

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Prominent Philanthropist Named Honorary Alumna of UC Santa Barbara

As a youngster struggling to keep up with her classmates learning to read and spell, Brigit Ferguson's frustration found focus when she was diagnosed with dyslexia. The revelation, and the support she received as a result, allowed her to not only catch up -- but to excel.

A current doctoral candidate at UC Santa Barbara, Ferguson is still excelling today. And she's giving great credit for her success to a prominent local philanthropist, Lady Leslie Ridley-Tree, whose scholarship endowment for just such students afforded her academic opportunities that may have been otherwise impossible.

Lady Ridley-Tree, co-chair of the Campaign for UC Santa Barbara, and a trustee of the UC Santa Barbara Foundation -- whose generosity to the campus also includes support for Arts & Lectures and the Department of Music -- is a longtime benefactor of the university.

Now the campus is giving back. Lady Ridley-Tree has been named an honorary alumna of UCSB -- only the 50th individual to be so lauded since the school's 1944 establishment as a University of California campus.

"I thank you, university. I thank you all. I thank life for the privilege that I've had to be able to give," Ridley-Tree said during a special induction ceremony. "For me to have this degree, at this point in my life, is so overwhelming, you cannot imagine. Everything I've done in life has been because a door has opened, and there seemed to have been a need, and I walked through it. How blessed I feel, how joyous I feel."

Chancellor Henry T. Yang paid tribute to Lady Ridley-Tree in his remarks, describing her as "a world citizen, and a local citizen, who truly represents the spirit of Santa Barbara."

"Your vision, your leadership in philanthropy, your leadership in everything, as well as your passion for the arts, and for life, make you one of the most respected citizens of our community," said Chancellor Yang. "Tonight, we would not dare to think that we are honoring you. You, by accepting this honorary degree, by agreeing to be an honorary alumna -- we feel that you have honored us. The university is being honored tonight."

Echoing that sentiment, Bruce G. Wilcox, chairman of the UC Santa Barbara Foundation's Board of Trustees, called the plaudit "a richly deserved recognition from the university" for Lady Ridley-Tree, a devoted campus advocate with a long history of student support. "Her sponsorship of a young accomplished scholar who overcame the most tremendous difficulties is an inspiration, and so typical of what we aspire to, and do, here," he said.

The distinction of honorary alumni is the most prestigious award given by the UCSB Alumni Association. The equivalent of an honorary degree, it is reserved for "people who have made significant, important contributions to the university and the Santa Barbara community," said Dick Breaux, president of the association's board. "It welcomes a very special few into the Gaucho family."

Among those who have also received the award are past Chancellor Vernon Cheadle and his wife, Mary, as well as philanthropists Michael Towbes, and Virgil and Betty Elings.

That "special few" now includes Lady Ridley-Tree, who Breaux commended for her visionary philanthropy and "her commitment to educating citizens for California and a global society, evident in the many scholarships she has endowed at UC Santa Barbara, which help make higher education accessible to outstanding students with need."

Students such as the Ph.D hopeful Ferguson, who hasn't let her dyslexia impede her pursuit of a doctorate in the history of art and architecture -- or her dream of academia. If anything, she said, it's helped her. Now completing her dissertation on 13th century German sculpture, Ferguson was on hand at Lady Ridley-Tree's induction, offering personal thanks to the benefactor whose eponymous scholarship she has received four times.

"While many people seem to think that a learning disability means I should seek a non-academic career, Lady Leslie has recognized that there are those of us with learning disabilities who thrive despite -- and, perhaps, even partly because of -- them," Ferguson said. "While Lady Leslie's financial support has allowed me to carry out essential research that I might not otherwise have been able to, it is so much more meaningful to me because she has recognized those of us who have to work a little harder to succeed."

Speaking directly to Lady Ridley-Tree, Ferguson added, "It strikes me as wonderfully appropriate that you, who have helped me and other present and future UCSB alum and alumnae, join our ranks. We will always be grateful."

Lady Ridley-Tree attended Columbia University, the University of Madrid, and the University of West Los Angeles. For seven years, she was director of a community center on New York City's Westside, and established the first Head Start program, as well as the Bridge Academy for teens expelled from public school. Currently, she is CEO and chair of Pacific Air Industries in Santa Monica, and a trustee of the Ridley-Tree Foundation. She and her husband, Lord Paul Ridley-Tree, shared the Philanthropist of the Year Award, presented by the National Society of Fund Raising Executives in 1994; and the Santa Barbara News-Press Lifetime Achievement Award in 1993.

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† Top image: From left to right: Dick Breaux, Alumni Association board president, with new honorary alumna Lady Leslie Ridley-Tree, and Chancellor Henry T. and Dilling Yang.

Credit: Monie Photography

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The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.