

PHI THETA KAPPA FOUNDATION

Visionary

2016 EDITION



**YOUR GIFTS
IN ACTION**

The Will to Rise Above

From DREAMer to **LIVING HER DREAMS**

Sofia Medina-Pardo is a pre-med student at Johns Hopkins University who dreams of helping advance health care as a basic global human right. She received numerous accolades as a student at Essex County College in New Jersey, including being named a prestigious Jack Kent Cooke Scholar.

It's hard to believe that only five years earlier she, her father and her three older brothers were facing deportation.

Medina-Pardo and her family came to the United States from Ecuador in 2000, seeking a good education and a stable future. Applications to become permanent U.S. residents, filed in 2001, had in fact been misfiled; and in 2010, she was at risk to be sent back to Ecuador. Medina-Pardo's future was debated in immigration courts for more than three years; in the meantime, she tried to keep her head up as she completed high school and began thinking about college.

She finished high school in the top 15 percent of her class, but a four-year college was out of reach due to her undocumented status — there



was no way she could receive the financial aid she needed. Instead, she applied to Essex County College, where she received a full-tuition merit scholarship and acceptance into the honors program.

“Attending Essex County College has taught me that higher education is a privilege,” she said. “Reflecting on how fortunate I am for my academic journey serves as a source of motivation.”

Medina-Pardo’s status as an undocumented immigrant often left her feeling hopeless; to combat this, she became involved with the New Jersey DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act Coalition. She co-founded the Essex County DREAM Team in 2013, a non-profit, student-led organization that provides a support network to undocumented students and advocates for immigration reform policies to advance the rights of undocumented individuals.

“Part of my approach in co-founding the Essex County DREAM Team was based on my involvement in the Essex County College Honors Program and Phi Theta Kappa, through which I benefit from a supportive community of scholars who encourage each other by sharing advice and opportunities,” she said.

Phi Theta Kappa has been a family affair for Medina-Pardo. Her three older brothers also attended Essex County College and were members of the Alpha Theta Chapter. She became an active member as soon as she could be inducted, even serving as chapter president.

In the fall of 2013, as Medina-Pardo was preparing to transfer, she discovered her undocumented status prevented her from applying for financial aid and many scholarships. With the courts still discussing her future in this country, she once again grew discouraged at the thought of how she might fulfill her educational dreams.

David Berry, the director of the Honors Program at Essex County College and one of her mentors, encouraged her to have her scholarship applications ready just in case. Four days before an important application deadline, her permanent U.S. resident card arrived in the mail.

“It’s that support system and mentorship, at times when I felt very overwhelmed by my workload and had doubts throughout my community college journey, which have contributed to my achievements,” she said.

Medina-Pardo was named a 2014 New Century Scholar and a 2014 Guistwhite Scholar. She also received the 2014 Jack Kent Cooke Foundation’s Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship — together, these awards have eased the financial burden of transferring to Johns Hopkins, and they’ve motivated her as well.

“It meant that people believed in my potential and my goals enough to support me in the continuation of them,” she said. “I also felt acknowledged and valued not only for my accomplishments but also for who I was as a person, because I was very honest in my scholarship applications about some of my struggles.”

The Coca-Cola Foundation and The Coca-Cola Scholars Foundation, in addition to the American Association of Community Colleges and Phi Theta Kappa, sponsor the New Century Scholar program. Fifty-two students receive scholarships of \$2,000 each for the completion of a bachelor’s degree.

“The Coca-Cola Scholars Foundation is honored to recognize Sofia and celebrate her accomplishments,” said J. Mark Davis, President of the Coca-Cola Scholars Foundation and Treasurer of the Phi Theta Kappa Foundation Board of Trustees. “We strongly believe investing in leaders like Sofia will result in positive, lasting change in our communities and make a positive impact on our world.”

Medina-Pardo was also named to the 2014 All-New Jersey Community College Academic Team and was asked to address fellow team members, state legislators, community college presidents, advisors and other guests during the recognition ceremony. Her story caught the attention of staff from the New Jersey Education Association, who thought she would make a good feature for an episode of *Classroom Close-up, NJ*, a half-hour television program featuring innovative projects in New Jersey public schools.

She recorded her segment, “An Immigrant’s Story” (available at classroomcloseup.org/segments/an-immigrants-story), and the episode in which it was featured was later nominated for an Emmy Award.

“It details some of the hurdles that I faced in obtaining higher education when I was an undocumented immigrant,” she said.

Medina-Pardo said her Phi Theta Kappa membership played a significant role in keeping her motivated. The friendships she fostered with both chapter members and faculty at Essex remain a source of strength for her today. She is still close with one of her chapter advisors, Dr. Jeffrey Lee.

“The support network that I became immersed in through Phi Theta Kappa helped me to believe in myself, to discover my potential, develop leadership skills and to have the energy to keep moving forward despite the limitations of my undocumented status at the time,” she said. “My entire Phi Theta Kappa experience was motivating because I constantly heard about amazing stories of growth and resilience of fellow Phi Theta Kappa members.” ♦

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