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PRESS RELEASE

High-Achieving Foster Youth Who Exemplify Academic Success Take Center Stage at the 29th Annual “Celebration 2017” Graduation Ceremony on Tuesday, June 27th.

Scholarships awarded to all 175 youth, many the first in their families to attend college.

(LOS ANGELES, June 15, 2017) —175 college-bound young adults will proudly take center stage to celebrate their many successes on Tuesday, June 27, 2017 as part of the 29th annual “Celebration 2017: Honoring the Academic Achievements of Foster Youth.” This unique event, a source of inspiration for all in attendance, 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, family members, and social workers 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.

“Celebration 2017” is a collaborative effort involving the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Los Angeles County Department of Probation, the Rotary Club of Los Angeles, and United Friends of the Children.

Kara Allen Soldati, President and Chief Executive Officer of United Friends of the Children, DCFS Acting Director Brandon T. Nichols and Terri L. McDonald of the Los Angeles County Department of Probation will address and bestow congratulations upon the graduates.

“I am really inspired by the students celebrated at this event. They are setting high goals for themselves. Many will be the first in their families to attend college and are already looking for ways to improve our world through careers in areas like child welfare, immigration, racial discrimination, and LGBTQ equality. It is so great to watch them succeed,” said Brandon Nichols.

Featured youth speaker Miani Giron, a former foster youth, 2012 Celebration alumna, and current medical student at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, will emphasize that other foster youth can achieve their dreams as she has. 2016 Celebration participant Jevonne Davis will perform a dramatic monologue onstage. Last year, Jevonne and other Celebration

“To Enrich Lives Through Effective and Caring Service”

graduates scripted and starred in a short film, “Time for Change,” which was screened as a finalist entry at a White House film festival and will be highlighted during this year’s graduation event.

The graduates will be surprised and thrilled to hear from guest celebrities Krista Marie Yu, Jaime Camil, and Christine Adams.

Krista Marie Yu is a champion and spokesperson for former first lady, Michelle Obama’s Better Make Room Campaign, which promotes higher education for youth. Krista stars in ABC’s drama “Dr. Ken”, playing Ken Jeong’s (Dr. Ken) daughter ‘Molly’. Prior to “Dr. Ken,” Krista had recurring roles on Nickelodeon’s comedy series “The Thundermans,” as well as ABC’s “Cougar Town.” On the big screen, Krista can be seen in the comedy “Love the Coopers,” starring Alan Arkin and Ed Helms and the horror thriller “6 Miranda Drive,” starring Kevin Bacon and Radha Mitchell.

Golden Globe, Critics’ Choice, Teen Choice-nominee and Imagen Award-winner Jaime Camil plays ‘Rogelio de la Vega’ on CW’s hit-series “Jane the Virgin.” The Mexican-born actor-singer-heartthrob is an international superstar, starring in award-winning films (PULLING STRINGS, 200 CARTAS), mega-hit telenovelas (“Por Ella Soy Eva”, “La Fea Más Bella”) and recording four platinum selling albums

Christine Adams recently starred alongside David Schwimmer and Jim Sturgess on the AMC series FEED THE BEAST and portrayed ‘Agent Weaver’ on the hit ABC series MARVEL’S AGENTS OF S.H.I.E.L.D. On CW’s most anticipated upcoming DC Comic series BLACK LIGHTNING, she’ll star as ‘Lynn.’

All “Celebration 2017” graduates will receive scholarships ranging from \$1,000 to \$15,000 from a variety of agencies, organizations, corporations and non-profit organizations including Accenture, Coalition for At Risk Youth, Department of Children and Family Services, Department of Children and Family Services Managers, Department of Children and Family Services Trust Fund, Foster Care Counts, Heads Up Youth Foundation, Jane Mabie Memorial Scholarship/ All Saints Church Foster Care Project, Los Angeles County African American Employee Association, Rising Stars, Rotary Club of Los Angeles, Swing for School/ Lifestream Global Ministries, Torrance Woman’s Club, United Friends of the Children, Winford Dixon Jr. Scholarship Fund and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Omicron Rho Zeta Chapter.

