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Spencer Neale Memorial Scholarships

By Lou Fancher



(L to R): Tina Curiel, Audrey Neale and Bridgette Thornton Photo Ohlen Alexander

Journalists are trained to write just the facts: news accounts stripped of embellishments and minus emotion. How then, to write the complete story, the entire story, of Spencer Neale, Tina Curiel, Bridgette Thornton, and the employees at Coldwell Banker in Orinda?

Beginning at the end is one approach. Curiel and Thornton, both Campolindo High School graduates from the class of 2010, have been awarded Spencer Neale Memorial Scholarships for Excellence in Art. The \$1,000 scholarships were given by the Coldwell Banker Orinda office to support the students' continued education in the field of art.

Continuing to report in reverse chronological order: Art students at Campolindo were invited to submit an essay describing how art affected their lives and how they hoped to share it with the world. In an interview, Val Cook-Watkins, Managing Broker at Coldwell Banker, summarized the key points in the winning essays.

Thornton wrote of "creating art with fresh meaning," and was "passionate about art and art history," according to Cook-Watkins. Curiel planned "to use her art to create messages about war, the environment, and endangered-species," Cook-Watkins said. This fall, Thornton is headed to

Chico State; Curiel, to the California College of Arts in Oakland.

Creating the scholarship applications and planting a tree in Spencer's honor involved careful planning, with permission and parameters for the donation requiring extensive communication between Coldwell Banker and Campolindo. Coldwell Banker employees, originally planning to give only one scholarship, raised enough money to give two. The Japanese Maple tree planted on the Campolindo campus will eventually bear a plaque, designed by incoming art students, with "Spencer Neale" inscribed upon it.

Here then, the backwards exposition falters, entering territory where facts and emotions are entwined. To carve a vast hole in the story's origin, to leave "chapter one" out, would be to leave out the "why" behind the realty company's generosity and the girls' triumph.

The complete story must be told. Spencer Neale, a 2009 Campolindo graduate and the only daughter of Audrey Neale, was the victim of a tragic traffic accident while returning to school in Southern California. Spencer's mother had been with the Orinda office for five years. "Our office came together as a family to support Audrey Neale and to create a tribute that would have some impact," Cook-Watkins said.

The impact was immediate. "I initially was overjoyed to hear that I was to receive this scholarship," wrote Curiel. The award was "bittersweet" because Spencer was a fellow classmate. She promises not to forget Spencer and to use the scholarship and her art as an "opportunity to see something new in the world." Thornton said she looked up to Spencer and is motivated by the award. "It gives me confidence knowing that others want to support me," she explained.

Facts, we find, are not always cut and dry. Life, when tragedy nestles breathtakingly close to joy, is a puzzle. Responding to ambiguity with generosity may be the only answer. "In the face of unthinkable loss, you want to do something," Cook-Watkins concluded, "to have something positive. It's not over for the people who love Spencer. She won't be forgotten."

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