

BROWNSVILLE The Herald

Getting a jump: Dentists sponsor LEAP Week scholarships

By Steve Clark | July 30, 2019



A group of high school juniors from IDEA Frontier have experienced the week of a lifetime thanks to the efforts of Dr. Saam Zarrabi, co-founder of Rodeo Dental & Orthodontics.

Rodeo Dental, which has three locations in Brownsville and 21 around the state, sponsored scholarships for 30 students to attend the [LEAP Foundation's LEAP Week 2019](#) at the University of California, Los Angeles, July 21-27. The cost per student was more than \$2,000.

LEAP stands for Leadership Excellence and Achievement Program. Each year for LEAP Week, 500 students from around the world descend on UCLA, where they live on campus and learn life lessons for higher personal, academic and professional achievement. The week consists of

interactive workshops, small group exercises, celebrity speakers, mentor sessions and social activities.

“The program is all about soft skills,” Zarrabi said. “They talk about how to interview for a job, how to apply for college. working to find a mentor, creating mastermind groups, which is an incredible skill, which is connecting with peers that want to succeed, and working together to collaborate in success groups.”

IDEA chose 30 students based on the quality of the essays they were required to write as part of the scholarship application process.

“Most of them have never even been on a plane before, which is incredible,” Zarrabi said. “They were super excited about that part — I think more than going to the event.”

LEAP Week’s celebrity speakers have included actor Anthony Hopkins, SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, eight-time Olympic gold medalist Apolo Ohno, NBA All-Star Chris Paul and actor Mark Wahlberg. This year’s speakers include singer Paula Abdul and actress Kathy Bates.

Dr. Bill Dorfman, a Los Angeles-based, dentist-to-the-stars and celebrity in his own right, co-founded the nonprofit LEAP Foundation, which held its first program for students in 2008. Dorfman was also Zarrabi’s mentor, when he was attending UCLA as an undergrad and applying to dentistry school in San Francisco.

Zarrabi shadowed and interned with the charismatic Dorfman, who hadn’t started LEAP yet but was already coaching young people and teaching life skills.

“He built a whole program out of it and it’s been a hit,” Zarrabi said. “He’s done a great job.”

Zarrabi said the experience with Dorfman ignited a passion for mentorship. For the past 10 years, he’s mentored LEAP students interested in dentistry, and last week flew to Southern California to participate in LEAP Week, which sells out every year.

“They have a huge mentor workshop,” Zarrabi said. “(Students) have to bring suits and professional gear. They do sort of a 20-minute speed round of interviewing with mentors. Dr. Dorfman will bring in mentors from all industries: real estate, business, education, health care.”

Rodeo Dental sponsored its first IDEA student to LEAP Week about five years ago. The following year, three students received scholarships to the event. Two years ago, they upped it to five scholarships. Then Dorfman had an idea.

“Last year my mentor challenged me,” Zarrabi said. “It was his 60th birthday and he said, ‘Hey, can we try to do 60 students for my birthday?’”

That was a lot to pull off, so Zarrabi instead proposed 60 scholarships spread out over two years. Even then, he said, it was a “major leap of faith.”

“I talked to my team,” Zarrabi said. “I talked to my partners. They said let’s commit to this. This is a good program. We talked to IDEA and they said let’s go for it.”

Each Rodeo Dental location is sponsoring one student per year, with Zarrabi helping making up the difference. Juniors are targeted since they’re about to apply for college, he said.

“They come back from LEAP and that senior year they’re fired up,” Zarrabi said. “This is a complete game changer. This is not the only program like this out there, but I can tell you this is one of the best ones out there.”

https://www.brownsvilleherald.com/news/local/getting-a-jump-dentists-sponsor-leap-week-scholarships/article_6b37c400-b318-11e9-a9b4-3f7f2e1d0905.html