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 (626) 938-1727.

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 personal and moving stories from “Celebration 2017” graduates:

TV Producer, Thespian, Comedy Improv, Debate and Model United Nations Team Member

Nancy, a whirlwind of nonstop activity, produces and hosts “Good Morning MLK” for her high school and will shortly be interning for TV’s Steve Harvey. She volunteers for Foster Care Counts and the Boys & Girls Club of Watts, is a photographer and school advocate for youth at Woman Wonder Writers and welcomes incoming school freshmen while helping them with their schoolwork. She’s lettered on the “Varsity Comedy Sportz Improv Team.” Nancy also participates in choir, has acted, written and promoted plays as part of school’s repertory class and has been invited to compete at the International Thespian Conference. She was a semifinalist for the August Wilson Monologue Competition and still finds time to serve as the President of MLK High School’s Model United Nations Team, Vice-President of the Professional Arts Conservatory and member of the school’s Debate Team. Nancy boasts a 3.57 grade point average and plans to study Communications at Chapman University. Best of all, her foster parents of 6 years are adopting her to provide the stability she needs to continue pursuing all her dreams.

A Search for the “Genuine Self”

Edgar identifies as transgender; that is, “she” identifies as female. Edgar grew up in a close-minded family with a homophobic father requiring Edgar to hide who she truly was. Drug dealing by parents, deportation and jail resulted in Edgar being placed with her godmother who allowed her to be her “genuine self.” Edgar came to realize that she had to change her way of thinking and learn to accept and love herself. Says Edgar, “writing has been an important part of my life and one of the ways I use to express my sexual and gender identity and inner thoughts.” She joined Students against Gender Oppression, an activist community support group and seeks to be a leader promoting gender awareness and gender equality for everyone. Her mother was shot and killed in 2010, which threw Edgar into a tailspin of depression. With the support of her godmother, teachers, counselors and mentors, Edgar focused on school, achieving a near perfect 3.98 grade point average and will be attending UC Davis where she hopes to study among other things Native American history. Edgar envisions a future in performance art, working as an activist and in philanthropy.

Twins’ paths to achievement: volunteer work, Fiji, Israel and MMA.

A conflicted relationship with their father, described as an “emotional hurricane,” resulted in twins Benjamin and Daniel being removed from their only parent, home, and friends to a new life 65 miles away. In many ways this dramatic change of events helped to liberate both twins and transform them into who they are today. With the loving support of their aunt, teachers, family and friends they’ve pursued opportunities at school and in their community. Both are active in Student Council, and have done community outreach for food shelters and the homeless. Both have worked with Bnei Akiva, a Jewish organization providing high quality education for youth. Ben was actively involved in promoting the 2016 Maccabi Games held in Florida and competed in swimming. He travelled to Fiji as a volunteer, teaching village children to read and write and built 10,000 liter water tanks enabling a steady water supply for 2 villages. Since the age of 6, Daniel has been trained and fighting every day in mixed martial arts (MMA). He competes regularly and placed on the podium in his first adult tournament.

“MMA helps me keep my emotions in check; it’s my emotional outlet and teaches me discipline and hard work. It’s a big part of my life.” In addition to fighting, power lifting, surfing, and mixing music, Daniel has started his own lifeguard business. While his twin will be starting school at UCSB this fall to study economics, Daniel will attend Bar Ilan University, in Tel Aviv Israel and study Business Management. Says Daniel, “I’m looking forward to having an amazing experience in Israel.”

“I would’ve ended up in prison or dead but I turned my life around.”

