

Connecting a Caring Community Changes Lives With Dec My Dorm

By Lori Berezin
Photography by Peter Munteer of Galerie Carlyle

College offers students the opportunity to expand their minds, form lifelong friendships, and prepare for the future. It also poses myriad challenges, especially for foster kids who must overcome even more hurdles than the average college student.

Jill Franklin, manager of the Independent Living Program at the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (ILP), recognized certain needs foster children faced when entering college dorm life. She began a grassroots project in 2018, with the department's assistance, outfitting students with dorm room essentials to help them feel supported.

"I created this passion project after hearing a student from a group home talk about how terrible she felt during her first day of college when she realized she didn't have the same dorm room items as everyone else," describes Jill. "I placed a link to an Amazon wish list of college essentials on my Facebook page to see what would happen. It just took off from there."

In 2021, the Calabasas nonprofit Connecting a Caring Community (CCC) expanded greatly on Jill's concept to create *Dec My Dorm*, offering in-person giving events where students receive bags full of dorm room supplies such as bedding, towels, utensils, dishes, toiletries, and beyond. That first year, they helped around 21 students. Today, they're supporting 140 foster youth beginning their college journeys at UCLA, CSUN, UCSB, and elsewhere throughout the country with more than 1,600 items. The most recent Dec My Dorm event took place on July 20th at the Stephen Wise Temple.



Phyllis Shinbane, former director of operations at CCC from 2017 through 2024, continues to chair *Dec My Dorm* as a volunteer. Phyllis praised these young scholars for overcoming personal challenges, "We're grateful to every single donor who bought even one item from the Amazon wish list. These kids have to work harder than others to earn their spot in college. Now we're sending them to school with dignity and class."

Contributing to the cause

Lisa Kodimer, co-founder and executive director of CCC, joined forces with a local Calabasas family to found CCC nearly a decade ago. They operate out of the belief that "the more you give, the happier you live."

"We believe every person we touch touches another and, in turn, continues the ripple effect of growing our community of givers," says Lisa. "This motivates our community to mobilize each other to live a life of giving."

Lisa expressed her profound gratitude to Jill, Phyllis, and Co-Chair Allison Weiss. "This compassionate trio continues to ensure foster youth in Los Angeles have what



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they need to go off to college," she says. "Thanks, as well, to our donors, dream team of volunteers, and board of directors who selflessly help us fill the needs of this beautiful community."

Changing lives one step at a time

One extremely impressive recent Calabasas High School graduate, Devyn Anderson, received a special shout out. Connecting a Caring Community presents its first Leadership Award to Devyn, a dedicated volunteer for the past three years, supporting foster youth through CCC's teen program, Connecting with Teens. She even founded a club at her school.

"We can't wait to see the impact Devyn continues to make in the world as her leadership, heart, and service continue to change lives," says Lisa. "In honor of her inspiring commitment, we're thrilled to announce a new financial scholarship in her name. The initial scholarship will support a foster youth attending Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, the same college Devyn will be attending. It will provide \$1,000 per year for four years to Karla Dominguez, a young woman who, like Devyn, is ready to make a difference."

CCC also created scholarships in memory of Jordyn Solny, a beloved, local 27-year-old Oak Hills Elementary School kindergarten teacher who tragically passed away following a sudden illness. The first Jordyn Solny Memorial Scholarship awarded \$1,000 a year to a young woman pursuing a degree in elementary education at the University of Montana. They also presented 15 one-time \$1,000 scholarships on June 24th at Disney Hall.

Generously giving back

There's nothing more fulfilling than finding a purpose to support, especially when it supports others. CCC also partners with such charitable groups as the UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital, Ronald McDonald House of Los Angeles, and many others. CCC also supplied much-needed essentials to victims of this year's devastating January 7 wildfire.

To learn more about *Dec My Dorm* and this inspiring organization, visit the website at connectingacaringcommunity.org. ●

