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PRESS RELEASE

High-Achieving Foster Youth Who Exemplify Academic Success Take Center Stage at the 26th Annual “Celebration 2015” Graduation Ceremony on Thursday, June 18th

Over \$1,000,000 in scholarships to be awarded to 175 youth including aspiring judges, psychologists, doctors, criminologists, and youth advocates.

(LOS ANGELES, June 11, 2015) —175 young adults will proudly take center stage to celebrate their many successes on Thursday, June 18, 2015 as part of the 26th annual “Celebration 2015: 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 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.

Mayor Michael D. Antonovich, Fifth District Supervisor, will welcome the students. Polly Williams, President and Chief Executive Officer of United Friends of the Children and Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Director Philip L. Browning will address and bestow congratulations upon the graduates. American Idol finalist Jacob Lusk, whose mother is a DCFS social worker, will share his unique vocal talents and has a personal message for these exceptional youth. Coming off of the recently successful international “American Idols Live Tour,” Pop and R&B sensation Jacob Lusk is poised to be one of the music industry’s next great talents. Jacob’s humble beginnings took him from his hometown church choir to winning over the hearts of over thirty million television viewers weekly. His Rendition of "God Bless the Child" was considered by the judges to be "the best ever" on American Idol. Within the last year, Jacob has performed with Empress of Soul, Gladys Knight, Stevie Wonder, Chaka Khan, India Arie, and gospel star Kirk Franklin, and has recorded with super-producers Tricky Stewart, R. Kelly, Rodney Jerkins, Ray Chew, Harvey Mason Jr. and the legendary Don Was. Jacob is set to release his debut single this fall. Marina Zamora, a former foster youth, 2009 Celebration Alumna, and recent graduate from California State University Dominguez Hills, will be the featured youth speaker.

“To Enrich Lives Through Effective and Caring Service”

The Celebration graduation starts at 7 pm. **Graduates will be available for interviews at the following times: from 3:45 – 4:30**, the Celebration graduates profiled below will field questions from the media in the Green Room. **Media will be allowed to film a rehearsal of the students taking the stage at 3 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 2015” graduates:

Amazing Quadruplets are 4 times as likely to succeed!

Quadruplets Tiffany, Paris, Madison, and Bianca learned a painful lesson at an early age—that domestic violence and mental health issues can totally disrupt what every child is entitled to—a happy and carefree childhood. By age 11, the sisters were placed in different foster homes during their school years and were not reunited until 2011. Bianca’s situation was complicated by a heart defect requiring two surgeries. Yet through it all, she and her sisters have come to know that they are survivors and are stronger and more focused because of what they’ve been through. Paris and Madison have been captains of their school’s varsity basketball team and played alongside their sister Tiffany. Tiffany, Madison and Paris interned at a Torrance Law firm from 2010-2014 and are considering careers in criminal justice. Bianca volunteers at a convalescent home, and plays water polo, softball, and basketball. Says Paris, “Living as a youth in foster care is the hardest obstacle in life. But when you overcome it... it’s the best feeling ever.” Tiffany adds, “The key is to appreciate the good and find a way to turn a negative into a positive.”

“As a child, I could curse better than I could read”—with a 4.0 GPA, Qui-jai boasts an impressive resumé and is going to Berkeley to become a pediatrician.

“My mom has been in and out of jail most of my life,” says 17-year-old Qui-jai. Her father passed away before she was born. She described herself as a young kid roaming the streets at night, who could curse better than she could read. This downward spiral changed when her foster mother showed her how education could change her life forever and with it came a new previously unknown feeling—pride. She struggled with sexual orientation issues resulting in numerous foster home placements. With the support of a mentor, she participated in varsity basketball and track and field and taught herself to play instruments. She has enjoyed the challenges of difficult advanced placement courses and can boast a 4.0 grade point average. At school, Qui-jai has been active in the Black Student Union, Boys and Girls Club, Big Brothers Big Sisters Women In Entertainment (with Oprah/ Winfrey), College Match, South Central Scholars, College Ambassador President, Bible Club, United Way of Greater Los Angeles and Summer Night Lights and received numerous awards for academic achievement. She plays drums for her church choir, tutors middle school students at John Muir, was a speaker at LA’s Promise Gala and served as host and rapper for Homecoming/ Winter Jam. “When I was a child, I doubted my worth because I couldn’t read or write.” She attributes her success to her natural determination to prove herself capable. Now her goal is to become a pediatrician and she’ll pursue that dream at Berkeley this fall.

Destinee—Future Chief Justice of the United States!

Destinee B. was raised in a community where “struggling day to day was the norm.” Her family lived from welfare check to welfare check. Despite hardships, her mother stressed the importance of educational excellence and would drive her daughter to a magnet school far from where they lived. Mom’s drug addiction and mental health issues resurfaced and life as Destinee knew it rapidly changed. The family was evicted, “bounced” from motels to shelters, and eventually, Destinee and her brother were placed in foster care and separated. All the while, Destinee made sure her younger brother was adequately cared for while struggling to attend school by train. She kept her eye on the prize, while maintaining an impressive 3.84 GPA. Her perseverance paid off-- she plans to attend USC to study political science and dreams of becoming the Chief Justice of the United States. Don’t think she won’t make it! She is active in her school’s Associate Student Body; the HOLA club, which promotes cultural values; mentors incoming freshmen; participates in the Key Club, while regularly making the Honor Roll and playing club soccer. When she graduates in June she will have already earned an Associate of Arts degree from College of the Canyons!

