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Girls Inc. member wins \$20,000 scholarship

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To be able to capture beautiful photos and write stories inspired by them is a longtime dream for Arianna Lopez, 18, the newest recipient of a \$20,000 scholarship from Girls Inc. of Carpinteria.

"Photography has always caught my eye," said the Carpinteria High School senior. "I especially like the part where you break down everything. I feel like there are so many messages in pictures and I want to write about what it means and what it represents."

The Girls Inc. National Scholar Program selects young women for exemplifying the Girls Inc. mission of inspiring all girls to be strong, smart and bold. This year, Girls Inc. awarded 31 high school girls scholarships for educational expenses at any accredited college or university, from a record-high pool of applicants.

Ms. Lopez joins a list of 18 other young girls from Girls Inc. of Carpinteria to be named a national scholar. Girls Inc. of Carpinteria is seventh in producing national scholars out of 82 affiliates nationwide, according to the organization.

The excitement of receiving the scholarship aside, things were not always easy for the aspiring pho-

tographer, who hopes to study photography and journalism at Santa Barbara City College in the fall and ultimately transfer to UCSB.

Ms. Lopez was born with birth defects and the medication given to her as an infant left her in a one-month coma, an event that eventually affected her learning abilities. She also suffered a serious head injury in kindergarten, and during her recovery, she was bullied for having a healing scar on her face.

"There was a lot of name-calling," she said. "They come and go but it hurt me for a long time. I also had a difficult time learning anything academic in school, including reading, writing and listening. I had to learn new techniques to understand the information and it was frustrating sometimes.

"So for a while, I was very secluded. I didn't really want to be with anyone, so everything was kind of a downward spiral for me. But the moment I stepped into Girls Inc., that changed."

The organization gave Ms. Lopez a sense of home and warmth that she didn't feel she had from school.

"I had a place to fit in," she said. "That's what they showed me. No matter how different you are from everyone, you are not an outsider."

She remembered "Hat Party" while she was recovering from her



KENNETH SONG/NEWS-PRESS

Arianna Lopez

head injury.

"I had to wear a hat constantly to avoid the sun and bacteria," Ms. Lopez said. "They had a hat party for me so I didn't feel weird about it. That's the kind of thing they do."

Her parents have shown her nothing but love and support.

"I'm thankful that in my own home, I never saw anything other than true love," she said. "I know not everyone has that. It's a reason why I stayed with Girls Inc. I

feel much better about myself now and that I've accomplished something. It's a great feeling to know that I can succeed in something I put my mind to."

In 2014 she was recognized by Radio Disney with a "Hero for Change" award for highlighting the risks smoking holds and helping make Carpinteria a smoke-free city. She has completed more than 2,600 community service hours and hopes to continue her involvement after graduation.

To her mother, Ericka Loza-Lopez, who is a program director at Girls Inc., it was amazing to watch her daughter's transformation.

"We are extremely proud of her because she came out of her struggles," Ms. Loza-Lopez said. "As a parent, it was hard seeing her struggle every night with homework and trying to learn new skills. But she buckled down and did it. It was incredible to see."

Before heading off to college, Ms. Lopez hopes to become a counselor for Girls Inc. during the summer.

"I've met a lot of women who inspired me to jump into new opportunities, to become more open minded and change my attitude," she said. "I hope to give young girls the same encouragement that I received."

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