

## Class of 2013 Outstanding Grads

### ***Outstanding Senior Award Winner and Earl Warren Grad Dedicated to Solving Environmental and Social Problems***

**Annie Le** is a graduating senior from Earl Warren College who is earning a bachelor of science in human biology, with minors in history and healthcare social-issues. This fall, Le will attend UCLA where she will work toward earning a Master of Public Health. In addition to her multidisciplinary studies, Le has dedicated her time at UC San Diego to grassroots organizing in support of social and environmental sustainability issues. She served as a director and member of the Student Sustainability Collective (SSC) at UC San Diego. Le played an integral role in negotiating the policy to cease the sale of bottled water in dining halls and the elimination of Styrofoam use by campus vendors, as well as securing funding for hydration stations. In addition to the SSC, Le has also worked with numerous student organizations. As co-president of the Foundation for International Medical Relief of Children (FIMRC), Le aimed to increase awareness about health disparities among vulnerable communities and mobilize students to work toward health security for all, locally and globally. Le accepted the Outstanding Senior award on June 14 during the annual All Campus Graduation Celebration.

### ***Outstanding Graduate Student Award Winner Aldo Rodriguez Mentors Classmates Through Medical School***

**Aldo Rodriguez** is a graduating doctoral student receiving a M.D. from the UC San Diego School of Medicine. As a pediatrician, he is leaving UC San Diego to develop his skills in Oakland, Calif. where he will complete his residency at one of the nation's premiere Children's Hospitals. Rodriguez earned his bachelor of arts degree from UC Berkeley in 2007 where he majored in both molecular and cell biology immunology and anthropology. During his time at UC San Diego, Rodriguez dedicated countless hours to the Latino Medical Student Association (LMSA) where he served as co-chair and in various other roles. He also worked with others to help the underserved community of Vista Canyons through the "Border Health Project." Rodriguez and three other classmates co-founded the UC San Diego School of Medicine Mentorship Program in 2010. This group pairs up School of Medicine students with self-identified underrepresented undergraduate students at UC San Diego. Rodriguez accepted the Outstanding Graduate Student award on June 14 during the annual All Campus Graduation Celebration.

## ***Thurgood Marshall Student Overcomes Health Challenges to Care for Others***

Studying human biology, healthcare and social issues, **Alesha Thomas** is well on her way to achieving her goal of becoming a physician's assistant or nurse practitioner. Diagnosed with cerebral palsy, the graduating UC San Diego senior knows that life often has obstacles. According to Thomas, UC San Diego's terrain can be difficult to maneuver in a wheelchair. However, she gets assistance from Autumn, her service dog and constant companion. "Autumn is a big help when I drop things. She makes sure I'm doing my best everywhere I go," says Thomas. Thomas has been engaged in the TRiO Student Support Services Program while an undergraduate. The program helps students who are disabled, come from low-income backgrounds or are the first in their family to attend college. Thomas said that the support from TRiO was invaluable during her undergraduate years. After her freshman year, Thomas underwent surgery to improve her muscle elasticity; however, she suffered from complications from the procedure which required her to undergo



*Alesha Thomas*

emergency surgery. Though Thomas faced health setbacks, she maintained her full-time student status at UC San Diego and even worked as an Orientation Leader at Thurgood Marshall College. "I definitely had some trying times during my college career, but I got help from my mentors at TRiO and Thurgood Marshall College," Thomas said. "They were like family—they helped me through some rough patches and were extremely supportive." Following graduation, Thomas intends to continue her studies and further pursue her education in physical medicine and rehabilitation.

## ***Multitalented Revelle Grad Pursues Medical School and Graduate School for Journalism***

**Ayan Kusari** is completing his undergraduate degree after just two years at UC San Diego, where he pursued both his passion for journalism and science. The general biology major developed an interest in medicine after volunteering late nights at the emergency room. "Thanks to some really good mentors, I became quite competent in disinfecting wounds, measuring vital signs and making patients feel comfortable and safe," Kusari said. He is a member of the UC San Diego Medical Scholars Program, a combined bachelor/M.D. program that accepts up to twelve highly qualified high school seniors each year and grants them provisional acceptance into the UCSD School of Medicine. As part of this program, Kusari, who is a graduating Revelle student, will be entering medical school in fall 2014, but Kusari's post-college plans don't end there. This fall, Kusari will attend graduate school at Columbia University for one year to earn a master's of art in journalism before returning to California

to pursue his medical degree at the UC San Diego School of Medicine. Kusari received his start in media in high school, editing the school's magazine, and worked briefly at the *Orange County Register*. During his past two years on campus, Kusari worked as reporter, features editor and ultimately managing editor for *The UC San Diego Guardian*. He also was editor-in-chief for *Mania Magazine*, a features editor at both *Under the Scope Magazine* and the *Saltman Quarterly*, and a radio host at KSDT Radio.

