We made it!

We may have achieved our quest for sustainability this year. Your awesome loyalty, our caring, competent, committed volunteers, inside and outside the University, frugal habits, and sheer determination paid off. We also took a big step forward in our mission to embody the charitable spirit of Page and Eloise Smith. With careful stewardship, we should be able to grow in size and strength for years to come:

- We served seventy-four Collegiate Fellows; if trends hold, we will pass eighty next year.
- All twenty-seven students who requested a mentor were paired with one.
- We secured permanent funding for our student adviser function.
- Our students continued to host inspirational events for pre-college youths.
- Our Senior and Collegiate Fellows put community service center stage.
- Our graduates continue to live lives that make us proud.

The Smith Factor

Cowell College founding provost Page Smith, whose name we bear, believed that loving the students was central to good undergraduate education. He also believed in doing that in the context of community: it takes a village. And he believed in building character. That’s what we try to do and be. We think it is what sets us apart.

Just as the Santa Cruz campus, with its colleges, is unique in the University of California, the Smith Renaissance Society is different from other approaches pursued by other schools that serve comparable students. They offer programs, we offer a caring community. Each has its virtues, but ours routinely generates retention and graduation rates that exceed those of UCSC students as a whole. We do this by mobilizing a small group of dedicated friends, who, working with modest funding, offer a lot of love and life experience.

Our large-souled board president, Cheryl Perazzo, embodies the best of it. Retiring last year from her UCSC financial aid adviser position, Cheryl has been a loving presence in our students’ lives throughout our fourteen-year history. Her professional experience enables her to see what’s needed and guide us before most of us would notice. This led to this year’s launch of community service internships.

Says Cheryl, “One of the big challenges our students face is the growing lack of work study jobs due to funding cuts. This leads them to borrow more. This
year we created Smith Renaissance paid internships for our students who are passionate about helping at-risk youth and others less fortunate. We were able to raise enough for our Smith operating account to fund seven positions, with donations matched dollar for dollar by the federal government. This is a win-win: local agencies receive much-needed help and our students gain valuable experience and skills while earning part of the cost to attend college. We’d like to be able to expand this next year.”

Smithies for service

Believing in lifting as we climb, our students hosted more than a hundred pre-college foster and homeless youths on campus this year, leading campus tours, organizing and raising funds needed for Music Day, a joyful opportunity for kids to experience and express themselves through music and spoken word, and hosting the annual overnight College Camp, giving youths a chance to taste college life for a few days.

This year we spread out into the community, serving at the Rebele Homeless Shelter, Walnut Avenue Women’s Center, Boys and Girls Club, Teen Center, and Harbor High. We also helped build a house for Habitat for Humanity and planted a garden for the Jesus, Mary, and Joseph Home.

SARA SHIMEL, homeless in her youth, works to build computer literacy and access for adults and kids at the local shelter. Says Sara, “By being role models who have ‘insider knowledge’ of what aspiring students like those at the shelter are going through, we have a unique opportunity to reach out to these students. In partnering with the shelter, we make a stand against trans-generational poverty and use our personal stories to better our communities.”

ROSIE CASTILLO, who just completed her freshman year, while caring for her younger brother and sister, took the lead with Habitat. Says Rosie, “Habitat for Humanity serves families in desperate need of affordable housing. There are parents who work really hard to support their families, yet that is not enough. Providing a stable home is important, but so hard for low-income families. Habitat for Humanity represents the hope many families need to know that they are not alone.”

JOO BIN KIM assisted the karate instructor at the Boys and Girls Club. “I chose this because I want to go into teaching and I thought this would be a perfect way to get more experience. This job is very important to me and I absolutely love the work. I have developed relationships with the students and instructor. On most days the time I spend there is the highlight of my day.”

Profiles in friendship

TRANG NGUYEN majored in Business Management Economics. Her immediate goal is to land a job in finance in San Jose. Her long-term vision is to find a career she loves surrounded by amazing friends and loved ones. What she sought in a mentor was a friend with whom she could speak about life, academics, or general advice. She found it in Literature Professor DEANNA SHEMEK: “We have a lot in common and instantly connected through long talks about food, traveling, and our dogs. She helped me so much throughout my time as a student and I know we will carry this relationship into the next chapters of my life.”

Says Deanna, “My relationship with Dairrang was one
of friendship first of all. It was my first experiment in mentorship, something I took to be different from my relationship with students in my courses. We shared things we had in common and she taught me numerous things. Though she welcomed me warmly, she also demonstrated remarkable independence and initiative. She says she wants to discover her path as it appears before her and not predetermine where her life should take her. I feel lucky to have met her and I look forward to watching her make her way. I have a feeling I am going to be impressed!”

