



# Westreich Scholarship Program

## *Final Impact Report*

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# WESTREICH SCHOLARSHIP & MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

## FINAL IMPACT REPORT 2023

*I cannot emphasize enough how pivotal the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship program has been in my journey, especially during a time when I was navigating the challenges of being a new single parent following a domestic violence relationship.*

*The financial relief and the values I gained from the program have had a lasting impact on my life and the lives of my children. I've carried these lessons forward, instilling them in my children's lives to ensure their academic success and personal development.*

-Past scholar, Dia Soto, feedback collected Spring 2023

Founded by philanthropist Ruth Westreich in 2007, the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship (WAWS) aimed to support promising young adults as they work to achieve their higher education goals at the college or vocational level. All participating scholars faced extraordinary circumstances such as homelessness, exposure to violence, struggles with alcohol/drug abuse, teen pregnancy, or impact by the justice system. After more than 15 years of supporting young adults, the Words Alive Board of Directors chose to sunset the program in July 2023. This report intends to provide a high-level synopsis and summary of the success and impact of this program.

### THE WORDS ALIVE WAY

We envision a world where everyone is connected to the power of reading and the innumerable ways that it enriches our lives. We know that empowering experiences turn individuals into agents of change and advocates for their education and that when everyone can read, whole communities thrive! At Words Alive, we believe that the world we envision is made possible through the simple, essential, and effective act of reading together.

### EMPOWERING SCHOLARS IN THEIR NEXT CHAPTER

Through the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship Program, we launched life-long learners into their next chapter by providing individualized support as they pursue their higher education and vocational goals. Scholars were past participants of the Words Alive Adolescent Book Group Program and recent graduates of the San Diego County Office of Education Juvenile Court and Community Schools. Supporting their transition to higher education was the logical next step to ensuring positive life outcomes, a living wage, and the lasting opportunities for success that a college education can provide.

*I love Words Alive because they help keep me accountable in my goals. There have been countless times when I felt like I could not make it another year and here I am going into my senior year of college. There is so much power in taking education into your own hands. I am so thankful for the high standards they hold me to.*

- Past Scholar

## OUR PROGRAM METHOD & PROCESS CONDITIONS

Scholarship funds are vital to removing immediate financial barriers to attending school, but it is in pairing a financial award with the personal growth and skill sets to address the challenges of their lives that launched scholars to a new level of what is possible. For that reason, the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship focused on three interconnected pillars of support.

For participating scholars, the program:

- Awarded **monthly financial stipends** used for expenses such as rent, utilities, food, basic toiletries, public transportation, and childcare. Unlike many traditional scholarship programs, students spent their awarded funds on living expenses such as rent, food, public transportation, and childcare. Funds were disbursed monthly into personal checking accounts for greater access.
- Paired scholars with a **mentor** who provided individualized support, assistance in accessing academic and community resources, modeled relationship-building skills, and often, a friendly shoulder to lean on.
- Offered personal and professional **development workshops** on topics including financial literacy, interview skills, resume building, time management, and self-care.

Our **ultimate objective** was that scholars believed they could be successful in school and become *agents* of their own success to achieve their goals. That is the tipping point between someone *attending school* and someone who calls themselves a *scholar*. To get there, our program aimed specifically to influence what scholars *knew*, how they *felt*, and what they *did* about their personal development and progress on their educational journey.

Using research-based tools developed by our third-party evaluative partners at Dialogue in Action, the Westreich Scholarship focused on four key impact goals to that end. That scholars:



*Scholars 2015-2016  
with Ruth Westreich*

### 1) Have the financial stability to succeed

**Objective:** Scholars use their scholarship and knowledge gained at workshops to create a personal budget to become more financially stable.

### 2) Form healthy, meaningful relationships with adults

**Objective:** By receiving support in areas such as problem-solving, training, and access to resources through the relationship with their Words Alive mentor, scholars learn that there are adults who want to help them succeed and are reliable in doing so. As trust and respect develop, scholars build a reciprocal relationship with their mentor, which serves as an example for other healthy relationships.

### 3) Develop a deeper sense of self-worth, self-awareness, and self-confidence

**Objective:** Scholars experience positive attitudinal shifts about their circumstances, their place in the world, and their value. Scholars recognize their ability to seek information to solve problems and transition successfully into post-secondary education or careers.

#### 4) Become advocates for themselves and their futures

**Objective:** Scholars become empowered to invest in their futures by increasing self-esteem, by proactively participating in WAWS program offerings, and by contributing to their personal development. Scholars apply the academic, professional, and community resources at their disposal; create long-term personal, educational, and career goals; and take steps toward meeting them.

