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PRESS RELEASE

Tuesday, June 26th: High-Achieving Foster Youth Who Exemplify Academic Success Take Center Stage at 30th Annual “Celebration 2018” Graduation Ceremony

Scholarships awarded to all 150 youth, many the first in their families to attend college.

(LOS ANGELES, June 19, 2018) —150 college-bound young adults, many of them the first in their families to attend college, will proudly take center stage and be honored for their success on Tuesday, June 26, 2018 as part of the 30th annual “Celebration 2018: Honoring the Academic Achievements of Foster Youth.” This unique event, featuring the inspiring stories of these exceptional young people, 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 celebrate the proud graduates as they march across the stage to honor this significant milestone in their lives—an occasion marked by academic achievement and triumph over adversity.

“Celebration 2018” 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, and United Friends of the Children.

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

“These foster youths have overcome significant obstacles to achieve academic excellence. They know that education is the key to having a different kind of life—one of promise and personal fulfillment. Foster youth are often perceived by the public as damaged goods, destined to struggle throughout their lives. These graduates dispel that myth. Many Celebration graduates

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will attend prestigious schools throughout the nation pursuing careers in medicine, law, engineering and the arts. A good number of the graduates will seek careers in child welfare, so they can help those youths, who like themselves had to deal with challenges not of their own making. On this night, social workers, family members, caregivers and friends all celebrate what these exceptional youths have accomplished,” said Bobby Cagle.

This year’s featured youth alumnae speaker is Junely Merwin, currently enrolled at California State University Fullerton, graduating class of 2019. Junely, who participated in Celebration 2011, is a Human Services major with a minor in Human Communications. She will share her successes and challenges since leaving foster care, encouraging the graduates to stay focused on their academic goals and personal dreams.

Celebration graduate Fernando Morales, an accomplished jazz bassist, soon to be pursuing his music studies in Spain through the prestigious Berklee College of Music, will perform original compositions onstage with his quartet.

When Diego Tinoco, star of the trending Netflix series *On My Block* addresses the graduates, they will undoubtedly be tuned in. Set in South Los Angeles, the series centers on a group of friends attempting to balance the challenges of adolescence and life in their predominantly Hispanic and black neighborhood, forcing Diego’s character to choose between gang influences and education.

All “Celebration 2018” graduates will receive scholarships and have access to continued financial assistance. Scholarships are donated from a variety of agencies, organizations, corporations and non-profit organizations including Accenture, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, Foster Care Counts, Heads Up Youth Foundation, Jane Mabie Memorial Scholarship/ All Saints Church Foster Care Project, Rotary Club of Los Angeles, Torrance Woman’s Club, William and Terumi Kawasaki Foundation, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Omicron Rho Zeta Chapter, Barbara L. and Richard C. Barrett Foundation, Generations on the Move, Project Good for Girls, The Moore Family Foundation, and United Friends of the Children.

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 3:30 – 5:00 p.m. Media will be allowed to film a rehearsal of the students onstage from 2:30 –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 2018” graduates:

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Jerry's new heart beats with a passion to design life-saving devices.

At age 11, Jerry suffered cardiac arrest requiring 7 months on a cardiac support device. After his family relocated to LA from San Francisco, he fell asleep one day in his school's hallway and woke up several months later with a new heart. His parents were not up to task of providing the necessary medical care, so Jerry was placed in the home of his current foster parent which allowed him to excel at school. Although determined to study medicine, Jerry became interested in electrical engineering. In 8th grade he assembled his own Gameboy, igniting his passion for electronics. He's the "electrical leader" for his high school's First Robotics Competition. A well-rounded scholar, Jerry role-plays court cases through his school's Mock Trial program and is involved in the TEDx Program, designed to help communities, organizations and individuals spark innovative conversation and connection. He envisions a career combining his interest in electrical engineering with his love of medicine. Says Jerry, "My heart's circulatory system wasn't fully functioning. Engineering is making things move that aren't alive. It's bringing life to something that's actually inanimate." His 4.16 GPA has earned him acceptance to the Olin College of Engineering in Massachusetts where he will study electrical engineering.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3v2m4iE122A>

"If not a Senator, I can see myself performing on Broadway"

