



July 13, 2023 - Volume 4, Edition 7



The educational achievements of youth in foster care were applauded by family, friends and DCFS staff at the 35th annual *Celebration* event.

The Walt Disney Concert Hall stage was set, gowns were donned and speakers stood ready to offer words of inspiration to 153 eager high school graduates. While each of the scholars had their own unique story, they all shared one thing in common: They reached this milestone while living in foster care.

Achieving this feat was no easy task.

The annual Celebration event, hosted on June 27 by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), recognized the extraordinary efforts of young people who have overcome adversity to graduate high school and pursue post-secondary education at community colleges and universities.

“As a foster youth myself, I understand the immense strength, dedication, determination and tenacity required to triumph over adversity,” said alumna speaker Joelle Walley, who sat on the same stage when she finished high school in 2019.

“I commend you for harnessing the power of education to bring you to this very moment,” she added.

This determined and hardworking group of students finished high school with grade point averages of 2.80 or higher and were admitted to schools in California and throughout the country, including the University of California, Los Angeles; California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles; Clark Atlanta University and Spelman College in Georgia; and Hampton University in Virginia.

With family and friends cheering from their seats, students sat proudly on stage, enjoying a collective moment of accomplishment. Graduates received scholarship funds totaling almost \$500,000 from DCFS and private donors to help them continue their educational journey. Each young person also walked away at the end of the evening with a suitcase, personalized luggage tag and new pair of shoes, courtesy of the [She Ready Foundation](#).

“You guys are beautiful — You shine and you inspire me,” said DCFS Director Brandon T. Nichols, choking back tears while addressing the graduates.

Rapper ScarLip and actors Cedric Joe and Kareem Grimes offered sage advice to the graduates, who were also treated to a series of congratulatory videos from celebrities Tiffany Haddish, Jalyn Hall, Shamon Brown Jr. and Chance the Rapper. Emcee and KTLA co-anchor Chris Schauble, himself an adoptee, shared his own enthusiastic outlook for their future. Other guest speakers

included Los Angeles County Supervisor Lindsey Horvath, Chief Executive Officer Fesia Davenport and DCFS Deputy Director Angela Parks-Pyles.

Walley, who now holds a bachelor's degree in computer science and double minors in African American studies and civil and environmental engineering from the University of California, Berkeley, urged the class of 2023 to view this success as the first of many.

"Let us recognize and embrace the tremendous potential that lies within each of us," she said. "By leveraging our unique experiences and education, we can create a ripple effect of transformation and inspire those who come after us."



College graduate Joelle Walley, whose experience in foster care fueled her educational drive, encouraged the honorees to believe in themselves and continue reaching for their dreams.

DCFS extends its deepest gratitude to the community and County partners whose sponsorships and support make this event possible each year. These include: [Connecting a Caring Community](#); the [Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors](#); the [Los Angeles County Office of Education](#); the [Los Angeles Urban League](#); [Rambo House](#); [Rotary Club of Los Angeles](#); and [TeleHealth Van](#).

For 35 years, DCFS' Independent Living Program has coordinated the Celebration event. Our thanks and appreciation to the staff for staging a beautiful and memorable evening for the class of 2023.

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