

Alumnus looks to expand support for innovative program dedicated to helping students who are foster youth



Victoria Wilder Eisenberg (left, with her children) lived in more than 20 foster homes while she was growing up. Despite that formidable obstacle, last year Eisenberg reached a goal that only about 28 percent of Americans have attained: getting a bachelor's degree.

Eisenberg got help in achieving that milestone from the Smith Renaissance Society, a grassroots, alumni-initiated effort that provides financial, academic, and emotional support to UCSC students who are orphans, veterans of the foster-care or juvenile-justice systems, or others who have been forced to experience life on their own.

"As you can imagine, trying to fit into the college experience was hard," says Eisenberg, "because I knew I wasn't like everyone else, especially those who had families."

The Smith Society was founded in 1999 by Bill Dickinson (Cowell '68, pictured below), who, like Eisenberg, had been on his own when he arrived on the newly opened UCSC campus in 1965.

Since graduating, Dickinson has had several successful careers as an educator, speechwriter, business journalist, and entrepreneur. But he says the accomplishment that makes him most proud is his enduring legacy of helping students in need.

When Eisenberg arrived at UCSC, she had been homeless for months, having been "emancipated" from the foster care system.

Getting support from the Smith Society was transformative.

"I became a part of the Smith Society, and my [life] changed dramatically," Eisenberg says. "I have been cared for, nurtured, and, like a little seed, have grown into a beautiful spring blossom."

While completing a double major in community studies and theater arts, she served as a Smith Society student leader, was involved in student drama productions, got married, and had two children.

Since its inception, nearly 150 students like Eisenberg have been served by the Smith Society program. All but a handful have graduated or are on track to graduate—a remarkable record.

Dickinson credits his years at UCSC—the creative, interesting education and supportive community presided over by Cowell College founding provost Page Smith and his wife, Eloise—with his success. The Smith Renaissance Society was named in their honor.

"Page and Eloise treated me with real respect, an uplifting first for me," Dickinson says. "We aim to provide that sort of lift for our students, which helps account for our awesome retention and graduation rates. The Smith Society needs more funding. Two hundred new donors giving at least \$100 a year would keep our noble little boat afloat," says Dickinson.

As the society moves toward its 10th year of operation, increased financial support will provide scholarships for students; ultimately, supporters aim to establish an endowment to ensure the program's smooth operation into the future.

Donations can be made at giving.ucsc.edu; for more information, contact Development Director Kathleen Rose Hughes at (831) 459-4552 or khughes@ucsc.edu.