## PROGRAM SCOPE

Since the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship awarded its first funds in 2008, it provided financial support and mentorship for dozens of young scholars, most of whom were first-generation college students. Many scholars returned to the program over multiple years, finding connection and stability with their mentors as well as a concrete benefit to the financial stipend.

Through the program, Words Alive launched 75 scholars into their next chapter by providing individualized support as they pursued their higher education and vocational goals. This was achieved through the dedication of over 35 volunteer mentors, many of whom stayed with the same mentee for several years.

In addition to these committed scholars and mentors, several local organizations partnered with Words Alive to support the success of the program and its scholars. Such partnerships included:



*Scholars during 2019 – 2020 program year*

### HP, Inc.

To support their academic success, HP provided laptops and basic computer literacy training for Scholars beginning in 2019.

### Juvenile Court and Community Schools (JCCS)

JCCS shared expert knowledge with mentors through in-service trainings hosted by Words Alive. As many scholars come from JCCS, this was a critical relationship for the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship.

### **Mentoring Coalition of San Diego**

Through sharing their expertise in training mentors, the Mentoring Coalition of San Diego helped WAWS provide a more impactful mentorship experience.

### **San Diego City College**

By hosting scholarship interviews, San Diego City College provided applicants with an accessible and familiar location for the process.

### **San Diego Public Library**

The central branch hosted our scholarship award ceremony and several workshops throughout the years, making access to learning opportunities easier for the students.

### **San Diego Padres**

Thanks to donated tickets, we kicked off our mentorship program in 2017 at Petco Park. Many students had never been to a ballgame before.

### **Theatrical Partners: California Ballet Company & The Old Globe Theatre**

Through donated tickets, scholars were able to experience *The Great Gatsby* ballet as well as a theatrical adaptation of the book, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Exposure to the arts is an opportunity many students rarely or never get but helps make them more well-rounded individuals and provides context for their conversations in humanities classes.

### **Wells Fargo Bank**

For many years, employees from Wells Fargo helped coach students through opening bank accounts, developing budgets, and providing financial literacy coaching.

## **WHAT SCHOLARS SAID**

*"I am married and have 4 beautiful daughters. We have 2 businesses: a cleaning business where I do all the customer service and pair up our cleaners with house and we own an internet marketing company we're we also have built over 200 websites in the last 6 months."*

*-Feedback collected via anonymous survey, Spring 2023*

Feedback was collected throughout the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship, including in its final year. When conducting the final round of qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, reaching scholars who had been out of the program for several years or more proved more challenging. Most of the feedback received from past scholars was qualitative and received via a short questionnaire.



*Scholars volunteering at a food bank in 2014*

At the height of the program, interviews and surveys were deployed regularly to report on and assess programmatic impact with great success and strong response rates. Several of those findings are cited in this report. A 2018 survey of past and present scholars, conducted by Dialogues in Action, found that after participating in the program, 85% of scholars reported that they often or always used budgeting skills and tools to manage their financial situation, compared to 15% who reported doing so before participating in the program. This data remained consistent in subsequent evaluations.

The same program evaluation found consensus among interviewed scholars that the amount of their financial award was not significant enough to cause lasting financial change or relief in the larger context of their lives. However, students who received larger financial awards reported feeling less stressed about their financial situation, as well as sticking to their budget and accessing financial resources outside their scholarship more often.



*Scholars during 2018 - 2019*

Year after year, scholars in the program indicated that the program impacted them in four key areas:

1. **The financial stability to succeed.** Across several surveys deployed over the life of the program, respondents consistently confirmed that the scholarship had positive impacts on their financial skills, situation, and outlook. For instance, in the 2019-2020 program year, 80% of scholars reported always or often using budgeting skills and/or tools after the program, and in 2018-2019, 88% of scholars agreed (moderately or strongly) that they felt less stressed about their financial situation after the program.

*When I first got the scholarship, I was going through a tough time. I had just been kicked out of my living situation and I was living off the scholarship money. So, I learned how to budget money for necessities like food. I had my young daughter, so I had to think about her. I didn't really have help, so I had to figure it out on my own and I was very young. This taught me how to save money and not spend on things you don't need. And the scholarship money was limited so I learned how to extend it out.*

*I'm spending more of my money on school supplies and using free school resources for food. I'm saving scholarships for further down the line. I'm using that money for other materials, like in 1-2 years when I know I'll have like a \$5,000 tuition. So, I'm planning for that...I'm stretching my budgets to cover everything I need. I'll spend 3 days researching something I need to buy to find the best price. I think these changes are feeding my motivation and keeping it alive.*

*I have more common sense, better decision-making skills and am wiser. Financial burden takes a lot out of you, [but] I don't feel as dragged down by it.*

2. **Form healthy, meaningful relationships with adults.** The 2018 Dialogues in Action report concluded that students who met with the mentor more frequently reported better follow through and high competencies in skill sets relating to financial and personal responsibility, ability to take action or seek resources, and have healthy relationships with adults.

