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Cover Story - November 16, 2016

Holiday Fund: Raising expectations through education

Story by Elizabeth Weal, founder and executive director, Sequoia Adult School Scholars.

Nine years ago Carmina Ortuno came to the United States from Mexico to escape threats on her life. Today, she owns a thriving food truck and catering business.

Ms. Ortuno owned a restaurant in Mexico so she knew how to be a professional chef. What she didn't know was how to speak English.

Sequoia Adult School Scholars (SASS) provided her with funds for books and transportation so she could afford to attend Canada College, where she took the advanced ESL (English as a Second Language) classes she needed to learn enough English to start her business.

She is one of close to 400 adults who have received support from SASS, a small nonprofit that serves adults, most of whom are working at minimum wage jobs, who want to continue their education in community college so they can get jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage, and serve as role models and advocates for their children.

Supported by donations from individuals and local foundations, SASS provides scholarships that cover college textbooks, bus passes and parking passes, one-on-one tutoring, and laptops for outstanding students.

Current SASS students range in age from 19 to 66. About 85 percent come from Latin America and about 86 percent live in Redwood City, Menlo Park and East Palo Alto.

While the majority of SASS students are adult immigrants taking ESL classes, SASS also serves students who left high school, then returned to adult school to work toward their high school diploma or GED.

Role model

Working two jobs to support his wife and new baby, Redwood City resident Alejandro Avendano quit high school a few months before he was scheduled to graduate. But when his son turned 5, Avendano realized that if he was going to set high expectations for his son, he would need to serve as a role model and thus return to school. He also wanted to pursue his dream of becoming a police officer.

After completing the credits he needed to receive his high school diploma from Sequoia Adult School in Menlo Park, he enrolled in the College of San Mateo, where he is working toward a degree in criminal justice. A SASS scholarship pays for his textbooks and college parking pass. SASS also provides him with a math tutor, Atherton resident Susan Speicher.

"Alejandro is a hardworking and dedicated student who inspires me with his commitment to succeed," Ms. Speicher says. "At the end of our sessions, I feel like I'm getting far more than I'm giving."

Comments

Posted by **Alison Elliott**
 a resident of Menlo Park: The Willows
 on Nov 29, 2016 at 10:21 am

Amidst the uncertainty of a new administration, the work of Sequoia Adult School Scholars (SASS) is more important than ever. SASS helps dedicated adults to gain the education they need to secure better paying jobs and build stability for their families. My annual contribution goes a long way because it is leveraged by the ambition, persistence and commitment of the SASS scholars, working to build a better life for themselves and their families.

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Posted by **Ruth Sherer**
 a resident of another community
 on Dec 1, 2016 at 9:18 pm

SASS has had an important impact in its community, students at the Adult School in Redwood City. Its founder, Elizabeth Weal, saw a need as she was teaching ESL students there. She set to work to help make it possible, for students who wished to continue their education, with funding for some of the costs involved. Without assistance, with things like parking passes, books, and sometimes even computers, continuing their education might well have been out of the question. Groups like SASS are grass roots and can well evaluate situations close at hand. I think this contributes to making the funds available go far and with good success. I feel happy that my donations to SASS enhance individual lives and our whole community in a very meaningful way.

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