

Press Release

Akerman and The National CASA/GAL Association for Children Announce 2022 Recipients of Academic Excellence Scholarship for Foster Youth

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Akerman LLP and the National Court Appointed Special Advocate/Guardian ad Litem (CASA/GAL) Association for Children are proud to announce the 2022 Akerman Academic Excellence Scholarship recipients. This year's awards support two deserving college students with lived experience in foster care and other challenging circumstances at home, and who are thriving at the college level, with big ambitions for the future.

Nishimwe Emeline, a Texas Tech sophomore, and Brandon Kohatsu, a sophomore at Creighton University, each will receive \$2,500 a year in scholarship support, for each of the three years remaining in their college educations. Emeline, a Texas native, is aiming for a business degree, and hopes eventually to establish a clothing business. Kohatsu, from Hawaii, hopes to go on to law school, and to serve disadvantaged people when he succeeds at his dream.

Akerman's scholarship program is in its seventh year, and the law firm works closely with the National CASA/GAL to find deserving applicants, interview them, and work with them to increase their chances of success in college and in their eventual careers.

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Beth Zafonte

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Emeline said that her CASA volunteer has “shown up for me on my worst days, and my best, and been there whenever I needed her.” And as for Akerman’s scholarship? “It’s given me peace, knowing that I could just focus on my studies,” she said.

Now, with her finances and classwork in place, she says, “My ultimate goal is to create my own luxury clothing business, where I can design clothing that empowers hard workers and helps them gain a sense of accomplishment.”

With her bright outlook and strong grades, there is no reason to doubt her.

Kohatsu says he never can forget his status as the first person in his family ever to attend college. For a time, he struggled with that role, particularly when isolated due to the Covid pandemic. He’s become a strong student, thanks in part to the help of his CASA worker, Emily Kauwe.

“I’ve known Emily for about two years,” Kohatsu says. “She’s helped me a lot; she’s helped me find other scholarships, she’s always there to talk to. I compare her to a Swiss Army knife; whenever I need help with something, she’s always there for me. That’s who she is.”

Kohatsu is laser-focused on his goals after he gets his bachelor’s degree. “College provides me with the chance to make an impact on my community,” he said. “I hope to either become a defense attorney, or go into environmental law, because I want to be a voice for the powerless and help those in need.”

The Akerman Scholarship, which awards \$2,500 a year for up to four years of higher education, is funded by the law firm through an endowment established in 2015 as part of the firm’s historic \$1 million pledge to the National CASA/GAL Association. The endowment supports young adults who have spent part of their childhood in the foster care system, by helping minimize the financial

burden of higher education. The recipients of the scholarship go through an intense application process, including written and video interviews. Each student demonstrates outstanding academic commitment and readiness for success. The scholarship endowment is currently supporting four scholars, contributing \$10,000 annually to their educational pursuits.

Across the country, only 50 percent of youth in foster care earn a high school diploma, compared to 91 percent of all students nationwide. Only 15 percent of youth in foster care attend postsecondary institutions, with only about three percent completing college. Others drop out due to insufficient support, lack of appropriate guidance, and unmet financial needs. National CASA/GAL notes the several studies demonstrating the invaluable benefits a CASA/GAL volunteer brings to a child's life. Children with a CASA/GAL advocate are more likely to do better in school. The goal of the Akerman Scholarship is to help these students afford higher learning so they will be more successful after they age out of foster care and live independently.

“Nishimwe and Brandon, raised in the most challenging of circumstances, are teaching all of us at Akerman the meaning of perseverance, resilience and dedication,” said Beth Zafonte, chair of Akerman's Philanthropic Council and Director of Economic Services in the firm's Real Estate Practice Group in New York. “Their struggles might have defeated other young people; for them, those challenges are the engine of their hard work and their desire to help other youth in foster care who will follow them. They truly inspire me, as they do everyone else who has the good fortune to have met them.”

“Supporting youth who have experienced foster care as they continue on their path to success is an important initiative of the National CASA/GAL Association. The scholarship provided through this partnership with Akerman is one of the many ways

that we are able to help young people achieve their full potential,” said National CASA/GAL Association CEO Tara Lisa Perry. “I have no doubt Brandon and Nishimwe mean it when they say they will extend a helping hand to younger students. Their good will and bright promises show on their faces, and their ambition to change the world is truly inspiring.”

About Akerman

Akerman LLP is a top 100 U.S. law firm recognized among the most forward-thinking firms in the industry by *Financial Times*. Its more than 700 lawyers and business professionals collaborate with the world’s most successful enterprises and entrepreneurs to navigate change, seize opportunities, and help drive innovation and growth.

About the National CASA/GAL Association for Children

The National Court Appointed Special Advocate/Guardian ad Litem (CASA/GAL) Association for Children, together with its 950 state and local member programs, supports and promotes court-appointed volunteer advocacy so that every child who has experienced abuse or neglect in the United States can be safe, have a permanent home and have the opportunity to thrive. National CASA/GAL offers leadership and support to the network of programs and leads its continued growth. CASA/GAL volunteers and staff work every day to help change a child’s story. To learn more, visit nationalcasagal.org.