LIZ MOYA, a 2013 graduate, majored in Sociology and Legal Studies. She has been a spirited Smith leader and has worked tirelessly as a peer mentor with the Educational Opportunity Program for first-generation students. Soon to be the mother of a baby boy, she aims to attend graduate school in social work to pursue her passion of working with delinquent youths and those in underprivileged communities.

Says Liz, of her mentor, Geophysics Professor EMILY BRODSKY, “Emily has grown to be one of my ‘super guardians.’ Without Emily, I would have had no place to live during transition periods. I went to her when I was stressed out. She’s given me some of her motherly teachings, which I appreciate the most. I know Emily and her family are going to be a part of my life forever.”

Adds Emily, “Mentoring Liz has been one of the richest relationships of my life. Entering her world reminds me of a comment a friend once made to me about parenting: raising a child brought the world from flatness into 3-D. Mentoring is similar. Liz’s fortitude, good judgment, and smile brought me to a different place. I am so proud of what she has accomplished and impressed with how she has grown from a fresh shell-shocked by the bizarreness of UCSC to an articulate young woman.”

SARAH BENJAMIN majored in Sociology and aims to be a Santa Cruz police officer. “Santa Cruz is unique in its character and diverse population. I know the challenges that come with that, but I am anxious to get out there and serve the citizens and city that I love, providing advocacy for victims and keeping criminals off the streets.”

SHAWN CERVANTES, her mentor, was a re-entry student who majored in Psychology. Three of her grown kids are in the military, two recently returning from Afghanistan. Shawn just graduated with Dean’s honors, has been admitted to USC’s MSW program, and is entering Walnut Avenue Women’s Center’s domestic violence advocacy program. She serves on our Smith Board.

Says Sarah, “I have always wanted someone I could look up to and call an honest and reliable friend. Shawn has been more than that to me. She has shown me what a mother’s love is and that it can come from a complete stranger. She also has been a personal coach who cheers me on and never gives up on me.”

Adds Shawn, “Smith speaks to me because I, too, grew up without a mother’s love and I think that is one of the most despicable tragedies in our world. Having been so fulfilled in my role as a mother, I wanted an opportunity to love some kids who may never have experienced that. What I have found in my relationship with Sarah is love, acceptance, mutual respect, and appreciation.”

Ripple effect beyond college

LISA O’CONNOR graduated in 2004, majoring in Legal Studies. Earning a Masters in Public Health from San Diego State in 2007, she returned to Santa Cruz, working in research. She serves on our board and recently took a job as Educational Liaison for FosterEd, an organization that aims to provide every Santa Cruz County foster child with an educational champion.
Says Lisa, “I believe that Smith is a valuable resource for students at UCSC who have non-traditional upbringings and experiences with the dependency/juvenile justice systems. Smith has made connections and supported the educational success of students who have been overlooked in the past. I invest in Smith because I believe it’s a good community to support and I believe in what it stands for.”

PHILLIP ROSE graduated in 2006, majoring in Computational Mathematics. Graduating from Lincoln Law School in 2010, he started PBR Legal in San Jose. He has been asked to co-teach a course on landlord/tenant issues at Lincoln. He returns to UCSC to coach Smith students considering legal careers. He also is a proud father.

Says Phillip, “The Smith Society provided me with educational resources and a community of engaged students and adults with a positive social purpose. The message it promoted helped me to be involved with helping others, an opportunity I would not have sought otherwise. The Smith Society inspired me and taught me to believe and trust that people working together can really make a difference. I learned core lessons that act as a moral compass and guide me even in my business decisions.”

COLETTE HOTTINGER and SIERRA REID-HOFFMAN, who became soul sisters at UCSC, graduated in 2010, Colette in Psychology, Sierra in Community Studies. Earning their MSW degrees last year, from UC Berkeley and San Diego State respectively, both are social workers for Child Protective Services, Colette in Solano County, Sierra in El Dorado.

Says Colette, “I’ve always known the experiences I went through in foster care could serve as a platform for me to help others experiencing the same in their lives. While my focus is on helping foster youth achieve their best, my current position allows me to add context and understanding.

Smith linked me with Sierra to launch an idea I had to reach out to reach out to middle school Santa Cruz youths. It also linked me with people who helped pave the way to more education.”

Says Sierra, “Smith gave me a safe place, a community, and another family. It helped me to realize my dreams and figure out what I wanted out of my life. I want to make it better for kids and families going through the child welfare system, to get the support they need to stay out of the system, and, when that can’t happen, to support kids from reentering the system when they become parents. I want to encourage kids to do better for themselves by going to college and experiencing more than they ever thought they would.”