

COMMUNITY

A GIFT OF HAPPINESS

Joy abounds at holiday party for deserving kids. More on Page 3.



PHOTO BY DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Calvin Hutchison enjoys bowling during a holiday party Dec. 4 hosted by Cal State Fullerton's Center for Autism, Sigma Pi fraternity and the nonprofit No Limits Creative Arts at the Titan Student Union.

SCHOLARSHIPS

COUPLE'S ANTI-BULLYING AWARENESS FOUNDATION REACHES OUT

Turning anger to action

By Lou Ponsi
contributing writer

Aryo and Marjan Nikopour have channeled their anguish from the loss of their teenage son into a cause designed to bring more awareness and empower others to help prevent the same tragic outcomes for families and young people who've been bullied and shunned by their peers.

Nika Nikopour loved science and history. He played the violin. He earned a black belt at age 11.

Because Nika was on the autism spectrum, he often felt marginalized and was victimized by bullying, his father, Aryo Nikopour, said.

In March 2019, Nika died by suicide. "I could have been very angry at the whole world," Aryo Nikopour said. "But I turned this anger into something positive. It came to me and my wife that we

can't be angry. We can't blame the whole world. We just need to save lives through small acts of kindness."

Aryo and his wife started the Nika Nikopour Foundation, a charity that launches initiatives centered around autism awareness, antibullying, depression treatment and suicide prevention.

The foundation recently made a five-year commitment to Cal State Fullerton to provide two annual \$1,600 scholarships to university students who are on a path to serving others and have acted within their own communities by promoting inclusion, anti-bullying and suicide prevention.

"So, the scholarship is essentially for students who are pursuing careers in mental health, who want to give back and be good stewards," said Lauren Sieven, senior director of development for foundation and corporate relations at CSUF.

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PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

The Nika Nikopour Foundation focuses on autism awareness, antibullying programs, depression treatment and suicide prevention.



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Greg Saks, executive director of the Cal State Fullerton Philanthropic Foundation

FUNDING

Donors' wishes drive the Philanthropic Foundation

Gifts often reflect personal passions

By Nicole Gregory
contributing writer

People who wish to give a financial gift to Cal State Fullerton, a state entity, must give to the university's Philanthropic Foundation, which distributes funds according to donors' wishes. And these donations are critical in supporting programs that benefit students, today and into the future.

The Philanthropic Foundation is part of the university but separate, too.

"The Philanthropic Foundation is basically an auxiliary of the university, a 501(c)(3)," said Greg J. Saks, executive director of the foundation, who has been

at Cal State Fullerton for 10 years and is also vice president for University Advancement. "It serves generically as the philanthropic bank of the campus. We serve as that depository of gift revenue that comes to the university."

The foundation's board of governors consists of local business and community leaders who work on committees, including finance and investment committees, and provide guidance for the university's endowment as well as the other funds of the institution. As executive director, Saks helps hone their vision and oversees compliance matters.

Donors can choose where their gifts are spent, and two ongoing areas of funding are scholarships and supporting basic needs for students, which was particularly critical during the pandemic.

"On our campus, over 99% of all donations are what we call 'designated,' which means that the donor tells us where it goes," said Saks. "We are bound to make sure it goes to that location. It

PHILANTHROPY » PAGE 5



TITAN OF EMPOWERMENT

Future Pediatrician Exceeds Her Own Expectations



Cal State Fullerton



PANETTA SCHOLAR

Internship in Washington: 'A Dream Come True'

CSUF news services

Standing in front of the Capitol building as Cal State Fullerton's 2022 Panetta Congressional intern, Sama Nafea felt tears in her eyes thinking about her younger self and realizing, "I made my parents and myself proud."

The fourth-year political science student immigrated to the United States from Iraq when she was 6 years old. Despite her age, Nafea said she understood the sacrifice her parents were making as they quit their jobs and said goodbye to their families.

"When we landed here, we started clapping, and when I think of my past self, I imagine that little girl earning this opportunity. That little girl would have never imagined herself being chosen for such a great experience to go to the Capitol and work there," said Nafea.

