

## Nikias shares his own story with USC's NAI students



President Nikias greets Liliana Ayala, an NAI parent, after he spoke to NAI scholars and their families about reshaping their future through education. *Photo by David Sprague*

By Joanna Clay

**USC President C. L. Max Nikias** made a surprise visit to Neighborhood Academic Initiative families at USC's Health Sciences Campus in Boyle Heights on Feb. 3.

In the NAI program, children from the neighborhoods around the USC campuses commit to after-school tutoring, along with Saturday sessions they attend along with their parents, to be a part of the tuition-free college prep program.

Since the program started in 1990, 100 percent of its roughly 1,000 graduates have been accepted to college, including many to USC. South L.A.'s Foshay

Learning Center, an NAI participating school, has provided more first-year USC students than any other high school.

Nikias spoke to a crowd of roughly 500 parents, students, faculty and friends and later visited NAI classrooms, where students were learning plant cell structure and the drag coefficient of their sneakers. He honed in on the purpose of the program: higher education for all.

"A family's income should not decide a child's future," Nikias told the families in Mayer Auditorium. "It should be a child's ability and perseverance."

Nikias also spoke of growing up in

a small village in Cyprus, in a home without running water or electricity. His father, a carpenter, and his mother valued education and moved to the city to get him into competitive schools.

Irma Henriquez of East Los Angeles said hearing Nikias was motivating.

"Like he said, anything can be possible — just keep dreaming and stay focused," she said. "You are sacrificing your Saturdays, but you see what you're going to get at the end."

Her son, 10th-grader Nelson, has been attending NAI since sixth grade. If he sticks with the program through 12th



grade, the payoff is great. He — like all NAI students — will be eligible for a full scholarship to attend USC. He would be the first in his family to attend university.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity, not just for Nelson but for many of our kids in our community and hopefully my daughter, too. She’s a future NAI,” Irma Henriquez said of her 10-year-old daughter, Sophia.

Getting a scholarship to attend university would be “winning the lottery” for her family, she said. Both she and her husband were born in El Salvador; she’s a stay-at-home mother and her husband works at a dry cleaning business in Beverly Hills.

With birthday parties and extracurricular activities, there are lots of things kids could be doing with their Saturdays, but her son gets himself out of bed and on campus on time every weekend. He sets his own alarm; she never has to wake him up.

“Since the beginning I’ve always had the dream to go to college and to be something big in my family,” he said.

While the students study on Saturdays, the parents are learning everything from college applications and personal finance to U.S. history and wellness, with NAI frequently sourcing USC experts.



**1** NAI parent Baoji Feng and Edward Ho, a translator

**2** President Nikias watches from the back of a classroom as NAI middle-schoolers learn about science.

**3** NAI scholar Nelson Henriquez

*Photos by David Sprague*

Parents also serve as “reps,” giving NAI feedback on what they’d like to learn and discuss. They have Spanish and Chinese translators.

Preparing for college can be stressful, especially for a student who will be the first in their family to attend college. With NAI, parents are part of the student’s journey.

“It takes off a little bit of the stress because we’re all a family here,” Nelson Henriquez said.

Over the years, Irma Henriquez sees the way NAI has impacted her son.

“You see the difference between my son and other kids. For him, college is

his priority,” she said. “He goes to the College Corner at his school.” That’s a spot at Wilson High School where kids can learn more about college applications, scholarships and financial aid.

“I don’t have to ask him. He goes with his friends at lunch time,” she said. “He has that initiative. You know why? This program.”

NAI, which started at the University Park Campus serving South L.A. families, expanded in 2013 to serve families around the Health Sciences Campus. When Nelson graduates from NAI in a couple years, he’ll be part of that group’s first cohort.