

EB211 Celebrates 27 New College Graduates

With more than 400 supporters in attendance, Excel Beyond 211 Dollars for Scholars, a nonprofit group assisting first-generation college students, celebrated the recent success of 27 college graduates.

More than 60 EB211 scholars gathered June 10 at Palatine High School to accept awards and scholarships with families, mentors, donors and EB211 members applauding their success. Among the special guests joining the celebration were Palatine Township District 211 superintendent Dr. Judith Campbell, Harper College president Dr. Avis Proctor, and Scholarship America president and CEO Mike Nylund.

Mariam Bhatti-Mushtaq, EB211 board member and mentor, welcomed the attendees by acknowledging the theme of the evening, "Because Someone Believed: Mentorship That Matters," and she addressed the challenges many first-gen scholars face while pursuing a college degree.

"A mentor does more than help students make academic decisions. They help students build confidence in themselves," Bhatti-Mushtaq said. "That kind of support can truly change the direction of someone's life."

While the national graduation average after six years of study for first-generation students is 11 percent, 81 percent of mentees who joined EB211's ranks in 2021 have earned a college degree. EB211 serves first-generation graduates from the five high schools in District 211 (Conant, Fremd, Hoffman Estates, Palatine and Schaumburg). Since it was formed in 2014, the organization has worked with 386 students who have been supported by 232 mentors. To date, 192 mentees have earned college degrees, and another 128 students are still in pursuit of bachelor degrees. The organization has grown from 10 scholarship donors in its first year to more than 150 today. This year, EB211 made \$230,000 in awards and scholarships. The organization, which is affiliated with Dollars for Scholars as one of 455 chapters of Scholarship America, has assisted 386 students over the years.

Among its graduates, 20 have returned to serve as mentors, many of its grads are represented on the EB211 Alumni Advisory Council, and 11 current students have served as interns for the mentor-based organization. This year's graduates earned degrees from Benedictine University (1), Columbia College-Chicago (1), DePaul University (2), Illinois State University (3), Northeastern Illinois University (1), Northern Illinois University (2), Purdue University (1), Stanford University (1), University of Chicago (4), University of Illinois-Chicago (3), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (7), and Wilmington University (1).

EB211 mentor Luis Arias was the keynote speaker for the evening. Arias, a finance manager for a Fortune 500 company in Chicago (Jones Lang LaSalle), shared his career journey with the graduates and reflected on the educational support he received at Palatine High School (2012 graduate), Harper College and the University of Illinois-Chicago, where he earned a Bachelor of

Science degree in Finance. He credits his mother, who immigrated to the U.S. nearly 30 years ago from Mexico, as his first mentor, and praised the work ethic, discipline and goal-oriented focus she displayed daily for her three boys while working multiple jobs as a single parent.

“She made sure to let me know that no matter how big the dream, she believed that I could make it a reality,” Arias said.

Arias also credits his former Palatine High School counselor, Susan Quinlan, with instilling the confidence he needed to achieve his goals. Quinlan, who helped launch EB211 in 2014 after retiring from PHS, serves as vice president of the organization.

“She taught me how to lead,” Arias said. “I always thought leadership was something people were born with. ... But I learned that leadership is a skill, just like reading or playing soccer or riding a bike. It takes practice, it takes falling down, and it takes getting back up. It is a skill that needs to be fostered. And through the same tenacity that my mom showed me, Mrs. Quinlan showed me that leaders are formed through their actions, and that they can only grow through their exposure. And again, she believed in me.”

Today, as a mentor, Arias believes in giving back because “we all have something to learn and something to teach.” Mentors, he said, get a valuable return on their investment: “We get back friendships, life lessons and hope for the future.”

Two EB211 scholars, Leilany Fuentes-Garcia and Karla Herrera, were selected to address the audience as new grads and shared their college experiences. Fuentes-Garcia, who graduated from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign with a B.S. in Sustainable Design, explained to the new crop of college-bound scholars the importance of being open to change and saying yes to new opportunities. “We need to remember to keep pushing and working toward the things we care about,” she said, crediting her mentor (Kevin Miller) with giving her the confidence to move forward in her career choice. While she explores employment opportunities in her new profession, Fuentes-Garcia also said she plans to continue her education journey and earn a Master’s in Urban Planning.

Herrera, a pre-dental graduate who studied Biological Sciences at the University of Illinois Chicago, spoke of dealing with Imposter Syndrome, the fear that many students face when they feel they don’t belong with their college peers. “Don’t let fear or self-doubt make decisions for you,” she cautioned after telling how she waited a full year before applying and gaining acceptance to a “life-changing” pre-dental program at Harvard University. “Nobody rejected me. I rejected myself before anyone else had the chance,” she added. “This program (with mentor Bianca Perez) gave me the guidance, encouragement and the community that reminded me that I wasn’t doing this alone.” Herrera’s next goal is to graduate from Dental School so she can become a dentist and “serve communities that are often underserved.”

Nylund, of Scholarship America, praised the graduates, the new mentees, supporters and mentors in his closing address. “This (organization) isn’t just about scholarship,” Nylund said. “It’s about a culture of belonging... and a community where students know they matter.”

Each graduate attending the celebration was awarded a \$500 check from the Foglia Family Foundation as an investment in their future. EB211 board president Nancy Robb also thanked the Foglia Foundation for providing each graduate with an additional \$500 to donate to a nonprofit charity of their choice. Among the organizations benefitting from the \$13,500 in total donations chosen by the 2026 graduates were: Angel Youth Center, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Champaign County Christian Health Center, City of Hope, Clearbrook Krause Community Day Services, Doctors Without Borders, Feed My Starving Children, Excel Beyond 211, Golden Apple Foundation, Harper College Foundation, Islamic Society of Northwest Suburbs, National Immigration Justice Center, North Suburban Legal Aid Clinic, Pakistan Children’s Heart Foundation, PUSA Foundation, The Trevor Project, and UNICEF.



These Excel Beyond 211 scholars are among the 27 first-generation college students who earned degrees this past year. They celebrated their success on June 10 at an EB211 Dollars for Scholars event hosted at Palatine High School. Photo for EB211 by Lynn Ridge