Frank refers to where he grew up as “the mud,” where he spent a lot of time hanging out with guys who are now facing life imprisonment and a few who were killed. The dangers and challenges he faced on the street made him a stronger person, more focused on what he needed to do to change his life around. Growing up, he had few memories of his father who was deported to Mexico. Although he had his ups and downs with his mother, he is grateful to still have her by his side and the loving support of his grandparents. He attends the Century Center for Economic Opportunity, a non-profit organization and charter school that works with under-served young adults to rebuild their lives and communities through leadership, education and technical training. He will pursue a career in criminal justice but also entertains the possibility of becoming a culinary chef. Says Frank, “You have to earn what you want. 2017 is my year to become the person I want to be and nobody can stop me from achieving it.” He is enrolled in AmericaCorps, a volunteer service program and has completed 135 hours of community service.

A foster youth advocate travels the state educating child welfare officials

Florencia, the 2nd youngest of 9 children, has been in and out of foster care 4 times in 7 different placements—a result of her parents’ struggle with substance abuse. “I had to grow up faster than any teenager should, caring for my younger brother and often surviving on cup of noodles and frozen burritos.” She is acutely aware that most foster youth do not graduate college but plans to be the first in her family to do so. Her 3.95 grade point average has secured her acceptance into UCLA this fall where she plans to study sociology and pursue a career in social work. “Failure is not an option,” says Valencia who dreams of someday creating her own nonprofit to help youth who’ve experienced abuse and neglect. Valencia is a member of the California Youth Connection, a foster youth advocacy organization that supports current and former foster youth teaching child welfare officials throughout the state about best practices. As part of the Foster Youth Cultural Exchange Program, she has travelled to New Zealand and Guatemala. This well rounded graduate participates in varsity volleyball, an afterschool mentoring and tutoring program, does community volunteer work that helps furnish a foster youth’s first home and serves on the her school’s Board of Education Committee and the Student Council. Florencia is a recipient of United Friends of the Children’s \$15,000 College Readiness Scholarship.

Thanks to her efforts, her school now has a fully functional library

In 2013, Anna’s father suffered a massive stroke that left him paralyzed and Anna’s life in disarray. Three months later, she was placed in foster care, separated from her home and younger sister. She had 7 different placements in high school, but attending High Tech LA afforded her a sense of direction. Says Anna, “I needed to take charge of my own future and

grasp my own ticket to happiness.” She volunteered for a mammoth project; to organize & catalog the school library which was in total disrepair. Anna learned about the library’s cataloguing software and delegated tasks to a corps of volunteers. Thanks to her efforts, a fully functional school library could be accessed and enjoyed by all students. She was appointed the President of the newly initiated Library Club. Anna also participated in the Student Council, the Student Poll Worker Program, and an art therapy program for special needs youth. She created a public art mural selected by the Lake Balboa Neighborhood Council—a design of an airplane taking flight with a sunset in the background which was displayed just off the 405 Freeway. As a result of her own experiences in the foster system, Anna wants to help advocate for causes, organizations, and those who cannot represent themselves as a lawyer. “I want to be the voice of the voiceless.” Her 3.93 grade point average is her ticket to studying law at either San Francisco State or Berkeley.

Laura is focused on breaking the family cycle of abuse by taking full advantage of educational opportunities.

At age 16, Laura arrived at an emergency shelter facility at 1 am with a backpack containing a few pieces of clothing feeling overwhelmed. She found the courage to leave her abusive home that day. Her mother, a refugee who escaped an abusive parent and the Salvadoran Civil War came to America for a better life but married into alcoholism. Laura is fiercely focused on breaking the family cycle of abuse by taking full advantage of educational opportunities. She was the first Latina foster youth to attend a prestigious Westside school and found herself at the center of debate on privilege and class. Laura quickly learned the politics of assimilation and oppression and developed an understanding around issues of inequality affecting marginalized groups. With the support of foster parents committed to her success, she has been a volunteer and mentor with Peace4 Kids and Cedars Sinai Hospital and has tutored youth with disabilities. Samantha served as her high school’s Gender Equality President, and participated in the Peace Club, Computer Club, Latina and Political Science Club. Laura plans to stay in extended foster care through the state’s AB-12 program. Her 3.40 grade point average and school and community activities have earned her admission to New York City’s Barnard College this fall where she plans to study political science.

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