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PRESS RELEASE

12-8-23

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Milken Educator Awards Founder Lowell Milken, colleagues and veteran Milken Educators give Alexis Arias a hand with her oversized ceremonial \$25,000 check.

Photo courtesy of Milken Family Foundation.

CSUSB Palm Desert Campus alumna wins prestigious Milken Educator Award

PALM DESERT, Calif. – When Alexis Arias graduated from the Cal State San Bernardino, Palm Desert Campus in 2007 with a bachelor’s degree in English literature, followed by a master of arts degree in English and writing studies in 2015 from CSUSB, she never imagined winning a national educator award in her teaching career.

Arias, a 12th grade English teacher at Desert Sands Unified School District’s Amistad High School, an alternative school in Indio, was caught by surprise when Milken Educator Awards

founder Lowell Milken presented her with the prestigious honor at a schoolwide assembly on Nov. 16 in front of cheering students, appreciative colleagues, dignitaries and media.

Arias, who is from Indio, is the sole California recipient of the Milken Educator Award this season.

“When I initially heard my name called as the recipient of the Milken Educator Award, I was in true disbelief,” said Arias. “The moments leading up to the announcement seemed surreal because it’s not often that educators are given this kind of attention and recognition. When I heard my name, I was still trying to process that this was really happening not just at our school, but to me.”

This special event is part of a historic, nationwide Milken Educator Awards tour that will honor up to 75 recipients with the Milken Educator Award and its unrestricted \$25,000 cash prize. Along with the financial prize, recipients will join the national Milken Educator Network, a growing group of professionals across diverse roles and disciplines working to shape the future of education.

“Receiving the Milken Educator Award as an alternative education teacher is meaningful to me because I hope that it can continue to push back against the negative stereotypes about alternative education – something I have been wanting to help change for a long time,” Arias said.

In October 2017, Arias survived one of the deadliest mass shootings in the U.S. while attending a concert with her family in Las Vegas. Despite sustaining a gunshot wound and fracturing her pelvis, Arias returned to her students within weeks of her injuries, ready to continue teaching with renewed meaning.

“My experience at the Las Vegas shooting helped to deepen my understanding of resilience amidst unforeseen challenges,” she said. “Until then, I’d been fortunate not to encounter such significant trauma, never having to rely on my resilience in that way. I compared my experience with those of the children we see in education, not solely in alternative schools, but everywhere. My appreciation for their resilience through everything they’ve endured has deepened, and I hope that I show that in my work with them.”

So what will Arias do with the \$25,000 cash prize?

As a parent of three and an educator, Arias says she knows the impact that extracurricular activities have on a child's development during their youth. Recognizing the privilege she and her family have, she says that she has made deliberate sacrifices to ensure these opportunities are accessible to her children. From their involvement in school bands, community sports teams, to years of musical lessons, these experiences have demanded sacrifices that Arias and her family have willingly made. This funding will be instrumental in helping them to rebuild

their savings, a crucial aspect that Arias thinks many parents recognize as essential, yet challenging to establish.

Arias says that during her time at the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus, she loved that she was able to achieve her goals of higher education without the sacrifice of leaving the community that had given her so much. She enjoyed being able to attend a university that was dedicated to bringing students the higher education they needed in order to advance themselves and their communities.

“My time at the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus contributed to my personal and professional growth by providing me the opportunity to remain local and continue to establish my roots as a part of my community,” said Arias. “The faculty served as examples of professionals living and reinvesting in the Coachella Valley, and served as inspiring role models for what I could become. I felt as though they understood and supported the significance of pursuing education while staying within our valley. Attending classes alongside like-minded peers helped further build a sense of community for me, many of whom I later collaborated with professionally, further enhancing my educational journey.”

Arias was inspired to become a teacher from a young age.

“As a child, I had the chance to play community sports, and from those experiences I remember being able to reframe a coach’s skill demonstration in my head into words and visuals that I thought were more effective for my peers. Little did I realize at the time that it was my version of playing teacher out on the field,” she said.

“As I progressed through college, I was able to get coaching opportunities with girls’ softball and volleyball teams, which is where it became more evident to me that I had an affinity for working with teenage youth. I’ve always had a natural attraction to literature, and so when deciding a major in college, I was certain it would be something in relation to that. I briefly entertained the idea of becoming a journalist or columnist, but ultimately found that in teaching I could merge both passions.”

Arias is a proud first-generation college student.

“I am proud to be the first in my family to earn not only an associate's degree, but also a bachelor's and ultimately, a master's degree. While navigating the complexities of the college system presented its challenges, I am deeply thankful for the nurturing environment created by my parents, which enabled me to feel accomplished in this journey. I acknowledge the privilege of consistently having the support of my family and friends throughout my career. As I began on my journey as an educator, I faced numerous challenges that helped me to identify my strengths and weaknesses in this role. I am grateful to my family and friends for their enduring encouragement, which motivated me to persist on this path. Their belief in my capacity to make a positive impact on the children I work with has been a source of inspiration,” she said.

Through her work in the classroom and social media presence, Arias hopes to help cultivate an appreciation for the resilience and contributions of individuals within her community.

“I hope that those outside the alternative education community recognize that both students and staff in alt ed possess boundless possibilities and strengths, and I aim to challenge stereotypes associated with alt ed. Above all, I hope to foster acceptance and empowerment, particularly for students and individuals who deviate from traditional definitions of success,” she said.

When not in the classroom, Arias finds time to fill a role within the parent teacher organizations at her children’s school sites. She has served on boards working with staff and other parents to help support the needs and experiences of students throughout their formative years. Additionally, she has volunteered at her church as a catechist and bible camp group leader, playing a role in nurturing the religious education of youth.

“I know that my experience as a survivor of the Las Vegas mass shooting is a part of my story and has helped develop me as an educator, and I can recognize the profound perspective it’s provided me that has helped strengthen my commitment to working with the often-misrepresented youth of our communities,” she said. “I want people to recognize that educators everywhere encounter personal challenges and draw upon those experiences to build empathy for students. Many educators invest immense passion into reflecting on their practice and connections with students because they have gratitude and understanding of the influence they can have on each child. The work I’m describing goes far beyond teaching formulas and rules of grammar. I hope that my story helps shed light on the depths of being an effective teacher.”

Follow Arias’ story on Instagram: [@welcometoaltd](https://www.instagram.com/welcometoaltd).

About PDC: The CSUSB Palm Desert Campus offers bachelor’s and master’s degrees, teaching credentials and certificates, and plays a vital role in educating the region’s growing population.

About the Milken Educator Awards: Created in 1987 by philanthropist and education visionary Lowell Milken, the Milken Educator Awards represent the nation’s preeminent teacher recognition program, often hailed as the “Oscars of Teaching.” 2023-24 will reach \$75 million in individual financial prizes spanning the length of the initiative and more than \$144 million invested in the Milken Educator Award national network overall, empowering recipients to “Celebrate, Elevate, and Activate” the K-12 profession and inspiring young, capable people to pursue teaching as a career. Visit the [Milken Educator Awards website](https://www.milkenawards.org/) for more information.

For more information about the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus, contact Mike Singer in the Office of Strategic Communication at msinger@csusb.edu or (760) 341-2883, ext. 78107, or visit the PDC website at www.csusb.edu/pdc.