

Millikan Student Worked Hard To Overcome Some Tough Times

Wanda Kao gave up fun with friends to raise money for college, helped mom take care of grandmother.

By Kevin Butler, Staff Writer

LONG BEACH - Many high school students try to take it easy during their senior year. Not Wanda Kao.

The Millikan High School student often finds herself turning down invitations to hang out with friends after school.

"I said, 'I can't, I have to work,'" the 17-year-old student said.

Kao has juggled schoolwork, a senior project and a part-time job that frequently had her working about 20 hours a week.

In addition to those challenges and commitments, Kao has faced family obligations, the death of her grandmother and a car accident that left her with injuries requiring more than two months of chiropractic treatment.

Amid all those developments, the super-focused student anticipates applying for about 40 college scholarships her senior year.

When asked how she has handled all those commitments and challenges successfully, Kao said she focuses on how her work connects with her future goal of becoming a civil engineer.

"I hold it in sometimes," she said. "I just think, 'It's going to be worth it.' That's what keeps me going."

For about four months during her junior year, Kao spent part of each week taking her grandmother, who was blinded by her condition, to dialysis sessions lasting two to three hours each.

"I cut back on my social life with my friends," Kao said. "And I didn't do what I usually do," like playing Sudoku and hanging out with peers.

Wanda's mother took care of her grandmother before she died in November. A single parent, her mother is now looking for work.

That traumatic event was compounded by a car accident Kao was involved in just three days after her grandmother's death, causing a back injury that required twice-weekly visits to a chiropractor for more than two months.



Wanda Kao will be graduating from Millikan High School and plans to attend UC Irvine with a declared major in civil engineering. (Brittany Murray/Staff Photographer)

After her grandmother died, Kao felt like "everything was going down the drain," she said.

"I was behind in my classes - The (back) pain didn't help, either," said Kao, adding that her back feels fine now.

Kao last summer and most of her senior year has worked part-time to raise money to pay for college and for traditional senior activities like grad night.

"I didn't want my mom to worry about getting resources for my college education," she said.

That's also why she has pursued scholarships so aggressively, Kao said. She plans to combine the scholarship money with loans and a work-study program to attend UC Irvine, living on campus.

Kao was accepted to five other colleges besides UC Irvine, a feat she credits not only to her own hard work but the motivation she was given by others, including a mentor she was connected with through the nonprofit program Operation Jump Start.

Kao also credits her optimism for getting her through a tough senior year.

"When I go through those rough time periods, I always think positively," she said. "And I have a lot of positive people around me to help motivate me."

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