

# Los Angeles, CA



## Joya Scholars makes the grade



**Kimberly Wolfe**

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A banner outside the Solid House on Garnet Lane in Fullerton where Joya Scholars mentors to low-income students.

**Credits:** Kimberly Wolfe

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Bianca Pena was a diamond in the rough.

A straight A student in high school with a 4.3 GPA, Pena grew up in a single-parent, hispanic family in Orange County that did not discuss college as an option with her while growing up. She honestly did not know that college was an option until her senior year in high school when she met a college student at her high school doing outreach and learned that she was eligible to apply to four UC schools without charge. Pena ended up being accepted to two of them and ended up graduating from UC Santa Cruz, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology. Had she not gone to college, she probably would have ended up getting pregnant at a young age, she said.

Pena ended up moving back to Orange County after graduation and worked in the Garnet neighborhood in Fullerton. The five-block area is home to more than 1,200 low-income children has not seen a college graduate come from that neighborhood in over ten years, according to outreach groups that work in the neighborhood.

Pena and others at her Fullerton church, [Epic Church](#), wanted to stop this statistic and knew that they needed to take action in order to make it happen. Joya Scholars grew from that desire to take action.

"My heart just really goes out to these kids because I feel for them," Pena said.


Founded two years ago, [Joya Scholars](#), according to its Web site, seeks to inspire and prepare students from the Garnet neighborhood for college. They accomplish this by seeking out students from sixth grade all the way to seniors in high school to mentor them in order to encourage them to attend college.

Students meet for mentoring sessions once a week at [Solidarity Rising's](#) Solid House located on Garnet Lane, where students are lead in a variety of workshops, including test taking, among other subjects. College tours and parent meetings are also part of the program.

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Mike Etagaki is a new mentor to Joya Scholars who became involved after hearing about it at Epic Church one Sunday. A Sociology professor at both [Fullerton College](#) and [Cal State Fullerton](#), he said that this program went hand-in-hand with why he wanted to teach-to make a difference.

"It's really neat to be able to give all my attention to that one student," Etagaki said.

Jazmin Perez is one of the students in Joya Scholars and has aspirations of attending medical school or of being a registered nurse. She listened intently at a mentoring session on test taking strategies and wanted to try them out the next day for her science test. A seventh grader at [Tuffree Middle School](#), she has seen her grades go up since starting the program. She desires to attend UC Irvine and would be the second person in her family to graduate from college.

"I just don't want to work in a fast food restaurant," she said. "I'm not saying it's bad, but..."

Pena dreams of the day that Joya Scholars can have a learning center in the Garnet neighborhood, where kids can come after school to get their homework done. She also dreams of cultivating a culture in the neighborhood that values learning. Her dreams are becoming reality since Joya Scholars is going to expand during the next school year. Mentors are needed.

More diamond's in the rough need to be found.

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**By Kimberly Wolfe**  
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