

Three UC Davis students awarded prestigious Strauss Scholarship

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Select students set to implement public service projects funded by \$10,000 grant

Catherine Rivas, Sina Soltanzadeh Zarandi and Ioannis Kournoutas were recently awarded the Donald A. Strauss Scholarship, a public service scholarship given to 15 California college students annually. The winners are each granted \$10,000 in funding to implement a public service project that will make significant, sustainable improvements to their communities.

Rivas, a third-year global disease biology major, plans to implement the Esperanza Project, a women's health initiative intended to bring breast cancer prevention and awareness services to rural communities in Yolo County. Rivas' experience working as the women's health director in Knight's Landing, a rural community 30 minutes outside of Davis, inspired her to seek better care and health education for women in underserved communities.

"The population that we serve is largely Spanish-speaking migrant workers, who are in general subject to a lot of barriers when it comes to good health," Rivas said. "It is very difficult for them to get consistent access to primary care services. That's why our clinic is there, because the community doesn't have any other access to these services."

Numerous women in the community had noticed that there were higher than normal occurrences of breast cancer in Knight's Landing, which Rivas partly attributed to the community's lack of breast cancer prevention awareness resources such as mammograms and proper education.

Rivas, who started out just trying to get funding for mammograms, saw the Strauss Scholarship as an opportunity to expand the breast cancer awareness initiative into a community-based women's health coalition.

"We would be working with the women of the community, and seeing how we can empower them to advocate for their own health," Rivas said. "Our goal is to eliminate the barriers that they face and hopefully bring down the levels of breast cancer."

Rivas' project is separated into three parts. The first, referral services, which will include access to mammograms, diagnoses and a yearly mobile mammogram event. The second part is education workshops, which will help to educate groups of women on a variety of women's health issues with an emphasis on breast health. The final step involves establishing leadership within the community, which includes developing undergraduate leaders in the health clinic itself. Rivas, who understands that implementing the plan will not be easy, expressed concern about participation in the workshops.

“There’s an issue of trust,” Rivas said. “This is a group that has been systematically neglected. Our presence as a clinic within this community is a very delicate balance, and we’re trying to figure out how to maintain that balance while also building on relationships.”

Regardless, Rivas, who will take over as the executive of the clinic next year, maintains a positive disposition.

“[Being awarded the scholarship] was really emotional for me,” Rivas said. “This is something that I’ve been working on for a really long time and it’s really exciting that I’ve been given this opportunity.”

The other two winners, Zarandi, a third-year neurobiology, physiology and behavior major, and Kournoutas, a third-year psychology major, are partnering up to implement their project titled “Inspire to Aspire,” a student-run mentoring program focused on helping at-risk high school students in underserved communities of the greater Sacramento area. The program aims to help students deemed as having low chances of finishing high school to not only graduate but seek higher education as well. For Zarandi and Kournoutas, their inspiration for the project comes from their own experiences as an immigrant and a first-generation student, respectively.

“For us personally, we didn’t go through the U.S. education system,” Zarandi said. “We had to figure out many things on our own, but with the help of our advisors we were able to overcome many challenges. Unfortunately in many high schools in California, the ratio of students to advisors are pretty skewed.”

Zarandi and Kournoutas plan to recruit UC Davis students who can mentor and guide at-risk students who may otherwise be ignored.

“These [UC Davis] students have already gone through the process,” Zarandi said. “We hope that by sharing the experiences that they have had, the mentors will be able to help the at-risk students overcome their challenges.”

Additionally, the two are partnering with renowned psychologists such as Dr. Philip Zimbardo of Stanford in order to implement various programs that have been shown to

increase retention rates in high schools. One such program is the Future Authors program, a writing workshop that helps students get in the mindset of what they want to achieve in the future.

Starting next year, the program will be implemented at Davis Senior High School and Vacaville High School. However, Zarandi and Kournoutas hope that the program will expand to other high schools in the Sacramento area as their organization grows. The mentor selection process brought in a wide range of students hoping to help others.

“We had more than a hundred applicants apply from all different fields, from engineering all the way to humanities,” Zarandi said.

Zarandi and Kournoutas understand that implementing the program could be a long and arduous process, but the two are prepared to approach the project with patience and a willingness to adapt.

“One of the reasons we decided to only start with two high schools was to downscale and try to perfect our formula per se,” Zarandi said. “Working with high schools can be difficult. Working with students can be difficult, but I think with experience we will be able to overcome all of these challenges.”

For Zarandi and Kournoutas, being awarded the Strauss Scholarship was an opportunity to help those who were in the same position they were.

“I believe that we have a lot to offer,” Zarandi said. “Because of our backgrounds, it was very difficult for us to navigate through the U.S. educational system. This scholarship has given us the opportunity to help students that are unsure about their futures.”

For Rivas, Zarandi and Kournoutas, the Strauss Scholarship is an honorable achievement but only the beginning of their pursuits. Implementing their projects is the first step, but keeping them running is the ultimate goal.

“The sustainability aspect is really important,” Rivas said. “I want to have a lasting impact.”

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