding. He died in her arms.** She and her family were devastated. Her traumatized mother turned to alcohol, and in doing so, neglected her children. **In November 2009, her mother, ill with pneumonia died—another unimaginable loss** for young Maria. As the world around came crashing down, she struggled with depression. Her life stabilized when she went to live with her aunt who became her legal guardian. Maria realized that while her mother and brother's lives had ended, hers had not; she would dedicate herself to living her life with purpose because that is what they would have wanted. Refocused, she joined her school's cheerleading team which provided her a joyful outlet. She became the cheerleading captain and was now inspired to join the cross country and soccer teams, all the while juggling a full academic schedule. Says Maria, "If I went through all that, there isn't anything worse I cannot overcome." She hopes to become an FBI agent, and will pursue that dream at Cal State University Fullerton.

**Vincent Bartle** (Accepted at UC Berkeley; 3.94 GPA; Career Goal: Lawyer)

Vincent recalls an early childhood memory that left an indelible impression—being awakened by a drive-by shooting in the projects. Life kept throwing challenges in his path. His family suffered financial hardships, and was evicted from several apartments. While his mother took on part-time jobs to provide for her family, Vincent's father became increasingly disoriented

from dementia requiring hospitalization. As the eldest son, Vincent took on the responsibility to help out with food and necessities. Along the way, something unexpected happened; **while attending his family's Dependency Court hearings, Vincent became fascinated with the legal proceedings, frequently discussing the finer points of law with his court appointed attorneys.** For Vincent, the law provides him with a sense of control over difficult circumstances. Last summer, he was an intern with a criminal defense lawyer and added to his legal knowledge by sitting in on court murder hearings. To further sharpen his skills as a future attorney, he started the first debate team at his school. By pursuing a legal career, Vincent hopes to help families in situations similar to his own.

**Katherine Ford** (Accepted at Oberlin College; 3.50 GPA; Career Goals: African-American Studies/ Law)

Katherine's first lessons on the basketball court were not easily learned. But following months of hard work, practice, and perseverance, **she was playing on the state's top girl's AAU Club basketball team.** Perhaps more difficult for the young African-American girl was acclimating to a new school in Pacific Palisades. The classes were difficult and the life styles markedly different. Katherine was not deterred. She made the honor roll and has been a starter on the team's varsity basketball team for the past 2 years. **She finds the time to participate in her school's Black Leadership Awareness and Culture Club, the Green Club, the Christian Club, and the Gay-Straight Alliance.** For the past 10 years, she has been actively involved with **Jack & Jill of America**, a community group informing young African-American youth about their culture and history. As if her schedule wasn't busy enough, she finds the time to work with young children through creative writing in the Writegirl and 826 LA programs. Recently, **she addressed an audience of 1,000 discussing child sexual abuse at the UCLA Rape Treatment Center, which fundraised over \$100,000.** Katherine will be studying sociology and African-American Studies at Oberlin College and then plans to pursue a law degree. She hopes to start a foundation and advocate for those unable to help themselves.

**James Young** (Accepted at Arizona State university; 3.5 GPA: Career Goal: Air Force/ Political Science)

James' parents have not been involved in his life. He was raised by his grandparents, and when his grandfather passed away, he felt like he lost his best friend and coach—the only person who had been there for him through all the ups and downs. James promised his grandfather that he would finish high school, college and join the military. While attending Lancaster High School, he joined the JROTC and accumulated multiple ribbons in recognition of his leadership, community service, and academic achievement. He was named "Cadet of the Quarter," awarded to the best senior cadet, the Kitty Hawk Award, and achieved the rank of Lieutenant Colonel Cadet, the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest rank in his corps. James also has received varsity letters for football and swimming and made achieved All Academic Team Honors his senior year. For two consecutive semesters, he achieved a GPA of 3.6 or higher. This fall he will attend Arizona State University to study History and Political Science. Following college he plans to join the Air Force—honoring all the promises he made to his grandfather.

**Additional Event Information:**

As part of the "Celebration 2013" graduation ceremony, nearly \$900,000 in scholarships will be presented to the youth by a variety of corporations and non-profit organizations. Donors include Los Angeles County Departments of Children and Family Services and Probation, United Friends of the Children, The Teague Family Foundation, Youth Opportunities United, Inc., Heads Up Youth Foundation, KLOS Radio, Coalition for At Risk Youth , Rotary Club of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services/ Managers, Accenture, Jane Mabie Memorial Scholarship/ All Saints Church Foster Care Project, One Child at a Time, Torrance Women's Club, and the Los Angeles County African-American Employees Association.

"Celebration 2013" is a collaborative effort involving the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, DCFS, the County of Los Angeles Probation Department, the Rotary Club of Los Angeles and United Friends of the Children, a non-profit organization that provides the direct and in-depth services that make it possible for foster youth to become self-sustaining adults.

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