The Panetta Institute for Public Policy was founded in 1997 by former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and his wife, Sylvia Panetta. Through the organization's Congressional Internship Program, students from the California State University system are selected to work in a congressional office in Washington, D.C., to gain hands-on experience in government, politics and public policy.

"I had the chance to have meetings with legislative directors and staffers, and they were able to educate me about what their job entails. It helped me better understand how politics and law work," said Nafea.

This fall, Nafea worked for Rep. Alan Lowenthal, a Democrat who serves the 47th Congressional District, including Long Beach, Buena Park, Cypress and Garden Grove.

As an intern, Nafea attended committee hearings and briefings, wrote memos for the office and kept track of bills. But she said her proudest achievement was helping produce the weekly Safe Climate Caucus Newsletter, which is sent to 175 congressional offices. The newsletter provides updated research and news about climate change, focusing on the impacts of climate on U.S. industries and environments.

After her internship concluded in November, the congressman's team hired Nafea as a staff assistant. She currently works in Lowenthal's district offices in Long Beach and Garden Grove, where she helps educate constituents and manage Capitol-based projects. As she continues her work with the House of Representatives, the 2023 graduate also is applying to law school.

"Sama has an extraordinary personal story of perseverance that led her to becoming a Panetta Congressional intern. Her pursuit of a career in public service is inspiring, and we are lucky to have someone like her who is so dedicated to helping her community. She is a determined and perpetually positive student, and I can't wait to see what she does in the future as a graduate," said Meriem Doucette, associate professor of public administration.

Before receiving the internship, Nafea worked on a campaign team in 2018 for former U.S. Rep. Gil Cisneros. She also has experience working at a private investigation firm, an immigration law firm and as a field representative for a state assembly member.

"I was born in Iraq, and I grew up in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. There, as a woman, I couldn't go into law because you have to be from the United



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Panetta Scholar Sama Nafea interned in Washington, D.C. with Rep. Alan Lowenthal.

Arab Emirates to work in the law and you can't be a woman. It's been a dream come true to come to this country and be able to pursue whatever field that I choose," said Nafea.

Looking back on the experience, Nafea said she's not only proud of the professional strides she's made, but she's also proud of the personal change that she

experienced and the hope she found for the future.

"One of the reasons that it was such a great opportunity is because it made me believe in myself. It made me believe that I could work in a place like the Capitol and potentially grow and learn. It gave me courage to apply to more opportunities in the future."

CONNECTIONS

Black CommUnity: Nurturing, retaining communications students

CSUF news services

As a Black college student at a predominantly white institution on the East Coast, Jasmine Phillips Meertins recalled how much she appreciated the African American Cultural Center — a place on campus that felt like home.

Now an assistant professor of communications, she wanted to create a similar experience for Black communications students at Cal State Fullerton.

Enter Black CommUnity — a new program within CSUF's Department of Communications designed to support and retain Black students by offering advising workshops, mentoring, job and internship preparation and social events. The program guides Black communications students as they persist toward their degrees and encourages community building and professional networking.

"I hope that through the events and workshops, students can find each other and build a peer network," said Phillips Meertins. "Feeling connected is a critical factor in retention, especially coming out of the pandemic. Students are looking for opportunities to bond, and Black CommUnity is providing the space and structure to facilitate that."

One of 11 programs that received first-year funding from the Scott-Jewett Fund for Student Success and Innovation, Black CommUnity is being championed by three faculty mentors: Phillips Meertins; Miya Williams Fayne, assistant professor of communications; and Amber Wilson, lecturer in communications and internship coordinator.

As part of a universitywide call to embed anti-racist and nondiscriminatory behaviors and structures within the Titan experience, CSUF recently outlined six Guiding Principles for Social Justice. One of these principles calls for a redoubling of efforts to recruit, retain and graduate students from underserved communities, specifically Black/African



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
Jasmine Phillips Meertins, assistant professor of communications

American students — an area that Black CommUnity helps to address.