Like all skills, consistency is a learned behavior. Mentors who consistently interacted with scholars helped keep them accountable to the requirements of their schools, the scholarship program and their goals. Between 2019-2020, 95% of scholars met monthly, if not more often, with their mentor.

### 3. Develop a deeper sense of self-worth, self-awareness, and self-confidence.

Qualitative feedback from scholars suggests that the scholarship and mentorship they gained through the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship impacted their positive sense of self.



*End of year ceremony, 2010*

*[My mentor] would visit me at school. We kept in contact and would catch up often, we would go hiking or meet up to eat. She was a really good friend... [She] taught me what it meant to be consistent.*

*Through my participation in the program, I've learned invaluable lessons about determination, resilience, and the power of education. This knowledge has had a profound impact on my ability to succeed, empowering me to overcome challenges and strive for excellence.*

*[My mentor] would go above and beyond to meet me where I was at. If we were meeting, she would come to me a lot of times. She would take trips to San Francisco to visit her niece and then stop by and see me. Having her support made the biggest difference. My parents couldn't come visit me, but she did - and it was such a comfort.*

### 4. Become advocates for themselves and their futures. Personal agency is crucial to positive life outcomes such as financial stability, relationships, and wellbeing. Scholars indicated, year-after-year, that they were taking control of their lives and their futures thanks to their participation in the program.

*I have noticed that in the beginning, I didn't really know how to ask for help, but over time I have learned how to.*



*I have learned to accept that I can't sit around and pity myself, so if I want to succeed, I have to do the same thing as everyone else no matter their race or class. I know my starting line is farther behind, but getting to the finish line will just take a couple more steps. I just have to keep going.*

*Since participating in WAWS, I've actively pursued various opportunities that align with my aspirations. The program ignited a fire within me to seize chances for personal and professional growth, and I've continued to explore avenues that resonate with my dreams.*

*Well, my life is just starting but I've accomplished so much. As of right now I am a teacher's assistant; working with young moms at Lindsay School. I am still attending college. I am a mother of 4 children, single mother and still pushing in life to hopefully getting my very own place. I'm working on myself and grateful for waking up everyday.*

## WHAT MENTORS SAID

Words Alive mentors understand the value of having positive relationships with adults and role models. They met monthly with mentees and participated in regular planning sessions to coordinate development workshops and share/reflect on their mentorship practices and strategies. Many of them cultivated close relationships with their mentees, sharing in their personal growth and accomplishments.

*She does a good job at assessing people and choosing to be with people who are good examples. She has become very open with me.*

*I benefitted from a couple of great mentors when I was young, and I love having the opportunity to pass it forward in some way. The Words Alive scholarship students I interact with are bright, ambitious, and really inspiring.*

*Helping others has always been joyous and fulfilling to me. After graduating from college, I wanted to give back in a similar way that educators and librarians helped me while growing up in a low-income, high-crime community. I knew what I wanted to do, and after joining Words Alive, I was able to fulfill my goals and more.*

*I think [my mentee] sees each of these accomplishments as milestones – and they are. It supports her sense of self-worth, value, and confidence. For some people, it's easy, but for her it has been incredibly challenging.*

*Every single milestone increases her confidence. And she's facing this hurdle now but she's not going to give up.*

## SCHOLAR PROFILES

**Zaphire Alonso Duarte.** Zaphire Alonso, a five-year scholarship recipient, graduated from San Diego City College, and transferred to San Diego State University in Fall 2018, where she studied Social Work.

“Words Alive has helped me more than just financially. The Words Alive program has been my support system both personally and academically. I am extremely thankful for all the people who are part of the staff; they are the best at always being on top of our schoolwork and lives.”



**Brittany Jackson.** Brittany Jackson, a five-year scholarship recipient, graduated from the University of California, Santa Cruz with a B.A. in Sociology. Brittany benefited from a close relationship with her mentor, Sarah Archibald, and plans to pursue an M.A. towards her career goal of becoming a high school counselor.

“My experience with Words Alive has affected me by showing the support that I lacked at home, both emotional and financial. I am grateful for Sarah — she is very supportive and understanding of all the obstacles I encountered while I was in school. Words Alive has demonstrated that there are people who care for others without expecting something in return. They have been so loving to me, and my experience at UCSC wouldn’t have been the same without them.”

**Domminiece Willis.** Domminiece Willis completed high school at Monarch School, where she was a member of Adolescent Book Group. Domminiece enjoyed a special relationship with her mentors, Karen and Sarah. She earned two associate degrees and graduated from San Diego State University with a BA in Child Development in 2020.