### ***From Laos to UC San Diego's Medical School: Khamph Southisombath Advocates for Health of Underserved Communities***



*uthisombath*

Recent UC San Diego School of Medicine graduate **Khamph Southisombath** immigrated with her family to California from Laos when she was just 5 years old. Since then, Southisombath has continued on an arduous, yet inspiring path. The Fresno native and California State University, Fresno graduate grew up on her family farm and, as the second-oldest of six children, acted as an interpreter for her family. After working throughout all of her high school and undergraduate years to help support her family, she became the first to move away from home when she enrolled at UC San Diego's School of Medicine. "I grew up in an underserved community and witnessed the health disparities that existed for non-English speaking and low socioeconomic families and wanted to make a difference," says Southisombath. During her graduate career at the School of Medicine, Southisombath involved herself with several health and community organizations, including the UC San Diego Student Run Free Clinic, Docs Ought to Care and the Lao Parent Teacher's Student Association. She also co-chaired the first Lao Community Health Fair in San Diego. Southisombath,

who received a medical degree this June, will be specializing in family medicine. Upon graduation, Southisombath is beginning her residency at the White Memorial Family Medicine Residency Program in East Los Angeles.

### ***After Serving in Military and Peace Corps, Dennis Mello Graduates from School of International Affairs and Pacific Studies***

This June, **Dennis Mello** is graduating from UC San Diego's School of International Relations and Pacific Studies (IR/PS) with a Master of Pacific International Affairs (MPIA) degree. The native San Diegan said his previous experiences serving in the U.S. Air Force and Peace Corps helped prepare

him for the type of research he conducted at IR/PS. While in the Air Force, Mello worked as a civil engineering officer. “In the Air Force I had my first opportunity to travel and work abroad,” Mello said. “That taste of life overseas led me to join the Peace Corps which gave me first-hand experience at the ground level of international development, which led me to IR/PS where my studies have been focused on international development and energy policy.” While a student at IR/PS, Mello spent his summer internship in the South Pacific conducting a research project which analyzed usage rates of ‘smokeless’ wood-burning stoves in Vanuatu, where Mello also served in the Peace Corps. In addition to producing groundbreaking research while at IR/PS, Mello reached another milestone: fatherhood. “Becoming a dad while in grad school was pretty intense and amazing,” Mello said. Upon graduation, Mello and his wife plan to stay in San Diego where they will raise their daughter and where Mello will pursue a career with local and international non-governmental organizations, as well as clean energy companies.

### ***Daughter of Refugees, Warren College’s Brittany Khong Makes Helping others Life’s Mission***

In 2012, **Brittany Khong** was diagnosed with a tumor in her knee. After a successful surgery and months of therapy, the graduating UC San Diego senior took to the waves and dance floors learning how to surf and salsa. As a student at Warren College, Khong has demonstrated the same unwavering determination and commitment to giving back to her community. Khong has been a strong contributor to the UC San Diego community, particularly in her role as president of the UC San Diego Student Foundation through which she raised nearly \$50,000 for student scholarships. Khong has also volunteered abroad, teaching high school biology in



*Brittany Khong*

Tanzania and restoring an elementary school in Guatemala. When Khong isn’t abroad or fundraising, she assists a refugee family from Burma in their resettlement by teaching the parents English, tutoring their children and even organizing family outings. “This family is a huge part of my life,” says Khong, whose parents are Vietnam War refugees. “I work with this family because I want them to know that someone cares.” Khong will be graduating with a degree in general biology and she plans to travel throughout Southeast Asia before attending medical school. She hopes to continue to give back to others as a pediatrician working in underserved communities.

### ***Thurgood Marshall Graduate and UC San Diego Class President Meggie Le: ‘I will always be a Triton’***



Graduating this year, senior **Meggie Le** will leave UC San Diego having impacted the lives of many of her peers. The Cerritos native entered college without any prior student government experience, but this didn't deter her from getting involved. Le has served as a Thurgood Marshall College senior orientation Leader, Thurgood Marshall College ambassador and Clinton Global Initiative University delegate. She also served her last year at UC San Diego as the Associated Students president. "This year was challenging, but I have been afforded so many unforgettable life experiences and opportunities," says Le. In addition to her

many commitments, Le held internship positions for both California State Assembly member Ricardo Lara and United States Senator Dianne Feinstein, and will graduate with a degree in political science/international relations. With hopes of traveling the world as a consultant and helping economies of developing nations, Le said she'll always keep UC San Diego close at heart. "My experiences and the people I have met these past four years have instilled a very strong sense of pride and I know that, even after I leave, I will always be a Triton," Le said.

### ***Sixth College Grads Mike Sierks and Grady Kestler Share Stage and Memories as the Modern Folk Band Soda Pants***

Graduating seniors **Mike Sierks** and **Grady Kestler** have shared the stage with popular music acts, such as The Mowglis, Youngblood Hawke and Run River North, and even comedian Conan O'Brien. As members of the folk band Soda Pants, the two have had their fair share of memorable musical moments. Since the band formed in early 2012, Soda Pants' popularity has grown, performing at numerous concerts and events, including UC San Diego's 2013 Sun God Festival. A native of Lake Bluf, Ill., Sierks studies environmental engineering, plays volleyball and often assists in energy forecast research at Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Kestler, a Los Gatos Californian, studies music and interdisciplinary computing and the arts, performs in string orchestras and quartets, and teaches guitar at the La Jolla Piano Institute. Kestler and Sierks may have different backgrounds, but the two display a shared, honest love for music as band-mates in Soda Pants. Kestler and Sierks plan to perform together for another year following graduation. "Hopefully we'll get an opportunity to record an album in the fall," said Kestler. Though plans for life post-tour have not been made, Kestler hopes to find work in the music or sound design industry. "We're extremely thankful for the opportunities we've been presented with and look forward to others in the future," said Kestler. "This band has been a highlight of our college careers."

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