"Black CommUnity is a critically important addition to the Department of Communication's signature programs," said Jason Shepard, chair and professor of communications. "We want all communications students to be connected to all that the department has to offer. Building deeper connections between our Black students and faculty can nurture a sense of belonging that facilitates deeper relationships and engagement."

Shepard added that during the 2021-22 academic year, the Department of Communications enrolled a total of 1,533 students, 41 of whom identified as Black.

Phillips Meertins noted the program is planning to offer financial support for students to complete the required communications internship, many of which are unpaid. Additionally, up to 10 students will have the opportunity to travel to the International Communication Association conference in Toronto next year.

"I hope students feel better prepared to choose their classes and pursue internships, which can be overwhelming for some of them," she said. "We're fortunate enough to have a dedicated internship coordinator on hand to guide them through the process because it usually takes multiple internships to be a strong candidate in the job market after graduation."

As the program gains momentum, Phillips Meertins hopes to build up a robust alumni network. "Of course there are Black alumni from communications, but we want to formalize the process of

bringing back Black CommUnity alumni and provide a platform through which they can help current students get the internships and jobs that they want.

"Fleshing out the program will strengthen CSUF's communications offerings and encourage Black students to come to CSUF because of the community we've created," Phillips Meertins said.

Although Black CommUnity is intended for students in the Department of Communications, Phillips Meertins noted the program is open to all students who identify as Black within the College of Communications.



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Students attend an advising workshop hosted by the Department of Communication's Black CommUnity program.

Awareness

FROM PAGE 1

The first two students to receive the scholarship were Karla Montiel and Carolyn Contreras.

Montiel, who graduated from CSUF in spring 2022 with a B.A. degree in psychology, learned about the Nika Nikopour scholarship while she was looking into graduate schools.

"I decided to apply (for the scholarship) because it is really what I want to do," said Montiel, who is just completing her first semester of graduate school at San Diego State University. "It related to a lot of things I'm passionate about, such as mental health."

At CSUF, Montiel served on the board of CSUF's Active Minds Club, a student organization that "empowers students to create a comfortable environment for open discussion of mental health issues."

While in graduate school, Montiel is also working as a paid intern for the Nika Nikopour Foundation, running the foundation's social media accounts.

She plans to receive her master's in two years and then earn an Ed.S. in school psychology.

"It's so wild how it goes full circle, and now I'm in my graduate program, and now I'm interning for the foundation," Montiel said. "And it relates to a lot of the research that I'm doing in graduate



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KARLA MONTIEL AND CAROLYN CONTRERAS
Karla Montiel, left, and Carolyn Contreras both graduated in spring 2022 with degrees in psychology.

school related to bullying or depression."

Carolyn Contreras also graduated from CSUF with a psychology degree in spring of 2022.

Contreras has known since freshman year in high school that she wanted to make a career of helping others and was



particularly interested in domestic violence toward men.

Contreras said she applied for the Nika Nikopour Foundation scholarship about the same time she was starting a domestic violence advocacy club at CSUF.

"The goal of my club was to educate

other people to know what is going on around them," Contreras said.

Contreras' goal is to earn a master's degree in social work and work with underserved populations.

"It's what I know," she said. "It's what I'm comfortable with. I definitely want to help children. I feel like that is where the trauma starts."

As she applies to graduate schools, Contreras is essentially receiving an on-the-job education, working in a substance abuse treatment facility in Long Beach.

Aryo Nikopour also sought her feedback on how the foundation can better advance its mission.

"They are still communicating with me after I got the scholarship, which I think speaks highly of them and sets them apart from other scholarships," Contreras said.

The foundation also funds an identical scholarship at UC Irvine and provides financial support for homeless families and students in the Orange Unified School District through donations of gift cards, food, clothing and other resources.

"You need to help your own community," Nikopour said.

Nikopour also hopes to host public events featuring experts who can speak on the topics of bullying, suicide prevention and autism.

"It's been a wonderful relationship," Seven said. "This is just a foundation that wants to do good in the world."