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Program helps foster kids finish college

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Brittany Chamalbide was more than ready for her Heidi Klum moment.

Makeup? Flawless. Hair? Perfectly coiffed. Chamalbide was rocking a clingy red dress and strappy black sandals, and the runway was beckoning.

"I'm super excited," said Chamalbide, 18, as she prepared for her modeling debut. "This feels like a real fashion show."

It was real, and it was important. The annual event was a benefit fundraiser for scholarships and other educational necessities for foster youths, like her, who have "timed out" of the system at age 18.

Surveys suggest that 80 percent of foster children want to go to college, said Joni Pitcl, president of the Foster Youth Education Fund, the nonprofit group that sponsored Sunday's event. Only 3 percent actually go, however, and only 1 percent finish.

Many youngsters leave the foster care system without the funds, confidence and support to navigate college, Pitcl said. "For these kids, a flat tire can turn their lives into a tailspin," she said. They need support and guidance, but they have nowhere to turn."

The annual Fashion Show and Tea has raised about \$200,000 over the past seven years, helping dozens of foster youth go to school and manage their educational expenses.

Each year in Sacramento County, about 250 youths "age out" of foster care, and a shaky economic climate and government budget cuts have hit them particularly hard this year, Pitcl said.

More than 300 people attended this year's fashion show at California State University, Sacramento, which also included a silent auction and raffle of donated items. Part of the proceeds from the event will go to the university's Guardian Scholars Program, which helps needy students with academic counseling, financial advice, social support and mentors.

Chamalbide and some 50 other young models wore outfits Sunday supplied by Macy's in

Sunrise Mall, and they wore them proudly.

"I love it," Alex Gonzalez, 20, said of his white shirt with snap buttons, black jacket and jeans. "It works for me. I would totally wear this shirt, if I could afford it. It costs \$90!"

As the minutes ticked by and the spotlight got closer, Gonzalez and his fellow models peeked from backstage at the runway that they soon would own. Music was thumping, and the house was packed. VIP seats lined the stage.

"I'm pretty proud to go out there," Chamalbide said.

Sure, they had butterflies. But these models were not easily flustered. After all, each of them had endured far scarier things in their young lives.

"Going through all of that stuff, it's a struggle," said Mark Hamlett, who was separated from his siblings at age 11 and placed in foster care. "But I'm OK now," said Hamlett, who turns 18 next week. "I think I'll be fine."

Chamalbide, Gonzalez and Hamlett all are students at Sacramento State, thanks in part to the Foster Youth Education Fund. So, as they took to the runway Sunday, they did so with plans for diplomas and careers.

"I feel really good," Chamalbide said.

Then she and the others stepped onto the stage, and toward a bright future.

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