

Five Santa Clara County students awarded REACH Scholarships

For Immediate Release

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SAN JOSE (May 3, 2006) – Five Santa Clara County high school seniors were awarded REACH Youth Scholarships at the program's annual breakfast today, which honored 34 local students who overcame adversity to excel in both academics and athletics.

NFL Hall of Famer Ronnie Lott, honorary chair, and women's soccer star Brandi Chastain gave out \$9,000 in scholarship awards on behalf of presenting sponsor Bridge Bank, with support from Hewlett-Packard, San Jose Sharks, National Tennis Championships, Cal-Hi Sports Bay Area, Southwest Airlines and San Jose Marriott, host of the breakfast. REACH is an acronym for **R**ecognizing **E**xcellence, **A**dversity, **C**ourage and **H**ard work, in its 10th year as a program of the San Jose Sports Authority.

"We are proud to honor all 34 nominees for this year's REACH Youth Scholarships," said Dean Munro, executive director of the San Jose Sports Authority. "Each is a young person who has overcome tremendous obstacles in his or her personal life through participation in school athletics, and as a supporter of youth sports in our community, the Sports Authority is proud to spotlight their achievements."

Teachers, counselors and coaches from each high school in Santa Clara County were asked to nominate students who they felt matched the scholarship criteria. Students submitted essays detailing how they were able to overcome adversity and the role that sports played in helping them do so. A panel of local community leaders reviewed the essays and selected the six scholarship recipients, who received scholarships ranging from \$1,500 to \$2,500 (list of recipients follows).

For event photographs and further information, please call the San Jose Sports Authority.

Scholarship Award Winners

Amanda Polzin – Harker School (\$2,500)

Amanda knew from the start that she faced difficulties. Extensive surgeries to repair amniotic band syndrome, which she was born with, left her with no middle finger on her left hand and missing half of each finger on her right. As her natural affinity for physical activity progressed into involvement in sports, she began to encounter barriers because of her physical problems that were erected by others and also her. Her first sport as a child was gymnastics. She excelled in the floor routine, which did not require her to use her hands. But exercises on the bar were difficult. She gripped the bar with her left hand and right wrist, but as the routines got more difficult, she found herself falling behind her class. She learned the first of many lessons: This might not be her sport.

Fourth grade basketball came next, and here she faced prejudice. She was kept out of games until her mother confronted the coach, who admitted he didn't play her because of her hands. He let her play the final five minutes of the team's last game and gave her an award for "most improved," but Amanda was not proud of the award. Instinctively she began to hide her hands in public, but she knew that if she were to achieve the things she wanted, ultimately she would have to prove herself. At Harker she has played volleyball and basketball and was named captain and co-most valuable player in basketball last season. She has a third-degree black belt in Shotokan karate, and she volunteers at the Special Olympics and teaching karate while maintaining a 3.7 grade point average.

Laine Armour – Fremont High School (\$2,000)

Laine had always enjoyed sports. She grew up swimming, playing soccer and basketball. But it was water polo that captured her heart. Her freshman year in 2002 she joined Fremont High's first girls' water polo team. The team was composed almost entirely of freshman players, and though the goal of winning their first season was unrealistic, Laine hoped that by her senior season the team would be competitive with any in the league. With each passing year, the team did improve, and last summer she was looking forward to

capping her high school water polo career with a successful season. But that's when trouble struck. Laine was severely injured in an automobile accident last July. She suffered a ruptured spleen, four broken spinal processes in her lower back, shattered bone below her nose, four front teeth knocked out and her lower teeth shoved through her chin. She was in the hospital 10 days, two of them in intensive care, and then the doctor told her she could not engage in strenuous physical activity for five months. Her senior season would be wiped out. She left the hospital barely able to walk, her back in a brace and assisted by a walker. And she left with her own personal plan for rehabilitation: She would push herself as hard as she could bear and not allow herself to be dependent a minute longer than necessary. While the rest of her team practiced in the pool, Laine sat on the deck exercising with her physical therapy equipment, the tears in her eyes hidden behind the sunglasses she wore. She added extra physical therapy sessions to her routine and focused on getting back to normal. She hoped to get back in the pool for the final game of the season. When she returned for a checkup in early September, her doctor said he was amazed by her improvement. He cut his original prognosis for three more months without water polo to one more, time for her to rejoin the team for four weeks of games. When she returned to play, she became one of three original members of her team to play water polo all four years. Laine has maintained a 3.38 grade point average, also competed in basketball and swimming during her four years and volunteers with senior citizens and at her church.

