



8 Burn Survivors Receive Assistance With College Costs Through 2011 Phoenix Education Grants

BY MAUREEN KALIL

The following college students were recently awarded Phoenix Education Grants (PEGs) to assist them in continuing their education. The Phoenix Society scholarships, funded by donations to the PEG endowment, are awarded annually to deserving burn survivors who are attending college or technical school.

Laura Dansby of Doylestown, Pennsylvania, will be one step closer to her achieving her dream of becoming a counselor when she graduates from Temple University in December. “Counseling as I see it,” says Laura, “is a time to get to know who you are, what you want, and how you are going to obtain it. It excites me to think that I could be part of that process in someone’s life.”



Since her injury in 2010, Laura has not wasted any time getting involved in the burn community. She participates in a monthly support group and has volunteered at Camp Susquehanna—an experience she says she cannot see her life without. Laura credits a wonderful

family and friends with being the “best support system anyone could ask for.” She says her experience as a burn survivor has helped her become the “positive, life-thirsty person” she is today. Now Laura hopes to take all the support and love that she has been shown and give it to others.

Freshman **Lane Duckworth**, of Battle Creek, Michigan, is just beginning her journey toward a career in psychology. Lane began her studies at Olivet College this fall. She would like to work in a pediatric trauma center, and ultimately with burn survivors and their families. Lane believes that her experiences as a burn survivor during the last 12 years are a valuable asset for inspiring others. Coupled with an education, Lane hopes one day to “change peoples lives,” not only as a psychologist, but as an



inspirational speaker who by sharing her story can help others “get through their struggles.”

Since her burn injury, Lane has been involved each summer with Great Lakes Burn Camp—initially as a camper and for the last 2 years as a member of the staff. “I feel my job there is important to the kids to give

them hope that things will be okay and they will make it through their ordeal,” she says.

Meri Hembree, of Tucson, is a material science and engineering major at the University of Arizona. Meri, who hopes to continue on to graduate school, explains that aiding burn survivors in their recovery is one of the most important goals in her life, but not as a nurse, doctor, or therapist, rather as a researcher who can work on developing and improving the materials used to treat burn injuries, such as pressure garments, braces, and artificial skin. She is also eager to inspire young students to enter the fields of mathematics and engineering and volunteers with programs designed to do so. “These volunteering opportunities have awakened a desire in me to also volunteer abroad in my home county of Bolivia,” says Meri, where



she would like not only to teach science, but also motivate young students there to learn more about science, math, and technology.

Meri believes that her experiences as a burn survivor with a facial injury has given her the ability to relate to people who are dealing with difficult situations. She says she is always the first person to welcome the new students at school and to help new employees at her job. “I want to prevent other people from feeling the way I have felt,” she says. “It’s never fun to feel out of place or different from your peers.”

Gina Patterson, of Mesquite, Texas, is currently attending Eastfield College, where she is taking the prerequisite courses she needs to apply to nursing school. Gina describes nursing as “her passion, her dream.” Although Gina has earned a degree in kinesiology, it has been difficult to find full-time position in that field. “I sincerely believe that becoming a nurse will allow me multiple opportunities for employment,” explains Gina.

Gina feels that it is important to “give back to our fellow brothers and sisters in this world” and she is doing so. Four years after her burn injury, at the urging of a friend, she volunteered with a local fire department’s fire prevention and education unit. “This was the bet idea ever!” says Gina, “Not only was I assisting others in fire safety awareness, but this was the confidence builder and ‘therapy’ I need for personal growth.” For the past 13 years,



she has been a burn camp volunteer, initially with Parkland Memorial’s burn camp in Texas, and since 2005 with the Great

Lakes Burn Camp for Kids. In 2009 she also became a volunteer firefighter/EMT in Cockrell Hill, Texas. She visits burn survivors and their families at Parkland Memorial in Dallas where she also attends the support group. "I have walked a difficult road, just as every other burn survivor has," says Gina, "but as we grow stronger it is extremely important to assist others in this walk of life."

