Students raised in foster system honored for completing college

By Stephen Ceasar, Los Angeles Times

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Soon they’ll walk across stages at college campuses around Southern California, accepting their degrees and celebrating with classmates. But at a smaller, more low-key event on Friday, they were honored with a closer set of peers: fellow foster children who had defied odds to get a degree.

The luncheon, sponsored by the nonprofit John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes, brought together in Little Tokyo about 30 students from Cal State Los Angeles, Cal State Northridge, UCLA and L.A. City College to celebrate their graduations.

Fewer than 15% of foster youth go on to attend college and only 1% graduate with a two-year or four-year degree.

John Burton, chairman of the California Democratic Party, told the students that with what they’ve gone through as foster children, no obstacle is insurmountable.

“Everything from today on is going to be a piece of cake compared to what you’ve done and what you’ve accomplished,” he said.

Tania Carpena, a graduate of L.A. City College, entered the foster system at age 18 months. She went on to live with an aunt after she was removed from the care of her mother. After attending Pasadena City College for two semesters after high school, she struggled to work and go to college. She took six years off to work, returning to L.A.C.C. recently to finish her degree in communication.

“This is just a steppingstone to becoming the successful, educated woman I want to become,” she said. “Now, at 28, my life is barely starting. I’m able to make choices and have opportunities I didn’t have before this.”

Carpena has been accepted to Cal State Dominguez Hills, but hopes to transfer to Cal State L.A. to be closer to her three siblings, who are still in the foster system.

College students usually have emotional and financial support from their families, said Diane Matsuda, director of the John Burton Foundation.

“Foster students walk into college with nothing -- no money, no support and they are left on their own,” she said. The foundation, along with other organizations across the state, try to fill that void,
Kenny Martin, a graduate of Los Angeles City College, entered the foster system at age 10. After high school, he attended the college for two years, but had difficulties navigating the complex requirements for transferring to a four-year school and made little progress toward that goal.

“It was just me on my own,” he said. He then learned of the Guardian Scholars program, a statewide initiative that provides assistance to former foster youth in acquiring financial aid, housing and employment. It also offers academic advising and intensive tutoring.

The program helped him get on track. “I would have dropped out long ago,” he said. He hopes to soon transfer to UCLA, UC Berkeley or UC San Diego.

“I’m really happy with where I am right now — but I’m not going to stop,” he said.

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stephen.ceasar@latimes.com | Twitter: @stephenceasar

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