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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**PRESS RELEASE**

**High Achieving Foster Youth Who Exemplify Academic Success Take Center Stage at the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual “Celebration 2014” Graduation Ceremony on Thursday, June 19<sup>th</sup>**

**Over \$1,000,000 in scholarships to be awarded to 187 youth including aspiring biologists, journalists, psychologists, doctors, dancers, criminologists, and entrepreneurs.**

(LOS ANGELES, June 11, 2014) —187 young adults will proudly take center stage to celebrate their many successes on Thursday, June 19, 2014, as part of the 25th annual “Celebration 2014: Honoring the Academic Achievements of Foster Youth.” This unique event begins at 7 p.m. at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, located at 111 South Grand Avenue in downtown Los Angeles.

Hundreds of friends, foster parents, and family members will applaud and cheer as the proud graduates march across the stage to honor this significant milestone in their lives—an occasion marked by academic achievement and triumph over adversity.

Polly Williams, President and Chief Executive Officer of United Friends of the Children and Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Director Philip L. Browning will address and bestow congratulations upon the graduates. Emmy and Tony-Award nominated actor, producer, and director Obba Babatunde, who’s appeared in HBO’s *Miss Evers’ Boys*; *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*; *Dreamgirls*; *Jelly’s Last Jam*, *Chicago*, and most recently, the critically acclaimed role as Sammy Davis, Jr. in the Broadway bound production of *Sammy*, will have a special message for these exceptional youth. Angelica Nwandua, a United Friends of the Children College Sponsorship Alumna, will be the featured youth speaker. A former foster youth and graduate of Loyola Marymount University, Angelica was recently selected as a fellow of the Sundance Screenwriter’s Lab for a script that depicts the struggles of a youth transitioning out of the foster care system. Also speaking is Nathan Fletcher, Senior Director of Corporate Development for Qualcomm Incorporated and former elected member of the California State Assembly. Entertainment will be provided by StreetKatz, a musically diverse accapela group that has appeared on television and performed as the opening act for many celebrities and musicians.

*“To Enrich Lives Through Effective and Caring Service”*

**The Celebration graduation starts at 7 pm. From 3:30 – 4:15, the Celebration graduates profiled below will field questions from the media in the Green Room. Media will be allowed to film a rehearsal of the students taking the stage at 3 p.m. During the actual ceremony, media will only be allowed to film from the back row of the Disney Concert Hall. If you plan to cover the event, please let us know in advance when you will arrive.**

**Below are some of the many personal and moving stories from “Celebration 2014” graduates.** If you would like to interview any of these remarkable youth or other youth involved in Celebration 2014, please contact Neil Zanville or Dominique Robinson with the DCFS Office of Public Affairs at (213) 351-5886.

**Nubia J.** (Accepted at Yale University; 3.98 GPA; Career Goal: Journalism)

When Nubia was 13 years old, her world fell apart as her mother’s mental health issues affected her ability to care for her daughter. When her parents separated, she and her mother faced eviction, moving from motel to motel, sleeping in their car and in vacant houses. Amidst this chaos, Nubia managed excellent grades and was named valedictorian of her 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. She was placed in foster care, with her aunt and uncle, who provided the loving care and stability Nubia needed to succeed. And succeed she did. Nubia became the Editor-in-Chief of her school newspaper in her senior year. She is a member of the National Honor Society, tutors youth in her school, and is involved in different community projects benefitting multiple sclerosis; clothing donations; disaster relief; and food drives. She also volunteers at her local library, helping youth with their reading. Nubia feels she can use her journalistic skills to tell her story to inspire other youth. Nubia has achieved a 3.98 grade point average at the Marshall Fundamental Secondary School in Pasadena and will be attending Yale College this fall where she will major in English and Journalism. She’s been awarded a full Quest Bridge Scholarship and is one of nearly 50 foster youth who will be receiving a \$15,000 scholarship as part of United Friends of the Children’s College Sponsorship Program.

**Jennifer A.** (Accepted at UC Santa Cruz; 3.80 GPA; Career Goal: Child Psychology (Bi-lingual))

“I came from darkness. The only light I had in my life was what little I could make for myself.” Abused at a young age by her stepfather, young Jennifer was afraid to speak out for fear of additional pain. She would cut herself to dull the emotional pain. At age 14, while in foster care, she became a mother. She was terrified at the thought of losing her newborn to adoption. Her situation was complicated by drug use and her running away from her group home, resulting in a stint at Juvenile Hall. Jennifer resolved to do what was necessary to get her daughter back which meant confronting her drug addiction and returning to school. Amazingly, Jennifer had not been in school for six years! In becoming clean and sober, she realized she was good at schoolwork. Today life presents different challenges, mostly financial, being a fulltime student and parent living independently with her daughter. She has her own apartment, provided through DCFS transitional housing. Despite her years away from school she has earned a 3.80 grade point average, is a member of the National Honor Society, and will be attending UC Santa Cruz where she plans to major in Environmental Science and then pursue her master’s degree in Early Childhood Development and PhD in Psychology. For the past 2 ½ years, she’s worked with Enrich LA, non-profit organization building gardens for at-risk youth; Jennifer finds that creating and caring for a garden is a healing therapeutic activity. She was awarded a \$4,000 grant for a garden project at her school. Through her many trials, Jennifer has learned how strong and truly special she is.

