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## Determined teen wins an SDSU scholarship

**By Lisa Petrillo**

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Since she's never had a lot of luck, 17-year-old Jennifer Best simply learned to thrive without it.

Though nobody in her family ever made it to college, she has applied to more than a dozen hoping she would somehow get one of the 30 scholarships she sought for the schooling.

For most of her life she's been the primary caretaker for her partially paralyzed mother, yet she finds time to serve on the student government at San Diego's Hoover High School plus work part time at a music store and as a lifeguard. And earn A's and B's.

"I like being someone who gets things done," shrugged the statuesque senior about her busy life.

Then Jennifer got really lucky.

At a swank party on Harbor Island in February, she received a full four-year \$14,000 scholarship to San Diego State University. A ballroom filled with well-dressed strangers came to applaud her achievements. And one partygoer was so impressed with her, he offered to pay for her college textbooks. With the average text topping \$50, that's worth more than a car these days.

"It was gorgeous," said Jennifer of the gala. "It was too good to be true."

Jennifer was among the first recipients in SDSU's new privately funded scholarship program that aims to increase economic and ethnic diversity at the 33,000-student university.

The President's Diversity Scholarship program was launched by President Stephen Weber as fees over five years for the 400,000-student CSU system shot up 76 percent and rose 60 percent at the 200,000-student University of California system.

Scholarship committee co-chairman Dan McAllister, the San Diego County treasurer-tax collector, said the group wants to stem the "brain drain" of local high-achieving students who go away to college, often never returning to work here.

"I was blown away by all the talent," McAllister said of the 12 scholarship winners.

Winners include Leonid Kandinov of Patrick Henry High School, an Uzbekistan native with a 4.62 grade-point average who spends his spare time volunteering for the Red Cross and reading Plato.

Another is Carolina Galindo of Montgomery High School, who came from Mexico in the ninth grade speaking little English and now plans to major in chemistry in college so she can do something about improving public health.

Others and their high schools are: Erica Asbury, Helix Charter; Lisa Doan, Mira Mesa; Alan Gomez, Eastlake; Elizabeth Meraz, Castle Park; Dwight Nwaigwe, The Preuss School; Monica Rodriguez, Mar Vista; Lagina Scott,

Mount Miguel; Vanessa Tapia, Sweetwater; and Pedro Parra, Brawley Union.

The committee raised \$140,000 for the scholarships Weber plans to award annually. The first fundraising gala sold out all 500 tickets, at \$150 apiece, and attracted as banquet speaker Yolanda King, daughter of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

### **Abandoned by father**

Jennifer Best's mother, Lisa Barnes, always dreamed of college for herself and later for her daughters. But real life took its toll on those dreams. The children's father abandoned them, and her baby, Jennifer, was born with respiratory problems that kept her hospitalized for much of her first years.

"That was a dream for me. I didn't know how they were going to get there. I didn't know which way they would turn when they were growing up," Barnes said of her daughters' college hopes.

Jennifer's Hoover High guidance counselor, Mike Askey, said the counselors and teachers nominated her because they thought this program seemed made for her. Though the San Diego Unified high school draws its students from the ranks of the poor, the working poor, minorities and immigrants, he said kids with the best grades and SAT scores often get lots of scholarship opportunities.

Sometimes students like Jennifer get overlooked, said Askey, the head counselor.

"She's had a tough story, but she's an overachiever. She plays above her level," he said.

She was 8 when her mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and her school career became spotty because she and her sister had to care for her mom, deal with appointments, cook the meals and take her to the doctors.

Jennifer shrugs off any hard-luck feelings about her childhood, pointing out that she learned a lot. "I got good at making pancakes and macaroni and cheese," she said.

Still the private pain of a hard life emerges poignantly in the essay that won her the scholarship – the only one she won of the dozens she applied for:

"I accumulated so many responsibilities that I never really got to enjoy being a kid . . . What kept me going was the support of my sister, and knowing that nothing else could possibly get any worse than they already were. But I was wrong." Her big sister, Juana, was recently diagnosed with uterine cancer. She is 21.


Jennifer wrote: "Now both my mom and my sister have a life-threatening disease. I have nobody to talk to, nobody to cry on and no one to help take care of the two most important people in my life. Every day I pray that they do not pass away. Before anything happens to them, I want to make them proud of me, by doing something that they were never able to achieve. I want to go to college and shine like they always knew I could."

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