

Early Academic Outreach Program Involves San Diego Students in Celebrating Native American Culture

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Kim Sykes

East Lake High School senior, Regina Carvalho, advanced to the podium at the front of the UCSD Student Center Multi-purpose room. Before a group of attentive students, parents and community members, she said, "A country's essence relies primarily on its ancestry and culture." She then continued reading her first place winning essay written for the California Native American Day (CANADAY) Essay Contest. Carvalho's presentation was the opening act and precursor to the evening's key note address by Former Chairman Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians, Anthony Pico. The essay contest was part of a series of events hosted by UCSD in conjunction with this year's California Native American Day Celebrations.

UCSD's Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) together with the California Native American Day Celebration Committee launched the essay contest for high school students at the beginning of the fall term. In line with EAOP's mission of engaging culturally diverse students in higher education and preparing the first generation, under-served students of San Diego for college, the essay contest was another strategy to get community youth thinking about diversity. The aim of the annual contest is to spread awareness and to celebrate Native American culture and heritage in an academic format. "It was a pleasure to read all of the high school students' essays and learn from their ideas and understandings of what is important for others to learn about Native American culture, history, identity, and social issues" said UCSD Essay Contest Judge Cynthia Davalos.

In her essay, Carvalho astutely suggested that our educational system embrace Native American culture by teaching our youth, starting at a young age, about the important role of Native Americans in American history and culture. "Awareness of these communities should be encouraged by implementing ethnic studies in every Californian middle school, high school, and college, and eventually, to a national extent; if possible, bringing a speaker once every month to expose his ethnic and cultural background to the students, and to clarify any questions and inquiries the students might have," Carvalho said.

The event sponsors hosted an informal pizza dinner prior to the presentations where Pico held a round table forum with students giving an inspirational discussion about his personal challenges and rise to success. Pico encouraged the students to look beyond seemingly impenetrable barriers sighting the odds he overcame to become the well respected leader before them. "I have a connection with young people. I'm honored to be here and be a part of them. It's of profound importance that I'm able to talk to students because people 'non Indians' know very little about what we are. Hopefully when these young people leave here tonight, they will have enough information that when Native America is in jeopardy they will have a much better understanding of who we are," Pico said.

Pico's presentation, *Sovereignty in Contemporary Native America*, discussed the economic and social progress of Native Americans in the era of "tribal self-determination" and the role of gaming in helping Native nations rebuild tribal governments and economies. He emphasized the University's responsibility in increasing diversity and the need for researching and teaching the sovereign legal and social status of American Indians.

In addition to reading her winning essay at the evening gathering, Carvalho received prize money of \$500 and a certificate of recognition. Having emigrated from Mexico City only two years ago, Carvalho was excited to have

written a prize winning essay in her second language. Carvalio said, "I'm really excited. I struggled with English when I got here, and now to be winning the essay contest gives me encouragement to pursue my goals. My hard work is showing in the things I've been able to achieve, hopefully this is just an example of many exciting things to come." Carvalio has applied for admission to UCSD.

The two runners up of the CANADAY Essay Contest also received recognition and won \$250 each in prize money. "We plan to make the essay contest an annual event and look forward to even greater participation next year" said CANADAY Essay Contest Chairperson and EAOP staff member, Kim Sykes. The Anthony Pico lecture was offered as part of the Helen Edison Lecture Series. The event was one of several gatherings held from September through November in connection with the California Native American Day Celebrations at UCSD.

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