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PRESS RELEASE

High-Achieving Foster Youth Who Exemplify Academic Success Take Center Stage at the 27th Annual “Celebration 2016” Graduation Ceremony on Tuesday, June 7th

Nearly \$1,000,000 in scholarships to be awarded to 175 youth including aspiring astrophysicists, journalists, doctors, therapists, and youth advocates.

(LOS ANGELES, June 7, 2016) —175 college-bound young adults will proudly take center stage to celebrate their many successes on Tuesday, June 7, 2016 as part of the 27th annual “Celebration 2016: Honoring the Academic Achievements of Foster Youth.” This unique event, a source of inspiration for all in attendance and disadvantaged youth everywhere, begins at 7 p.m. at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, located at 111 South Grand Avenue in downtown Los Angeles.

Hundreds of friends, foster parents, and family members 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.

Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Director Philip L. Browning will address and bestow congratulations upon the graduates.

Actor Danny Trejo, who’s starred in over two hundred Hollywood films (Runaway Train, Heat, Con Air, Desperado, Machete, and Spy Kids) and in TV shows (Breaking Bad, The X-Files and Sons of Anarchy) will have a special message for the graduates. Throughout the 1960s, Trejo was in and out of jail and prison in California. In the decades since, Trejo has been an active force for positive change in the community, visiting youth in Juvenile Halls, discussing sobriety.

Featured youth speaker Ashley Williams is a former foster youth, 2008 Celebration Alumna, recent UCLA graduate and current law student at Southwestern Law School. She is a recipient of the Jackie Robinson Foundation Award, a Sidley and Austin LLP Diversity Initiative Scholar, a Justice Corps Fellow, a California Bar Foundation Scholar, and Langston Bar Association Scholarship winner. At Southwestern Law School, she currently coordinates the Teen Court Program, teaches in Southwestern’s Street Law Clinic, and is an advocate for the Children’s

“To Enrich Lives Through Effective and Caring Service”

Rights Clinic. This past summer, Ashley worked as a Congressional Intern for Congresswoman Karen Bass, as part of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption.

Also performing onstage is 2014 Celebration participant Quron Clarks, an accomplished dancer who has danced with the Debbie Allen Dance Academy and Lula Washington Dance Theatre, and current Celebration graduate Nicholas Olivares, a classical pianist.

The Celebration graduation starts at 7 pm. Graduates profiled below will be available for interviews in the Green Room from 4 – 5:00 p.m. Media will be allowed to film a rehearsal of the students taking the stage at 3:30 p.m. During the 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.

Below are some of the many personal and moving stories from “Celebration 2016” graduates:

“It is impossible to become an astronaut when there is not enough food to eat.”

As a young boy experimenting with rockets, Moises knew he wanted to be an astronaut. Says Moises, “It’s impossible to become an astronaut growing up in El Salvador when there’s not enough food to eat.” His older brother earned enough money to bring his family to the U.S., but permission was denied by the U.S. embassy. At 13, Moises came to the U.S. by himself, trusting strangers to help him make the dangerous journey. He witnessed violence and death while riding the top of a cargo train. If that wasn’t his biggest challenge, learning a new language was. He was invited to join UCLA Writer’s Workshop, which greatly accelerated his language skills. His childhood fascination with science drew him to his school’s robotics team and became the main programmer and advisor. Moises is a member of the Cyber Security Team charged with keeping malicious hackers out of his school’s different computer systems. Just for fun, Moises enjoys working on partial differential equations, calculation electric fields and approximating thermal energy of motors. He plans to attend UCLA to study computer science and his 3.65 GPA and sophisticated science skills should help him achieve whatever he chooses to pursue.

“Attending public schools in the inner city isn’t easy when you’re a black gay foster child.”

“Attending public schools in the inner city isn’t easy when you’re a black gay foster child.” Growing up, Emani would cover up his bruises from excessive bullying so his family wouldn’t see them. He decided that to move forward he had to accept himself for who he truly was—black, gay, independent, driven, and a leader. Emani has done just that. He is the senior class president, Dance Club president and active in his school’s LGBT club. His message to others dealing with similar struggles is to love themselves, value their own worth, and disregard negative opinions. Emani hopes to spread his positive message through dance, which has always been his expressive outlet. In addition to dance, he plans to study broadcast journalism as well at Marymount Manhattan College in New York to ensure that different voices, such as his, are heard.

Following homelessness, absences from school, and disruptive family life, a doubting and shy young girl empowers herself.

Being a “daddy’s girl,” 11-year-old Sylvia could hardly wait for her father to be released from prison, all the while not appreciating her mother’s efforts to raise 4 children by herself. Homelessness and absences from school resulted in Sylvia and her siblings being separated and placed in foster care. This dramatic disruption had Sylvia attending 6 different elementary schools. A once open and talkative young girl became shy and hesitant, and began to question her own self-worth and place in the world. She and her siblings were reunited when they were placed in the care of an aunt who was granted custody, allowing her to reestablish regular contact with her parents. These difficulties made it perfectly clear that she and only she could control her own life by choosing never to give up. Sylvia has learned that she cannot be easily broken; that she will “pursue, not dream, and accomplish.” With a GPA of 4.3 and acceptance into USC, her dreams of becoming an animal doctor will undoubtedly be accomplished.

Hearing impairments are just another obstacle to overcome for this special youth who aspires to help others with hearing issues.

