



Beach entrepreneur Ronald M. Simon, helps promising students from challenging life circumstances succeed in college and beyond.

Five Santa Ana students who received full scholarships from the Ronald Simon Family Foundation in 2003 – Mike Nguyen, Isela Arias, Victor Lopez, Janet Mendoza and Antonio De Jesus – returned to Orange County to talk about how the scholarships changed their lives. The students gathered at the Big Canyon County Club in Newport Beach for a luncheon. Ron Simon made an appearance to speak with the students. All students came from poor families and have graduated from Harvard and UC Berkeley, among other prestigious schools.

Since its inception in 2003, the Simon Scholars Program has awarded more than \$23 million in scholarships and program services to more than 700 students. It also maintains a strong success rate, with 90 percent of its students who enter four-year colleges eventually graduating. This figure outpaces the national average, even though Simon Scholars come from the most disadvantaged of circumstances.

Espinoza says that one of the most powerful aspects of the program for him came early, when he and the other students took a college tour and discovered what kinds of possibilities were out there.

"For a lot of students, we've never left the community. To hop on a plane and see the world around

you, it gets your imagination going," he says.

After high school graduation, Espinoza became the first person in his family to attend college. He just completed his sophomore year at Georgetown University, where he received a full scholarship.

"Simon Scholars is not just about writing a check," Espinoza says. "It's about developing the character of its scholars. It's all about building up an individual who is going to grow up and give back."

This year, the Newport-Mesa Unified School District joined a growing list of high schools that offer the program, including schools in Santa Ana and Garden Grove. The program is also offered in San Diego County; New Mexico; Atlanta, Georgia; and Washington, D.C.

What sets the program apart is that it offers more than just financial aid for students, says Dr. Kathy Simons Abels, executive director.

"It's really a person-building program," she says. "The money really ends up not being that important in the end."

A cohort of promising and ambitious students from disadvantaged backgrounds is chosen at the end of their sophomore year in high school, Abels says. They are supported with intensive activities such as summer retreats, college tours and workshops on topics – everything from business etiquette to how to cook in college.

During high school, the students receive a cash stipend and a computer, along with SAT- and ACT-prep classes, college counseling and access to a networking association. Following high school graduation, Simon Scholars receive a \$16,000 college scholarship.

"Most of our students are first-generation college students whose parents have often raised them in survival mode," Abels says. "Part of what we do is to help prepare them for college and teach them to take advantage of every resource in their environment."

Many Simon Scholars such as Espinoza ultimately earn other financial aid awards from private supporters or the colleges themselves.

"I can't emphasize how special these kids are," Abels says. "They have beaten the odds. Despite other influences, they are choosing to be successful. These are the kind of people you want to hire, who you want in your community."

The program selects up to eight Simon Scholars per participating high school. The Orange County high schools that currently participate in the program are Rancho Alamitos, Estancia, Costa Mesa, Los Amigos, Saddleback and Segerstrom.

Recruiting for the program begins in January of the students' sophomore year, with the final selections taking place around May (deadlines vary by individual schools). For additional information about the program, go to simonscholars.org.

Soaring college costs

How important are private financial aid sources such as Simon Scholars to high school students? Just consider today's climbing costs of college tuition.

The College Board reports that a "moderate" college budget for an in-state public college in 2013-14 averaged \$22,826, while a moderate budget at a private college averaged \$44,750.

The average cost of college tuition has been outpacing overall inflation for years and is continuing to rise at a rate of 4.5 percent at private universities and 8.3 percent at public colleges, reports the U.S.

Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. At that rate, in 2029, when today's toddlers are ready to start college, the four-year cost of tuition and fees will be \$355,900 for a private college degree, \$102,900 at a public university and \$35,700 at a two-year community college. Those figures don't even include books, room and board, and other costs.

Still, when it comes to lifetime earnings, college degrees still pay off. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a person with an undergraduate degree will earn \$900,000 more in his or her lifetime than a high school graduate will, while someone with a master's degree will see \$1.3 million more.

Research by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce has also shown the importance of college degrees in the sectors with more job growth. During the last recession, approximately 6 million high-school-only jobs were lost.

Researchers found that the unemployment rate for all four-year graduates is 4.5 percent, while it is 6.8 percent for recent college graduates. However, for those trying to work with only a high school diploma, the unemployment rate is nearly 24 percent.

College bound!

The Simon Scholars Program continues to transform the lives of disadvantaged O.C. teens.

Like many children growing up in his Santa Ana neighborhood, Jonathan Espinoza did not imagine that college was in his future. Born to a single teenage parent and the oldest of six children, Espinoza watched his mother struggle financially just to get by. A strong student, he focused on his studies and dreamed of someday being elected president of the United States.

When Jonathan got to Segerstrom High School, he was so unfamiliar with the workings of higher

education, he didn't know how he could make his dreams a reality.

"Even when I got to high school, I was under the impression that only three higher institutions existed," he says. "There was Santa Ana College, UC Irvine and Harvard University. That's all I knew. When your parents didn't have the education or the resources, you aren't exposed to what's out there."

All that changed when Espinoza joined the Simon Scholars Program during his junior year. The program, founded by Newport

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