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Beating the odds: From foster care to UC Santa Cruz

By CATHY REDFERN

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Amber Leahey was placed in a group home at age 14 after a fight with her drug-addicted mom. Later, depression and self-doubt almost kept her stuck in a series of "really crappy jobs."

Now the UC Santa Cruz senior plans to study astrobiology in graduate school.

She also helps other foster children, seeking to be the supporter she needed in that group home.

Both to get the emotional support she needs and to help others, Leahey joined the Page and Eloise Smith Scholastic Society.

The society was formed this year by UCSC alum Bill Dickinson (Cowell College, 1968), building on a \$100,000 scholarship fund the former foster child started three years ago.

Dickinson and other society members aim to provide mentors to UCSC students who were foster children or wards of juvenile court.

At the same time, the society encourages students to guide younger foster children, many of whom feel unable to attend college.

"I believe the vast majority of children start out dreaming of being heroes or heroines and lose it," said Dickinson, who is 56, retired and living in Maine.

"Most foster kids are set up for failure. I just don't happen to believe it has to be that way."

It was almost that way for Leahey.

She went to DeAnza College at the urging of friends, but self-doubt plagued her.

"I've always been in love with science, but I didn't have the self-esteem," she said.

Then she landed a NASA internship, and loved it.

"I started setting more goals," she said.

There were 42 UCSC students this year who qualified for the society by coming from foster homes, orphanages or who were wards of the court — and 21 who took the bait.

As society members the students must attend four annual meetings to receive guidance for themselves and the chance to mentor younger foster children.

Their needs range from a place to store their things or stay during school breaks to career advice to somewhere to go for Thanksgiving.

They also received \$1,000 from a scholarship fund Dickinson started three years ago.

The society includes mentors such as alumni, Court Appointed Special Advocates and others.

Mary Male of Santa Cruz leads the society's community outreach arm and set up a series of activities for ninth-graders and the college students she hopes will become their role models.

A special-education professor at San Jose State, she got involved after hearing Dickinson's story.

"To the degree kids are not successful in education is the degree to which you are relegating them to a dead-end life," she said.

"Everything I know from research is that it (takes) one grown-up who believes in you passionately, someone who takes you over the rough spots and helps you believe in yourself."

Anne Smith Easley heads another arm of the society, which supports students on campus.

Leahey, the UCSC student, had a grandfather who taught her to value education, but she had to leave his care and wound up in a group home after he was diagnosed with cancer.

The society landed her a mentor last year, a scientist.

"It's been wonderful," she said. "I wanted my own personal cheerleader, so that when I'm not feeling so smart someone can say, 'It's OK you can do it.'"

Dickinson also had people he calls "beacons" in his life, such as his fourth-grade teacher and a millionaire who adopted him when he was on his own at 16.

Gratitude for those people prompted him to pledge \$4,000 per year over his lifetime to begin the scholarship fund three years ago. Donations add to the scholarship fund.

The fund and society are named after Page Smith, Cowell College's founding provost, and his wife, Eloise.

It's too early to predict how the new mentoring program will work, he said. But he knows this.

"Somebody has to help a kid see their own virtues and figure out how to get organized to pursue their dreams," he said.

The mentor program was inspired by Maribel Valencia-Castillo, a scholarship recipient who left Mexico after her mother died and is now at Harvard.

While attending UCSC, she began e-mailing Dickinson for advice. After she was evicted from a motel, he found a local professor to rent her a room.

He hooked up two other students with summer internships.

Dickinson was on his own at 16, but went on to 11 years of higher education, taught at Cabrillo College, dealt real estate in San Francisco and wrote union speeches in Washington.

He quotes Jerry Brown: "1,300 calories and a moderate climate and everything else in your life is expectation."

Dickinson has reined in his expectations for the society.

"I would hope it would do what it does well, that students can have something good happen as a result of connections," he said. "These students are by definition survivors, but they still need someone to believe in them."

Deutron Kebebew, 24, received a grant from the society this year too, and as a former foster child knows the psychological shock that some foster kids endure.

The UCSC senior met high-school students on a society outing last month and wants to show them around campus.

"I'll just show them where to get coffee, I don't want to scare them," he said. "Maybe next year I'll invite them to a fun class."

Kebebew found his own mentors in junior college. He calls them his extended family.

"I write their names in my diary so one day I can repay them," he said.

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