**Quron C.** (Accepted at Institute of the Arts in Barcelona; 3.01 GPA; Career Goal: Dancer)

Quron and his mother moved from Arkansas to Los Angeles when he was 15. He never knew his father. When his mother was unable to care for him, his aunt and his uncle became his legal guardians. Quron found solace in church activities; singing in the youth choir and creating “Holy Hip Hop,” a youth praise dance crew. His true passion is dance. He has trained with some of the nation’s premier dance troupes including: Lula Washington Dance Theater, Joffrey Ballet, Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, American Ballet Theater, Dance Theater of Harlem and the Debbie Allen Dance Academy. When he’s not dancing, Quron volunteers in his church’s outreach ministries providing food and clothing for those in need. At his school, Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, he co-founded the Black Artistic Student Enrichment program tutoring students, teaching them about their heritage and helping children in Africa. He was selected to travel to China and perform in an original production “Pacific Cinderella.” Says Quron, “Being committed to dance—the technique, practice, physical conditioning, and the sheer hours has never been my problem.” His 3.01 grade point average, impressive dance credentials, and school and community activism has paid off. In September, Quron will be traveling to Spain to study dance at the Institute of the Arts in Barcelona.

**Jamilah S.** (Attending CSU at Berkeley; 3.32 GPA; Career Goal: Medicine/African-American Studies)

Jamilah is a triplet and her two sisters are also current College Sponsorship Program recipients from United Friends of the Children. Being a single mom is difficult under the best circumstances. Jamilah’s son was born during her freshman year of high school, when she and her sisters were entering foster care for the third time, due to their mother’s instability. Her newborn son motivated Jamilah to focus on school, despite the changing homes and learning environments. With a lot of hard work and determination, she carries a 3.32 grade point average and has taken multiple Honors and Advanced Placement Courses. Learning to be a good mom has been her primary extracurricular job, but she’s also involved in sports and school leadership activities, at the urging of her foster parents. In the last two years, Jamilah has developed a special bond with her foster parents and credits them and her mentor, a young mother, in managing the emotional roller coaster of parenthood. Inspired by the first black female in the field, Jamilah has conducted thorough research on anesthesiology, her intended career. She is looking forward to attending CSU at Bakersfield in the fall to pursue a career in medicine.

**Shaina S.** (Attending UC Berkeley; 2.87 GPA; Career Goal: Creative Writing)

Shaina, twin sister to Jamilah, has a passion for creative writing and hopes to one day produce her very own television show. Starting at age 11, over a ten-year period, Shaina was in five different foster homes. Being briefly reunited with her mother, only to be returned to foster care, adversely affected her studies. She and her sisters supported each other in making difficult adjustments to new schools. Shaina credits her two foster mothers who took her and her sisters into their home and saw to all their needs, encouraging them to be of service to others. Shaina has been a member of her school’s varsity volleyball team; she served as the Tennis Team Captain and is very involved with her local church. Her mentor of nine years has played a key role in providing emotional, financial and academic support. Last year, Shaina traveled to Spain as part of her high school program and looks forward to future travels abroad. She has been accepted at New Mexico State University where she will pursue her B.A. in arts, media and communications.

**Ingrid A.** (Attending CSU Northridge; 3.38 GPA; Career Goal: Psychology) Bi-lingual

When Ingrid was a child in El Salvador, her parents separated and she went to live with relatives. With meager savings, her mother came to America, leaving Ingrid behind. At age 12, Ingrid and her sister came to the U.S. illegally. It was difficult for a 12-year-old to learn a new language and understand the culture. Her situation worsened—she was abused by her stepfather who went to jail. Her mother could not find work and was deported. She had few relatives here and a brief stint with an aunt proved disappointing. Ingrid's luck changed. She was placed in the home of caring Guatemalan foster parents who made a huge difference in helping Ingrid with the language, American culture and making sense of her situation. They became her legal guardians. With their support and that of her social worker, Ingrid was granted permanent legal residency. Ingrid, who's earned a 3.38 grade point average, plans on studying psychology at CSU Northridge.