When Karina was born, her doctors told her mom that she was not going to be able to walk, eat, or talk. With her mom’s support, she was able to get the treatment she needed, but still she remains deaf in one ear and hard of hearing in the other. As a young child, she was subject to lots of cruel taunts for wearing hearing aids. A learning delay also impedes her ability to process new information or as Karina puts it, “I learn differently.” Losing her mother to cancer at age 14 caused Karina overwhelming emotional despair; she became numb to her own feelings. Being placed in foster care in the Antelope Valley, an hour away from friends and the life she knew, felt like all her important connections were severed. Spanish was the language spoken at home, so she needed to improve her English skills as well. Therapy has helped her open up again and reconnect to her feelings and those around her. She has developed a nurturing relationship with her foster parents who consider her family. Karina has worked as a volunteer animal worker with Los Angeles County Animal Care and Control and has served as a Volunteer Juror with the City of Lancaster Teen Court. She’s an active participant in her school’s American Sign Language Club and Christian Club, and is planning on a career as a Certified Interpreter for the Deaf.

“Theater affords me a second home. Onstage, I escape from the world and express myself without limitations.”

“Curtains up, lights, band, break a leg!” This theater jargon translates into a second home for Jevonne, who with his 3 sisters moved from home to home with little stability growing up. In 4th grade, he was relocated from Nevada to Compton, a community filled with gangs, drugs, and violence. It was his “foster granny” who changed his life forever by exposing him to the Amazing Grace Conservatory, a local theater group. Jevonne immediately knew he wanted to make this new world his own and by his freshmen year in high school, he had starred in 8 plays. “When I am onstage, I escape from the world and express myself without limitations.” Although his early years were traumatic, he feels fortunate to have found his passion and share it with the people he calls his family. He dreams of studying theater and one day opening a conservatory where foster youth can learn about theater and thrive. Most recently, Jevonne starred in Bye Bye Birdie at the Nate Holden Theater.

“I may be half-blind, but I see the world and my purpose more fully now.”

Ni'tasha was diagnosed with glaucoma in her left eye, leaving her with only partial vision. By the age of 8, she had over 7 surgeries to correct her vision and reposition her eye, only to be told that she would be left with 10% vision. Her situation darkened when her mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia, resulting in Ni'tasha and her 4 siblings being separated in foster care. Although angry and frightened, her situation dramatically improved when she was placed in the home of her current legal guardian who encouraged Ni'tasha to play sports, volunteer at church, and pursue her studies. Having someone believe in her made all the difference. Says Ni'tasha “I took the opportunity and ran with it—literally,” participating in varsity basketball, dance, and volleyball programs and earning the Scholar Athlete Award and a \$10,000 “Beating the Odds Scholarship from the Children’s Defense Fund.” Realizing that her remaining vision could go at any moment, she makes the best of what she has now. Volunteering to serve her community through her church has provided her with fulfillment and purpose. Ni'tasha is planning on pursuing a career in sports medicine. “I may be half-blind, but I see the world and my purpose more fully now.”

“People assume nothing good comes from foster care which gave me that motivation to be a better person and allowed me to focus on going to college.”

Jennifer feels that she’s the person she is and who she’ll become because of her experiences in foster care which have had a positive influence. As Jennifer says, “people assume nothing good comes from being placed in the foster system.” Faced with these preconceived notions, Jennifer lets people know that she learned a lot of valuable skills and lessons from her experiences. Initially, her journey into foster care was difficult, but she soon became empowered to make her own decisions; to see the positive side of things, and escape from physical and emotional abuse of a mentally unstable mother. With the support of her foster parents and social worker, Jennifer began to imagine a different future for herself, one not restricted by family dynamics or money. Financial aids and workshops, including her Celebration involvement, have paved the way for her to focus on her future as a physical therapist. “Foster care gave me that motivation to be a better person and allowed me to focus on going to college.”

This UCLA-bound scholar’s guiding principle is to speak her mind against injustices.

Shortly after being placed in foster care with 4 other girls, eight-year-old Carolyn reported to her social worker that their foster mother had mistreated one of the other girls. She felt she had to say something. This sense of responsibility would guide her throughout her life; to always speak up, even if it is inconvenient and causes problems. Carolyn hopes to pursue a career in photojournalism and to advocate for mistreated and underrepresented foster youth. With a 4.0 GPA and acceptance to UCLA, she’ll achieve whatever she sets her sights on. Carolyn has worked and volunteered for Neighbors Acting Together Helping All on an anti-smoking, obesity, and drugs and alcohol campaigns. She’s also been active in her church ministries’ Skid Row efforts. She’s a National Honors Society honoree and tutors younger children.

If you would like to interview any of these remarkable youth or other youth involved in Celebration 2016, please contact Neil Zanville or Amara Suarez with the DCFS Office of Public Affairs at (213) 351-5886. Depending on their availability, youth can be interviewed on days prior to and after the Celebration 2016 graduation.

Additional Event Information:

As part of the “Celebration 2016” graduation ceremony, nearly \$1,000,000 in scholarships will be presented to the youth by a variety of corporations and non-profit organizations. Should the public be interested in contributing to the scholarship funds for Celebration graduates, they can contact Charlotte Lewis with DCFS Youth Development Services at (213) 351-0159.

“Celebration 2016” is a collaborative effort including the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, the Los Angeles County Departments of Children and Family Services and Probation, the Rotary Club of Los Angeles and United Friends of the Children.

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