Gift from USC Trustee Joan Payden significantly expands reach of USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative

By Jessica Raymond

Hundreds of inner-city Los Angeles teens have mastered the skills — and earned the grades — to go to college in the last 24 years through the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative. Now the initiative will grow dramatically thanks to a $5 million gift from USC Trustee Joan Payden.

Known as NAI, the initiative will expand to reach some 1,100 sixth-through-12th-graders by 2020, including 600 additional children and teens in the neighborhoods near USC’s Health Sciences Campus northeast of downtown Los Angeles.

“Joan Payden understands the power of education to inspire, provide hope and build bridges to previously unforeseen opportunities,” said USC President C. L. Max Nikias. “Through her visionary gift to NAI, she will help expand the reach of this transformative program and benefit the lives of students living near USC’s campuses for generations to come.”

NAI first began more than two decades ago with students from south Los Angeles elementary schools surrounding USC’s University Park Campus. These schools feed into James A. Foshay Learning Center. In 2013, NAI expanded to include sixth-graders at two schools in east Los Angeles near the Health Sciences Campus: Murchison and El Sereno elementary schools.

The cornerstone of NAI is the newly named Joan A. Payden Student Academy. Through the academy, NAI scholars attend classes at USC’s University Park or Health Sciences campuses on Saturday mornings and learn time management and study skills. High school students in NAI also attend weekday advanced placement and honors classes at USC before their regular school day begins. The program requires a six-year commitment from students.

“NAI has had remarkable successes over the past two decades, and I’m thrilled to play a part in expanding its scope and ensuring that even more students have access to this life-changing educational experience,” said Payden, who has served on the USC Board of Trustees since 2000.

Since the program enrolled its first scholars in 1991, 810 students have completed the program—a 99 percent graduation rate—and nearly 99 percent of NAI graduates have gone on to college. NAI scholars who are admitted to USC and attend the university receive scholarships covering their full tuition.

“NAI addresses a critical need for our neighborhood students by promoting a culture of academic excellence and instilling in them a mindset of achievement,” said Payden, who has served on the USC Board of Trustees since 2000.

Students aren’t chosen based solely on their past academic accomplishments. We look at their potential and their commitment to success.”

Kim Thomas-Barrios, the program’s executive director, notes that the NAI scholars create a ripple effect throughout their community. “Nearly all of our scholars are the first in their families to go to college, and we’ve seen that their achievements inspire their siblings and extended family members to pursue higher education and even motivate their parents to seek training for better jobs,” Thomas-Barrios said.

Payden is president and chief operating officer of Payden & Rygel, a Los Angeles-based global investment management firm that she founded in 1983. She earned a bachelor’s degree in mathematics and physics from Trinity College and graduated from the Advanced Management Program at Harvard Business School. She has long been a passionate advocate for education. She is a member of the Board of Visitors of the UCLA Anderson School of Management and serves as a trustee of Loyola Marymount University and Occidental College. Throughout her career, she has given extensively to educational institutions and organizations that support underserved members of society.

Payden’s gift supports the Campaign for the University of Southern California, which seeks to raise $6 billion or more in private philanthropy to advance USC’s academic priorities and expand its impact on the community and the world. The campaign has raised more than $4 billion since its launch in 2011.