Austin's journey has been marked by tragedy and heartache. Both his parents suffered from mental illness resulting in homelessness and his father's suicide three years ago. Says Austin, "my family was shredded, my home was gone, and my future completely dismantled." He still hears his father's voice encouraging him to move forward despite the challenges he has faced. Austin has attended the Crossroads School for Arts & Sciences in Santa Monica since kindergarten where he participates in Conservatory, an intensive theater program. At age 7, Austin started acting in TV commercials and had a recurring role on the TV hit *The King of Queens*. But Austin tired of auditions and being typecasted. "Theater was different—I could express myself as an individual. He's starred in 15 productions, most recently Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and *Rent*. Last summer, Austin participated in Northwestern University's prestigious Cherub's Program. Austin's other love is political science. He's been president of the local Youth and Government Delegation, the state's premier youth leadership and civic development program and has served as Chair of his school's Diversity and Inclusion Steering Committee He actively participates in the Black Student Union. Every Saturday, with his great uncle, he passes out lunches to homeless people around the city with the help of friends in the community. Says Austin, "If not a Senator, I can see myself performing on Broadway. I want to make people think and affect change through politics and theater."

Talented jazz musician is hitting all the right notes onstage and off.

Fernando's musical talents have taken him to unimagined heights, jamming with some of the nation's most renowned jazz artists. He's hitting all the right notes and will spend this fall in Spain

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studying his craft as part of Berklee College of Music's overseas program. Growing up, Fernando's father was out of the picture and his mother was rarely home to attend to him and his younger siblings. Family and friends helped Fernando fight depression and stay on track. Picking up the bass guitar at age 14 proved to be his salvation. He's received numerous awards at jazz festivals as an outstanding musician and soloist and was selected to play for the prestigious Southern California Band & Orchestra Association Jazz Honor band. The Stanford Jazz Workshop awarded him a full tuition scholarship which allowed him to learn from jazz legends Ravi Coltrane and Kendrick Scott. He's also played with Wayne Bergeron, one of the most sought-after musicians in the world. Fernando plans to double major in music performance and audio recording. You can catch him onstage at Celebration 2018 playing his original jazz compositions with his quartet.

“Cystic fibrosis doesn't mean you stop dreaming,” says Madisyn.

At 2 weeks old, Madisyn was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, a life-threatening disease requiring frequent hospitalizations. Growing up, she had to cope with her many health issues without the support of an alcoholic mother and absent father. At age 8, Madisyn's world spun out of control when her beloved grandfather died, and her mother became suicidal. Her medical condition has not allowed Madisyn to attend traditional schools until recently, yet despite these obstacles, she's persevered with the support of her grandmother, friends and hospital staff. She receives breathing treatments four times a day and must guard against infection as her immune system is severely compromised. Madisyn has learned to accept her condition and wants others to know they can achieve their dreams despite a cystic fibrosis diagnosis. She is currently working on a short film at her high school to help people learn about cystic fibrosis. Photography, painting, choir, theater, and writing provide creative outlets. Her 3.21 grade point average has earned her acceptance to College of the Canyons where she plans to major in education and business.

Immigrant scholar's law and psychology studies will allow her to help other vulnerable youth.

Mariah's parents immigrated to the U.S. from Honduras and El Salvador. When Mariah was 12, her mother abandoned her and her younger sisters, leaving Mariah depressed and anxious. With the support of her aunt and therapist, Mariah resolved her painful issues while challenging herself to excel at Students on Academic Rise Early College High School in Lancaster. An impressive 4.36 Grade point average has her attending UCLA where she will study psychology, and possibly law. She's already earned a local scholarship from Lancaster Chamber of Commerce. At school, she's participated in Mock Trial, which allows her to learn about law and practice in courtroom situations. Mariah tutors younger children at a day care and volunteers at a home for the elderly. She's thankful her aunt has kept her family including her siblings and grandmother together, allowing her to pursue her dream of attending college. Mariah is hopeful that her psychology and law studies will enable her to work in the child welfare system, helping those who like herself find themselves in difficult situations.

From the Middle East back to Los Angeles—Ali is an American Success Story.

Ali was born in the U.S. and relocated to Jordan in the Middle East at age 4. His parents wanted him to meet his extended family, learn about his culture, religion, and to learn how to speak, write, and read Arabic. Acclimating to this new world without his mother by his side was very difficult. After 7 years, Ali returned to the U.S. As a freshman in high school, he now had to work twice as hard on his English skills to complete his schoolwork. Ali was up to the task and was honored for the “best project” at his high school— building a model of a nuclear reactor, with a smoke machine. He’s been on the Dean’s List and Principal’s Honor Roll almost every semester, and served as an American History teacher’s assistant and a peer leader. He will be the first in his family to graduate high school and will attend Pierce College where he will study accounting. Ali wants to give back to the community by helping people with low incomes with their financial issues. When not studying, Ali enjoys weightlifting, football, swimming, water polo, writing poetry, and photography.

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