

Fresno State student overcomes parents' deaths and learning disability to earn diploma

By Hannah
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- Commencement ceremonies around the Valley

Porterville College: Friday, May 15, 7:30 p.m., PC Gymnasium

California State University, Fresno: Saturday, May 16, doors open at 8 a.m., Save Mart Center

University of California at Merced: Saturday, May 16 (engineering, natural sciences), 9 a.m.; Sunday, May 17 (social sciences, humanities, arts), 9 a.m., South Bowl

Madera Community College Center: Thursday, May 21, 6:30 p.m., on campus

West Hills College Lemoore: Thursday, May 21, 6:30 p.m., Golden Eagle Arena, tickets required

College of the Sequoias: Thursday, May 21, 7 p.m., Mineral King Bowl

Fresno City College: Friday, May 22, 6:30 p.m., Selland Arena

Clovis Community College Center: Friday, May 22, 6:30 p.m., Clovis Hills Community Church

Reedley College: Friday, May 22, 6 p.m., South Lawn on campus

West Hills College Coalinga: Friday, May 22, 6:30 p.m., Gymnasium on campus

- *Fresno State student Jazzman (pronounced Jasmine) Hester's parents both died when she was young*
- *She lived with a relative during high school, received little encouragement to go to college*
- *She applied to Fresno State, and after seven years and several changes of majors, she's graduating*

Jazzman Hester can see clear around the corner now.

It took seven years, a shot at three different majors, a year off from school when her grades tanked, and a discovery that she has a learning disability.

But at long last, the 25-year-old will earn her bachelor's degree in anthropology from Fresno State on Saturday and plans to walk at the university's [spring commencement ceremony at Save Mart Center](#) this weekend.

"It wasn't real to me, trying on my cap and gown," Hester said in an interview this month. "It felt surreal, like you're daydreaming. You're dreaming about this day. Am I really about to graduate, to walk across this stage?"

She'll be surrounded by great-aunts and uncles, cousins and friends. But two people will be missing on graduation day: both Hester's mother and father died when she was young, casting her into the home of a relative in Bakersfield during high school and delivering a big dose of uncertainty for her future.

Hester talks about her life like it's cracked in two. The early years: spent in Oakland and Vallejo with her parents and

grandmother, and then in a shelter when her father was hospitalized for seizures and diabetes. Then the years after her parents' deaths: her father, when she was 10, and then her mother just a few years later to cancer.

Hester says a broken heart was the real cause of her mother's death.

Herself brokenhearted, Hester was shuffled to live with an aunt in Bakersfield. It was a "gray" period, Hester says.

She was a B-average student at Ridgeview High School, volunteered, played softball and joined the bowling club. College wasn't on her mind. The question among her classmates was always, "Are we going to stay in the same neighborhood? Are we going to go work at fast food joints?" after graduating.

Then she took an information technology class with a stellar teacher who told her about how to submit a college application. She talked to her counselor, then applied and was accepted at Fresno State.

She was also accepted as one of the university's original Renaissance Scholars, a program for students who are in foster care or living with relatives. The Bee wrote about Hester and several other Renaissance Scholars around the Christmas holiday in 2009.

Hester has since formed a new family, her Renaissance Scholars family. Along with scholarships and counseling, the program offers students emergency cash, stipends to study abroad and internship opportunities.

The program paid for Hester to study in Italy and helped her find two summer internships.

When she was struggling in school, the program also paid part of her fee to be tested for a learning disability.

Hester remembers one time in a history class when her professor asked her to read aloud. After class, the professor told her she added words that weren't in the text, a symptom of what was later identified as a writing expression disorder.

Through it all — failed classes, switching from the English department to history, then anthropology, the recent death of a great-uncle she was close with —she's kept pushing.

"She's a fighter. She's just been through so much and hasn't given up," said Kizzy Lopez, the Renaissance Scholars Program coordinator.

Lopez met Hester in 2008. Then, Lopez vowed to herself that she wouldn't leave her position before she'd seen "every single one (of the initial Renaissance Scholars class) graduate."

Of the small number of California foster children who make it through high school — just 45%, a 2013 [report from the Stuart Foundation](#) shows— few ever apply and then graduate from college.

Of the 100 students who have gone through the Renaissance program since its inception, Lopez said, 32 have earned degrees. Nine students, all women, are graduating from the program this year. It's the program's largest class ever to earn diplomas.

Hester says she's "part of the 1%" of foster children who make it. She's thankful she doesn't "have to be named a statistic."

Her great-aunt Desiree Travis says she's amazed by Hester's resilience.

Travis and her late husband, Hester's great-uncle, connected with Hester when she began attending Fresno State. Hester is a regular around Travis' home in Fresno: they eat dinner together, pray together, celebrate holidays together. Hester plays and bakes with Travis' sons and takes care of them when Travis is out of town.

Travis said she lets Hester know that "even though you don't have your parents, you're not an orphan because you

have us.”

“I just want her to be all she can be, because there’s so much to life and she’s so young right now,” she said. “I know she’s going to continue wearing those big girl boots and walking in them. Her grown woman boots.”

Hester’s life story is entering a new phase now. One blooming with opportunity in place of loss and disappointment.

Hester says she plans to get a teaching credential and someday become a high school teacher.

“I heard college is to develop yourself and get a better job,” she said. “I think college is more than that. You’re discovering who you are and what you can do.”

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