**Andre R.** (CSU Northridge; 3.0 GPA; Career Goal: Criminology/ Music)

Andre is an artist; it's in his blood. It explains how he sees the world and how he chooses to engage in it. Andre is an accomplished violinist and violist, playing for both Renaissance Arts High School and for the Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles. His commitment and passion for art extends beyond music and includes a love of visual arts. While Andre is passionate about art and music, he is also interested in studying criminal justice at college. He has learned a great deal about himself from volunteering at the LA Mission and through serving as a Counselor in Leadership Training at Circle V Camp. Despite his busy extracurricular schedule, Andre earned a solid 3.0 grade point average. For several years, United Friends of the Children (UFC) has supported Andre in his academic pursuits through their College Readiness Program. While his entry into foster care began with seven placement changes, he has benefitted from the stability found in his foster home of six years. He was recently accepted into his top college choice, Cal State Northridge. Andre is incredibly appreciative of the support he's received from UFC and looks forward to their continued support for the next five years.

**Yiwen S.** (Attending Mount San Antonio College; 3.60 GPA; Career Goal: Photographer)

Yiwen's journey is amazing given what has transpired in her life these last few years. She came to America from China at age 15 almost 2 years ago with her mother. When she was 7, her parents divorced. Yiwen found herself taking care of her mother who struggled with depression. Yiwen did not understand a word of English or anything about American culture. Her mother's depression worsened; she could not take care of herself or Yiwen. Her mother contacted the police; with no relatives in this country, she was placed in foster care. Although, she had a difficult time acclimating to her first foster family because of the language barrier, she now feels lucky for the help and support she's received. High school was another hurdle to be faced. Yet despite these obstacles, Yiwen has improved her English and earned a remarkable 3.6 GPA. She is interested in becoming a photographer and will be attending Mount Saint Antonio College. Yiwen will soon be moving into her own apartment as part of the AB12 DCFS transitional housing program. Says, Yiwen, "I believe every challenge is a life lesson for me and I am getting stronger through those challenges."

**Elizabeth W.** (Attending Dickinson College; 3.80 GPA; Career Goal: Biology)

When Elizabeth was 9-years-old, her parents separated. She stayed with her mother in Las Vegas who had mental health issues and would occasionally see her father—but never after the age of 5. Living with her mother’s illness was difficult, forcing her to grow up fast and assume responsibility. Despite her mom’s illness, Elizabeth respected her mom’s intelligence, insisting on weekly trips to the library. In 2006, her mother suffered a breakdown, resulting in the loss of their home. She went to California to live with her grandmother who instilled in her a strong religious faith. Her grandmother passed away in 2008, and she remained in her home with her grandfather, aunt & uncle. School and church sustained her. It was Elizabeth herself who filed reports with DCFS following abuse from family relatives. Although it was difficult adapting to foster care, she was grateful for the academic support she received and that she has been able to remain with one of her siblings. She’s participated in basketball, Student Council, Church Alter and Choir, and has been very involved with Mother Teresa’s Nuns, the Missionaries of Charity. Elizabeth has received a 4-year fully paid scholarship to Dickinson College in Pennsylvania and plans on pursuing a career in the medical field. Says Elizabeth, “As a person who has been given so much, I would like to give back to all those who have given me support and guidance.”

**Nathan M.** (Attending Pasadena Community College; 3.14 GPA; Career Goal: Entrepreneur)

Nathan recently became a non-minor dependent under AB12 in LA County; he receives continuing support from DCFS including transitional housing. As a child, he and his family lived in Atlanta, but his father passed away when Nathan was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He and his mother moved from state to state, from school to school, landing in Compton when he was 15. Nathan’s mother was unable to care for him and he was placed in foster care. With all his family’s relocations and different schools, he still managed good grades and was able to make up missing credits. To help his family get by, Nathan sold narcotics and was sent to Juvenile Hall. That experience was a sobering one and he “straightened himself out.” He came to understand that anger and revenge would not serve him well. He is graduating high school with a 3.14 grade point average; has a job, and is saving money while living in DCFS transitional housing. This fall he will be attending Pasadena Community College with the goal of becoming a successful entrepreneur and setting a positive example for his 3 younger siblings. The changes he has made in his life have astonished family and friends.

### **Additional Event Information:**

As part of the “Celebration 2014” graduation ceremony, over \$1,000,000 in scholarships will be presented to the youth by a variety of corporations and non-profit organizations. Donors include Los Angeles County Departments of Children and Family Services and Probation, United Friends of the Children, Heads Up Youth Foundation, Teague Family Foundation, Rotary Club of Los Angeles, Foster Care Counts, Accenture, Jane Mabie Memorial Scholarship/ All Saints Church Foster Care Project, Torrance Women’s Club, Swing for School, DCFS Trust Fund, Chadwick School, Los Angeles County African-American Employees Association and Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services Managers. Should the public be interested in contributing to the scholarship funds for Celebration graduates, they can contact Charlotte Lewis with DCFS Youth Development Services at (213) 351-0157.

“Celebration 2014” is a collaborative effort involving the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, DCFS, the County of Los Angeles Probation Department, the Rotary Club of Los Angeles and United Friends of the Children, a non-profit organization that provides the direct and in-depth services that make it possible for foster youth to become self-sustaining adults.

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