

Rossmoor Scholarship Student Interviews

Now it begins. In coming weeks Rossmoor Scholarship Foundation (RSF) trustees will fan out in teams of three to interview the 150 students in six Contra Costa County high schools and two community colleges who have applied for 2025 RSF scholarships.

Before interviewing, each trustee will have reviewed students' online application to make sure they carry a minimum of 3.0 (weighted for high school applicants) and identify a federal Student Aid Index score that shows financial need. They will also have reviewed the "Information Packet for RSF School Interview Teams" that was prepared last year, and then craft a series of questions specific to each student that they bring to the interviews.

The goal? Pare the 150 applicants down to the final 100 who will receive funding. All trustees take an evaluation form to the interviews, on which they have already assessed students' economic needs (including their family's earning capacity and employment situation) and their academic success (including the quality of their essays and evidence of academic rigor). The form also calls for an evaluation of a student's particular qualities, challenges, and attributes, and acquiring this information shows why the 30-minute interviews are so important. Although the process is not easy, it's in the interviews that RSF trustees hear the incredible stories that so often populate RSF articles the Rossmoor News publishes in subsequent months.

In the interview the visiting team chair poses the first question the student hears; almost always it's directed at something in the student's essay. "It says here you've been living in a garage the past couple of months." (This has happened several times in recent years). "What set of circumstances brought that about?" "How are things going since your former fellow prison inmates convinced you to turn your life around?" (Another actual question previously asked.) "Tell us about the difficulties you have experienced in your education as a single mom." (Trustees have asked that question a lot over the years.)

Other questions follow. "Describe your typical responsibilities and activities outside of school hours." That one often reveals the number of hours per week a student needs to take care of siblings because both parents work. "What attracted you to your current or potential major?" It's uncanny how many times the answer to that question connects directly to the experiences students describe in their essays. "Tell us about the times things did not go as planned. What would you have done differently? What did you learn?" This one is particularly revealing—and telling—about a student's commitment to a higher education. The answer often leads another trustee to ask: "What would be your dream job? Where do you see yourself in 10 years?" RSF records of past scholarship winners show many have fulfilled their dreams. At the end of the day RSF teams rank the students they've interviewed, and pass those rankings to the RSF Scholarship Committee for final decisions on which students will be awarded scholarships.

By the end of February RSF trustees know how many scholarships they can award in 2025, and in mid-March they will get together to make their final, albeit difficult, selections. At that meeting many of the stories the February interviews yielded will be shared. Most trustees will smile, some will gasp, a few will shed a happy tear or two, all will marvel at the tenacity and commitment of the young people they just met. For trustees, what they get from those interviews is ample payback for the hundreds of volunteer hours they devote each year to the Rossmoor Scholarship Foundation.

Submitted by: Wayne A. Wiegand, RSF Trustee