Margo Consul – Leland High School (\$1,500)

Margo was born with a congenital heart block and a love for playing sports. There is no cure for either condition, but she and her doctors have done everything they could to ensure she can survive them. The doctors' role was to implant a pacemaker in her heart. That made it possible for her to go out for volleyball in the seventh grade and build self-confidence. But unknown to her, it was the reason she was the slowest person on her team. It was not a "demand sensitive" pacemaker that would adjust its pace to the physical demands her sports activity placed on her heart. Her heart beat at the same speed whether she was asleep or sprinting. By the end of her first volleyball season doctors implanted a demand sensitive pacemaker in Margo's heart, and the company that manufactured it invited her to St. Paul, Minn., to give a speech to its 2,000 employees. That experience helped her accept her condition and not be embarrassed by it. She made the junior varsity volleyball team as a freshman at Leland High with difficulty. She had more volleyball experience than many of her teammates, but she came off as bossy and superior to them and her coaches had to persuade her to lead by example rather than with speeches and criticism. By the time her junior year came, she had to go through another tryout for varsity or be cut altogether. The coaches advised her that she might not make the team, although she could stay and be a practice player. By increasing her own work load, she made the varsity and played the full rotation in a game that clinched a spot in the CCS playoffs. She was playing club volleyball last summer to prepare for her senior season when she got bad news. Her pacemaker was being recalled. There was good news in that the new device that would be implanted was improved over the old model: It would synchronize the beating of both sides of her heart, not just one as previously, which would make physical activity easier. But the recovery time from surgery would cut into volleyball tryouts for her senior season. She was walking when other players ran, doing exercises while others played, and she could not participate for the first two weeks of the season. But the coaches made her a spot on the team, she played in the final home game and was named most inspirational player by her teammates at the end of the year. A volunteer at summer camps, and an intern at the Almaden Times newspaper, she hopes to become a broadcast sports journalist.

Nikhil Marathe – St. Francis High School (\$1,500)

Nikhil's mother was his inspiration and example. But she was lying on a bed, plugged into IVs, catheters and monitors. "Just watch," his mother told her. "I'll walk out of here tomorrow." But she didn't. Over the course of six hours in May 2004, cancer sapped the remaining vitality from his mother's body in an excruciating ordeal that ended with a final breath and then silence. It took much longer to accept his mother's death, but the process began just hours later when Nikhil took his AP Spanish test at school. It was what his mother would have wanted him to do. Each card and call he got from friends helped him deal with the new reality of his life – that his mother was no longer with him, but his mother's optimism, courage and confidence had been passed to him. He put those character traits to work in the classroom and on the tennis court. His mother had been like a personal coach, and now Nikhil imagined her standing just outside the fence at each of his matches. Tennis became an escape, and it helped him keep the passion he'd always had for the sport. He maintained the No.1 spot on his team that he had held the two previous years.

Meanwhile, his grade point average of 4.39 was the highest in his class. He competed in mock trial, played piano and guitar, volunteered on the Santa Clara Youth Commission and was elected president of the National Honor Society. So even in death, Nikhil's mother remains his inspiration and example. "What would she want me to do?" is the question that guides his life.

Justin Martin – Live Oak High School (\$1,500)

Justin had been through the usual difficulties of adolescence, but he'd always recognized them for what they were – usual. Last September he found out what a real difficulty can be. His heart gave up on him. He had noticed that he was a step slower than his football teammates in summer workouts, and that he had strange heart rhythms and stomach aches. But his doctor found nothing wrong. Three plays into the first game of the season, however, he took himself out because he couldn't breathe. Two days later he was diagnosed with dilated cardiomyopathy, and two weeks after that he was transferred to Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford. He was told he'd need a heart transplant within a year, but his condition worsened so rapidly that he got it within a week. It was a struggle to get out of bed, a struggle to walk. But a month after surgery he was able to attend Senior Night, the final football game of the regular season. His teammates cried, and Live Oak won the game to qualify for the playoffs. Now, six months after getting a new heart, Justin has returned to sports, competing in track and field. He has not yet returned to the form he once had, but he's happy to be on the field competing. He has maintained a 3.8 grade point average, and won most inspirational awards in football and coaches' awards in both football and track.

2006 REACH Youth Scholarship nominees:

Nick Aurelio, *Bellarmino College Prep*
Timothy Danser, *Bellarmino College Prep*
Laine Armour, *Fremont High School*
Brittany Baza, *Fremont High School*
Joseph Maes, *Fremont High School*
Filip Novachkov, *Fremont High School*
Esperanza Sanchez, *Gilroy High School*
Ahmed Abdi, *Gunderson High School*
Eric Espinoza, *Gunderson High School*
Maria Luisa Flores, *Gunderson High School*
Jorge Mendoza, *Gunderson High School*
Venese Morgan, *Gunderson High School*
Amanda Polzin, *Harker School*
Carolyn Finney, *Independence High School*
Margo Consul, *Leland High School*
Jose Ramirez, *Lincoln High School*
Justin Martin, *Live Oak High School*
Tyler Fischer-Colbrie, *Monta Vista High School*
Katherine Near, *Monta Vista High School*
Minh Nguyen, *Monta Vista High School*
Matthew Yu, *Monta Vista High School*
Priscilla Arzate, *Overfelt High School*
Juan Castillo, *Overfelt High School*
Julio Gomez, *Overfelt High School*
Kao Saetern, *Overfelt High School*
Brianna Clay, *Palo Alto High School*
Kheaton Scott, *Palo Alto High School*
Jenna Brogan, *Presentation High School*
Sioeli Fakalata, *St. Francis High School*
Nikhil Marathe, *St. Francis High School*
Sela Painsi, *St. Francis High School*
Brittney Westphal, *Santa Teresa High School*
Nick Twitchell, *Westmont High School*
Maria Sosa, *Willow Glen High School*