Ms. Samantha Goes to Washington and Guatemala to advocate for foster youth.

Samantha O. says, “My family today is very different than what it once was; today it consists of me, other foster youth, and adults that mean so much in my life.” Samantha has been in foster care for the past 7 years, during which time she experienced bullying, emotional upheaval, and 4 different school changes in the 6th grade alone. With the help of a therapist and a support group of her peers, she was able to turn her life around and start to pursue her own agenda. Taking advanced placement courses in Chicano Studies, psychology, biology, and math analysis at Cal State Long Beach bolstered her self-esteem, with the understanding that she could rise above her circumstances. And rise she did. Samantha was selected by the UCLA Bruin Guardian Scholars Academy to go to Washington, D.C. to share her experiences as a foster youth with senators, advocating for Assembly Bill 1766 to provide transitional housing for foster youth. In doing so, Samantha realized that she’d one day like to create her own nonprofit organization to support families with autistic children. As a United Friends of the Children Readiness student, she’s maintained a 3.19 GPA and plans on majoring in sociology and political science, while minoring in feminist studies. She will be the first in her family to attend a four-year college. She is a leader and service-driven member of her community, active in Bruin Guardian Scholars Academy and the Boys and Girls Club. She is also the Vice President of the Keystone Leadership organization and Associated Student Body at her school and has received several awards acknowledging her contributions. She recently returned from a trip to Guatemala, where her mother is from, to fundraise for a foster youth club. She’s received recognition for her academic achievements from the LA County Board of Supervisors and the California State Assembly.

Brisia credits her social workers in helping her become the high achiever she is today.

“There were few times when my parents put their children first,” Brisia G. says in describing her meth-addicted parents. She recalls how her mother would take her along on car rides in the middle of the night to score drugs. Drug abuse and domestic violence were devastating to family life. Her father was frequently incarcerated. Young Brisia would turn to the TV show Grey’s Anatomy for distraction, which fueled the thought that she might one day become a doctor. During her 8 years in foster care, Brisia credits her social workers as playing a significant role in helping her become the person she is today. They were kind and put her and her little brother at ease while protecting them from certain things a young person couldn’t easily comprehend. Brisia believes that it was her experiences that most shaped her personality. She’s maintained a 3.83 GPA and will be attending Cal State Long Beach in the fall. An Honor Roll and Glen A. Wilson Scholar Athlete, she’s been active in many school activities including: varsity cross-country, varsity track and field, water polo, and has tutored freshmen and volunteered for community service. “My experience doesn’t make me want to give up; it makes me want to thrive. I can choose to make decisions to help me create a better life.” She’s focused on becoming a child and adolescent psychiatrist “to give back what has so selflessly been given to me.”

Recently transplanted and homeless, Victor dreams of becoming an FBI agent

Every night, Victor tries to dream about a better life, for a second chance for joy and happiness. He always felt like no one cared for him, wanted him, and that everybody was better than him. He’s been in many foster homes and eventually became numb to the constantly changing homes, friends, and schools, never letting anyone get too close to him. His mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and his father was disabled, with significant health problems, resulting in his death when Victor was 12-years-old and living in a group home. He lived with his oldest brother for 5 years in Columbus, Georgia, who provided love and support. Despite his own problems, Victor found time to tutor at-risk youth, has been on the Principal’s Honor Roll, was an officer in Student Government Association, a 2nd Lieutenant in JROTC, captain and marksman on the rifle team, a former member of Future Business Leaders of America, Junior Council, and Family Community Career Leaders of America. He also enjoys playing football and soccer and writing poetry. He dreams of becoming an FBI agent. He recently arrived in California as his older brother could no longer care for him. His goal is to attend USC and major in Criminal Justice. DCFS Transitional Housing has been working with Victor to secure a permanent residence.

If you would like to interview any of these remarkable youth or other youth involved in Celebration 2015, please contact Neil Zanville with the DCFS Office of Public Affairs at (213) 351-5886. Depending on their availability, youth can be interviewed on the days prior to and after the Celebration 2015 graduation.

Additional Event Information:

As part of the “Celebration 2015” graduation ceremony, over \$1,000,000 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, Heads Up Youth Foundation, Rotary Club of Los Angeles, Foster Care Counts, Accenture, Jane Mabie Memorial Scholarship/ All Saints Church Foster Care Project, Torrance Women's Club, Swing for School, DCFS Trust Fund/ One Child at a Time, Los Angeles County African-American Employees Association, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services Managers, Adelina R. Sorkin/Nina Sorkin Scholarship, California Community Foundation – Los Angeles Scholars Investment Fund, City National Bank, College Futures Foundation, Joseph Drown Foundation, The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, Hearst Foundations, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Foundation, Marclad Foundation, Nesbitt Foundation, Rose Hills Foundation, Roth Family Foundation, The Albert and Bettie Sacchi Foundation, and The David Vickter Foundation. 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) 351-0157.

“Celebration 2015” 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, the Teague Family Foundation 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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