

Scholars gala honors Joan Payden for Neighborhood Academic Initiative gift

Another 61 high-school graduates will continue their education this fall, thanks to groundbreaking USC program



USC President C. L. Max Nikias presents USC Trustee Joan Payden with a gift during Thursday's gala. *Photo by Gus Ruelas*

By Teresa Lara

USC Trustee Joan Payden was recognized at the annual Neighborhood Academic Initiative Scholars gala May 7 for her visionary gift of \$5 million to expand the college-access program.

The newly named Joan A. Payden Student Academy at the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative will expand to reach some 1,100 sixth- through 12th-graders by 2020, including 600 additional children and teens in the neighborhoods near USC's Health Sciences Campus.

USC President C. L. Nikias thanked Payden for supporting the transformative

educational experience to underserved youth in Los Angeles.

"The newly named NAI Joan Payden Student Academy reflects her steadfast commitment to serving our city and to ensuring the success of the most deserving students," Nikias said to the 250 guests.

USC Senior Vice President Thomas Sayles added, "Ms. Payden, your transformational gift will help ensure that NAI continues in perpetuity and will continue to produce amazing students."

Students like Alfa Lopez. Lopez, the daughter of Central American immigrants,

traveled the country on behalf of a national initiative advocating the wellbeing of American children, while also excelling in her college prep studies at the James A. Foshay Learning Center. Lopez will attend Penn State in the fall and was one of 1,000 students nationwide named a prestigious Gates Millennium Scholar, which funds her education for up to 10 years.

NAI success

NAI first began more than two decades ago with students from elementary schools surrounding the University Park Campus

in South Los Angeles; those schools feed into the Foshay Learning Center.

In 2013, NAI expanded to include sixth-graders at two schools in east Los Angeles near the Health Sciences Campus: Murchison Elementary School and El Sereno Middle School.

The program's students spend six to seven years coming to USC's campus for early-morning math and English classes and after school tutoring during the week, and daylong Saturday classes.

To date, 871 South Los Angeles students have graduated from the NAI program and gone to college — almost all the first in their families to attend college.

This year's NAI graduating class includes 61 scholars who will continue their education this fall and announced their university of choice at the event.

Eleven of the graduates will attend USC on full-tuition scholarships, with others headed for other top universities including the University of Pennsylvania, Middlebury College and UCLA.

Scholars were accepted to schools like New York University, Michigan State and the University of California, Berkeley.

Actors Mark Hamill and Tom Kenny led a live auction during the evening to fund college start-up kits for each scholar. Alysha Del Valle of KABC-TV emceed the event.

"Education is the great equalizer," said Kim Thomas-Barrios, the NAI program's executive director. "The USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative's private-public partnership with its neighborhood schools allow cohorts of students — who enter college on unequal economic footing than more

privileged peers — to be better equipped to navigate an ever-changing economy."

Giving back

USC senior and NAI scholar Antonio Parra gave a student keynote address and provided some words of wisdom to the graduating seniors.

"Never forget who you are," he said. "You are an NAI scholar, and that speaks volumes."

Parra, who graduates from the USC Marshall School of Business this year, established the Parra Family Scholarship to help students who have gone through adversities. Parra and family hope to transform the scholarship program into a foundation, stretching the reach and aid provided around the USC community.



USC's Neighborhood Academic Initiative Honors Young Graduates

LOS ANGELES (KABC) — Sixty-one graduates of USC's Neighborhood Academic Initiative Program were honored Thursday night at the program's annual gala.

After completing the pre-college enrichment program, the scholars will continue their education at a college or university this fall.

Eleven of those students were accepted to USC on full-tuition scholarships. Most of the students will be the first in their families to attend college. To date, 871 students from South Los Angeles have graduated from the program and continued to higher education.



USC's Neighborhood Academic Initiative celebrated the graduation of 61 students at the program's annual gala.

"I'm still in awe right now. I'm so blessed to be able to be a part of this program and it's so amazing," said Steven Pham of the Foshay Learning Center.

"NAI has really helped me achieve a lot of the goals that I've set for myself throughout these four years and has really helped me make my family proud," Alfa Lopez said, who also attended the Foshay Learning Center.

Stormtroopers invaded the ceremony, along with actors Mark Hamill and Tom Kenny. They helped auction off backpacks full of supplies for the students heading to college.