

Published: May 3, 2013 Updated: 5:31 p.m.

A new group of Simon Scholars prepares for college

A group of eight sophomores at Saddleback High School in Santa Ana attended a welcome lunch, and got a few pointers from veterans of the Simon Scholars program.

By **RON GONZALES** / ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

SANTA ANA Eight budding scholars at Saddleback High School passed through a new door on Friday that will set them on a six-year path toward college graduation.

The eight sophomores were selected as Simon Scholars at Saddleback, after working their way through a rigorous competition that will mean academic and personal support in high school, as well as a \$16,000 scholarship.



At Saddleback High School in Santa Ana, seniors and juniors who have been part of the Simon Scholars program on Friday welcomed a new group of participants who are now sophomores, entering the college preparation and scholarship program.

The 10th-graders were brought together so that they could meet the other members of what will be their new family – their Simon Scholar family, said Kathy Simon Abels, president and executive director of the Simon Family Foundation.

"Our philosophy is to create a support group of high-achieving, like-minded individuals," Abels said. "They form a support group, and help each other grow emotionally and develop leadership skills."

The new cohort is part of a group of 34 sophomores at four Orange County high schools who have endured the rigorous Simon Scholar screening process and been admitted to the program this spring. At Segerstrom Fundamental High, where a welcome lunch was held earlier this week, more than 100 students competed, Abels said, while nine were admitted. The other 17 came from Rancho Alamitos High in Garden Grove and Los Amigos High in Fountain Valley.

[MORE PHOTOS »](#)

Simon Scholars – by the numbers

34 - Orange County sophomores admitted this year.

231 - Orange County Simon Scholars since program's inception.

331 - Current California Simon Scholars.

Source: Simon Family Foundation

Rather than simply funding the college dreams of high school students, the Simon Scholars program - funded by Newport Beach businessman Ronald Simon, who is Abels' father – works with students during their last two years of high school, providing life skills and leadership development, academic tools and college preparedness training.

"We don't just measure success in numbers," Abels said. "There are also a great number of personal changes and leadership growth that take place as the Scholars experience the two-year high school program; such as the types of schools they ultimately choose to attend, the activities they participate in and the advanced and honors courses they decide to take, etc. Since we've instituted the intensive high school

program, college retention is greater than 90 percent."

The foundation staff and school administrators pick students who they believe will benefit the most and give back, above-average kids facing serious obstacles like poverty and other family challenges; kids who are likely to be first-generation college students; kids, nevertheless, with promise.

Senior Vanessa Lopez, 17, came here from Mexico four years ago, and four years from now, expects to be a UCLA graduate, with a major in biology and hopes of a career in occupational therapy. Her mother provides constant care for her father, who is disabled.

If she hadn't become a Simon Scholar, she probably wouldn't have applied to the UC campus, she said.

"It affects every aspect of your life in a confident way," she said. "Just the fact that you have that support system makes you dream further than you would dream."

The new group got a chance to share sandwiches with each other, as well as to hear from Saddleback High juniors and graduating seniors who are Simon Scholars heading to universities and colleges from UCI to UC Davis.

The new scholars shared what they hope to get out of the program, such as new friends and memories. Nearly all said they wept when they got their acceptance letters. Juniors who have been through the program talked about their favorite moments, such as retreats and a college tour to the Bay area. Soon-to-be-graduating seniors offered tips, urging the sophomores to try new things, to make school a priority, to embrace their Simon family and to seek their support.

Briana Ortiz, 15, whose goal is to study journalism at Cal State Fullerton, shared the moment she got her acceptance letter.

"When I got the letter, I got it out of the mailbox; I was just so scared of it. I was just so scared to face the truth," said Briana. "When I opened it, I was like crying."

The college money will help her working parents, she said – her dad a maintenance worker, her mom a factory worker.

"Once they're selected, they have hope," Abels said. "They can say, 'I am going to college.' ...It is life changing. I have had kids tell me, 'Someone believes in me' and that is powerful."

Contact the writer: 714-796-6999 or rgonzales@ocregister.com