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OCEANSIDE: First group of Simon Scholars graduates

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Four years after an Orange County-based foundation started to offer scholarships to high school students in Oceanside, all of the first class of students have graduated and plan to attend college this fall.

Some of the students are going to community colleges, while others are going to more prestigious schools, including UC Berkley, UCLA and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"I'm so proud of this class," said Kathy Simon Abels, executive director of the Simon Family Foundation. "This is a very special class to us because it was the first class" in Oceanside.

Each year since 2008, the foundation has picked 20 incoming high school juniors from Oceanside's two main high schools to receive the scholarships, which include money for college as well as academic help during high school.

The Oceanside Unified School District is only of only four districts in San Diego and Orange counties that the foundation has picked to partner with.

The foundation looks for students who have overcome significant barriers, stayed committed to school and worked to inspire others, Simon Abels said.

"We are looking for a certain strength of character that we want to reward and give a hand up to," she said. "We want to help students who would not otherwise have had a chance to go to college."

Some of the barriers these students have faced include dysfunctional families, parent deaths and poverty, Simon Abels said.

Having the help has been a strong motivator and enabler, said Cindy Renteria, one of the scholarship recipients.

"They've done so much," she said. "It's not just like \$16,000 and a laptop. It's more like an inspiration and having other people count on us and telling us we can do it."

Renteria graduated from Oceanside High School this year and plans to go to UC San Diego this fall. Without the scholarship, she said she'd be worried about getting the money to pay for college.

Support and encouragement from other students who have faced similar challenges was also a big help, said Chelsea Johnson, who graduated from El Camino High this year and plans to go to UC Berkeley this fall.

"It's really comforting to have someone who's there who knows what you're going through," she said. "It's very refreshing to know that someone cares."

Getting the scholarship was "life-changing," Johnson said.

In addition to \$16,000 for college tuition, students get thousands of dollars worth of products and services while they're still in high school, including a laptop computer, tutoring, trips and a \$1,000 stipend.

Simon Abels started the foundation in 2010 as an offshoot of the Ronald Simon Family Foundation, which her father started in 2003 to help students by sharing some of the millions of dollars he has made selling kitchen cabinetry.

She started the program in Oceanside as part of the original foundation before creating a separate nonprofit group last year.

There are other chapters of the family foundation working with schools in New Mexico and Georgia.

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