

# THE SACRAMENTO BEE



## Ex-foster kids hit fashion runway for college cash

**By Pamela Martineau - Bee Staff Writer**

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When you grow up in multiple foster homes, it's hard to dream that one day you might go to college.

Or to think that complete strangers might care enough to help you pay for college.

Or to imagine that those same strangers would organize a fashion show -- making you one of its stars -- to raise money to help send you to college.

On Sunday afternoon, those dreams were realized for emancipated foster youths from Sacramento County at the Fifth Annual "Reach for the Stars" Tea and Fashion Show. Held in the University Ballroom at Sacramento State, the fashion show raised money for the Foster Youth Education Fund, which gives money for higher education to those who have "aged out" of the foster care system.

In addition, the event let them shine. Wearing glittering floor-length dresses and dapper suit jackets, the young men and women strode across the models' runway before a cheering crowd.

They were the stars for the day, exuding grace and style. The troubles of their childhoods were set aside as they focused on raising money for their futures.

"It's beautiful how everybody comes together," said Mary Ann Tellez, 18, who entered the foster care system when she was 11.

The Foster Youth Education Fund is a nonprofit organization run entirely by volunteers, many of whom have worked on children's issues at the state Capitol. The group provides support to youths after they leave the foster care system. Too often, event organizers said, the youths are left to fend for themselves -- which few other 18-year-olds are asked to do.

"Part of what we do is inspire them to go to college and provide the means," said Joni Pitcl, founder and president of the fund.

Those who are 18 and no longer eligible for state support may apply. With proof of registration at a post-secondary program, they may receive anywhere from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand dollars for tuition, books, transportation and other education expenses.

This year, part of the proceeds will go toward launching a Guardian Scholars program at California State University, Sacramento, which will provide mentors to help former foster youths maneuver through college life.

Pitcl said the program even helps students find places to stay during university breaks. "When it's Thanksgiving or Christmas and the dorms close, they have no place to go," she said.

Former Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg of Sacramento, who has lobbied for years for more state support for foster children, spoke at Sunday's event. He has worked over the years with many former foster children who have inspired him, he said.

"Despite the struggles of your own lives, you have gone on to great things," Steinberg said.

Jennifer Rodriguez, 30, is one of those successful former foster children. She was moved from home to home as a child in the Bay Area and went on to graduate from UC Davis, and later to earn a law degree from the university. Now she is a legislative and policy coordinator for the California Youth Connection. She said she wouldn't have been able to do what she's done without scholarships and support from people who know the issues facing foster care youth.

"Every former foster care youth could be as successful as I was if they got that support," Rodriguez said.

To donate to the Foster Youth Education Fund, send checks to 3323 Watt Ave. #253, Sacramento, CA 95821. For more information, call (916) 944-4935.

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