“With Karen, she’s always checking in, and it’s not just mentorship, we go on outings. It’s very personal and I feel very comfortable with her. She sends me all sorts of pamphlets like study tips and resources to get food, it’s more than just academics. She goes above and beyond to take care of my mental health, so I get more out of what you would get out of a normal mentor. I have grown to learn that despite my hardships, I have achieved so much greatness. The odds have been against me, and I have overcome them.”



## REFLECTIONS

*The number one and most valuable thing I've learned is organization. To get the funds, you're being checked in on monthly, and that forced me to change my life around and make education my number one priority.*

-Past scholar

Due to the extraordinary circumstances program participants came from, Scholars often felt as if they were not in control of their own lives but were instead trapped by their upbringing and environment. However, we found that the financial support, mentorship, and professional development offered through the program helped Scholars believe in themselves, their futures, and their abilities — creating a sense of agency over their personal and academic trajectory. This translated into taking action toward improving their future.

In a 2019 survey, and echoing data over the entirety of the program, Scholars reported that since participating in the program:

- ❖ **85%** use coping strategies to address challenges they face.
- ❖ **85%** take action steps toward the goals they set.
- ❖ **100%** take advantage of academic, professional, and community resources.

## FINAL TAKEAWAYS



5-year scholarship recipient and college graduate Brittany Jackson, pictured (left) with Ruth Westreich, wrote in a 2023 social media post:

“I look through old photos and see the different versions of myself I've met along the way.

I remember taking this photo with Ruth Westreich, the founder of the @wordsalivesd Westreich scholarship. In this photo, I was working at UC San Diego doing research on adolescent brain development. It's amazing what the brain is capable of achieving.

I didn't know it yet, but later that day, an opportunity would come knocking. I've learned it's important to keep an open mind. Oh, the places you'll go 🦋”

After 15 years of leading the WAWS program, there are three key takeaways that we believe could help guide or inform philanthropists or organizations developing a mentorship and scholarship program:

- 1. Engaged mentees are more successful in the program.** Mentorship was key to the success of the scholars in the program. Scholars who reported a close bond with their mentor, established through frequent meetings, not only were more likely to achieve their goals but also reported feeling like they weren't "alone". Scholars met with mentors each month to create goals and seek out resources and support together. Overall, in-person mentorship relationships proved to yield stronger engagement and programmatic results. The quality of the relationship was determined by consistency, follow-through, and trust.
- 2. Larger awards increased positive outcomes.** Responding to overwhelming demand, the early years of WAWS saw larger numbers of scholars with smaller financial awards. As a research-driven organization, when Words Alive documented that students who received larger financial awards reported feeling less stressed about their financial situation, as well as sticking to their budget and accessing financial resources outside their scholarship more often, our model shifted to prioritize larger scholarship awards. While this necessarily resulted in a smaller group of scholars each year, the impact for each student was greater.
- 3. Support for students from marginalized communities has improved since the program's inception.** Higher education has made commendable progress over the past two decades in developing programs aimed at assisting individuals facing extraordinary circumstances, such as homelessness, exposure to violence, substance abuse struggles, teen pregnancy, or involvement with the justice system.

The successful operation of the Words Alive program potentially signifies that broader support mechanisms have evolved within educational institutions and other organizations. These advancements might indicate a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse needs of marginalized students and an increased allocation of resources to address these needs. However, while acknowledging the strides made in support programs, it's important to note that the needs of students from marginalized communities are not monolithic. The decision to sunset the program doesn't necessarily imply that all aspects of support have been adequately addressed. Instead, it could indicate a shift in the type or level of support needed.

Identifying the current gaps in support for these students is crucial. These gaps might be in areas such as specialized mentorship, mental health resources, career guidance, or specific forms of financial aid that cater to unique circumstances. The closure of the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship program might prompt a deeper examination of where these gaps lie and how they can be effectively filled or addressed.

Therefore, the conclusion of the Words Alive program does not signify a lack of need for support for marginalized students but rather indicates a need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of support mechanisms. There is an opportunity to assess the evolving needs of these young scholars and to ensure that the support provided aligns with these changing circumstances, fostering continued success in their pursuit of higher education and/or vocational goals.

## THANK YOU

Words Alive would like to express our deep gratitude to Ruth Westreich for her philanthropic leadership and visionary investment in this program. For over a decade and a half, Ruth's dedicated support opened opportunities for life success for the 75 scholars who accessed the financial and mentorship resources provided by the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship.

We are also incredibly grateful for the dozens of volunteer mentors who worked directly with scholars to shape their path forward, and appreciate each scholar for their time, feedback, and willingness to engage with a truly unique program.

Words Alive thanks the many community partners who were vital to the success of this program, as well as the many volunteers and advisors who helped us develop and improve the Words Alive Westreich Scholarship over the year.