Victoria Reed, of Newark, New Jersey, believes that building a future starts with a degree, continues with endurance, and ends with fulfillment. As a junior at Rutgers University studying exercise science, Victoria is on her way to building a future that she hopes will include becoming a physical therapist for burn-injured children and promoting healthy living. Inspired by her own therapist, Victoria says, "I want to encourage people the way she encouraged me."



Victoria is a volunteer in her church's music and youth programs and with a local Little League baseball team. Victoria recently became a peer supporter with the SOAR (Survivors Offering Assistance in Recovery) program at St. Barnabas Hospital. She says her involvement with SOAR has also helped her to recognize that helping others with burn injuries is "exactly what I want to do in life."

As a "burn survivor, orphan, and first-generation college student," **Huyen "Kiki" Vo** of Berkeley, California, says she has always had to overcome obstacles, so she is not afraid of the road ahead. In fact, Kiki credits the countless challenges she's faced



with making her even more determined to accomplish her goals and attain her dreams. Currently Kiki is working toward a bachelors of art in social welfare and ethnic studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She dreams of one day providing social services and support for burn patients and their families. It was a social worker who introduced Kiki to Champ

Camp and Firefighters Kids Camp, programs that she says changed her life completely.

"Another goal I have," says Kiki, "is to become a community organizer." Kiki wants to reciprocate the love that the Sacramento community extended to her and her family when they immigrated to the United States from Vietnam to seek medical care. Kiki has already been described as a leader in her community, serving on numerous community boards and committees and leading community campaigns and events, even earning recognition as Sacramento Youth of the Month. At Berkeley, she has been involved with various educational outreach and intervention programs, including serving as a middle school mentor. Kiki says she is very passionate about the road she's taking. "I know deep in my heart, I want to use my degrees to work with people, to lend a helping hand to others in need."

It was during his second semester at Pasadena City College, that **Jose Rivas** was encouraged by an instructor to pursue a degree in English. Jose has served as a tutor at an elementary school program for at-risk children and as a translator at a senior center, where he also has helped Spanish speakers to learn to read and write English, and pass their U.S. citizenship exam. This fall Jose headed to the University of Hawaii at Manoa.



"My dream is to find myself living a nomadic existence around the world competing in triathlons and being a mentor at the same hospital [Shriners] that opened its doors to me," says Jose, who has been inspired by the writings of American itinerant Chris McCandless and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau. "Working at a community college as an ESL or creative writing instructor," he adds, "would give me a fulfilling life as well." That career, Jose thinks, would pair well with his interest in writing books for children and teens. Jose has also considered returning to Shriners as a mental health counselor, where, he says, he would like to share a piece of his dream with every child. "The truth is, that with education, I have discovered my adventurous spirit and the passion to become a useful individual to my family, fellow burn survivors, and countrymen," says Jose.

Aaron Stander of Athens, Georgia, describes himself as living a "life of service, hard work, and diligence." As a teen, he traveled to Mississippi following Hurricane Katrina to assist with cleanup, participated in community service projects as an Eagle Scout, and organized the Special Olympics at high schools in his community. It was while working to earn money for a mission trip that Aaron, then 17, sustained a severe electrical injury.



"I learned three things from this experience," says Aaron. "The first is this accident impacted not just my life, but my family and friends. Second, it is amazing what the body can go through when it is healthy and strong. Third, when tragedy hits it can be a force to better you if you let it." Inspired by those who cared for him during his monthlong recovery from his burn injury, last spring Aaron enrolled in Brigham Young University-Idaho with the goal of becoming a nurse.

WITH YOUR HELP

Fifty-six students have benefited from the Phoenix Society's scholarship program to date. A total of 65 grants have been awarded. The monetary awards are made possible by contributions to the PEG endowment fund. To help other burn survivors continue their postsecondary education, contact the Phoenix Society office at 800-888-2876 or donate via the Society website <www.phoenix-society.org/donate>. (Be sure to select "PEG" as "type of gift" on the online form.) ■