Setting the Stage

It all began on October 9, 1915 in the Canary Islands village of Puerto de la Cruz, Spain with the birth of Domingo Tomás Hernández Bethencourt.

By 1920, when he and his family immigrated to America, the San Diego County Fair, which began as an agricultural exposition in 1880, was a popular annual event.

The two became intertwined in 1947 when the dashing Hollywood actor, now known as Tom Hernandez, embraced his lifetime role as the Fair’s goodwill ambassador, Don Diego.

After this charismatic face of the Fair died in 1984, the 22nd District Agricultural Association Board determined that the best way to honor Tom, in addition to commissioning a “¡Bienvenidos, Amigos!” sculpture that continues to welcome Del Mar Fairgrounds visitors today, would be to create a college scholarship program in his name. Thus, the Don Diego Fund was born.

Although Tom did not have children, his legacy of “progeny” is impressive. From this nonprofit’s inception through 2021, nearly 300 scholarship recipients and hundreds of thousands of Plant*Grow*Eat elementary students, who learn about agriculture from the ground up, have been beneficiaries of donors’ largesse.

This is our story.
**Selected Success Stories**

1995’s Vince Mukulanis learned the importance of leadership and community service in 4-H and now instills those values in his sons while honoring his agricultural roots and passion for forest conservation as a Davey Resource Group executive.

2000’s Scott Stebner is an award-winning photographer/videographer who captures blue-collar grit. Sales of his iconic “Kansas Farmer” book help fund a perpetual scholarship for Kansas State Agriculture Communication students.

2011’s Brett Huff received a B.S. in Agriculture/Animal Science and worked in animal genetics-based biomedical research; searching for cures to human diseases. Today, he is establishing a cow-calf operation in Ramona.

2016’s Carney Flynn’s interest in genetics began in 4-H and never waned. She graduated from UCLA and is pursuing an M.D. while conducting COVID-19 patient care studies.

1999’s Amber Lynn Scott has always soared beyond. Having served as White House Social Aide, this public affairs professional is currently earning her PhD in Organizational Communications at USC.

2016’s first-gen college student Yessica Valentin earned a bilingual elementary teaching credential and became a teacher in the Vista District that has nurtured her and her eight siblings.

College was cheaper then, and $1,000 – nearly $2,500 in today’s money – went a long way. So have many of our idealistic, ambitious Scholars.

In their quest to build a better San Diego, and a better world, scholarship recipients are excelling in careers as agriculture teachers, animal geneticists, vintners, veterinarians, healthcare professionals, community leaders, research scientists, entrepreneurs and more. We are very proud of them all.

**Placing the Seeds**

Like a small seed that would grow into a sturdy tree, Don Diego Fund began modestly after Tom’s death as the nonprofit partner of the San Diego County Fair and Del Mar Fairgrounds. The 22nd DAA Board comprised the founding Fund Board, with each member honoring Tom’s legacy by contributing $5,000 in seed money to fund college scholarships, and later, agriculture education.

Some stakeholders, such as Charity Fair Horse Show, have continued their commitment to this day. Other constants have been families such as the Eckes, organizations such as SDG&E and Del Mar Thoroughbred Club, and Chana Mannen, who as the Fair’s Deputy Manager oversaw operations until she retired and was appointed Don Diego Fund’s Executive Director.

Don Diego Fund’s enthusiastic community support was evident in Dave Barham, the creative genius behind Hot Dog on a Stick; a Fair favorite. Deciding to become a founding member, Dave delivered his initial contribution in a unique way: a grocery bag of cash totaling $5,000. As time went on, additional business and community leaders joined the Board, making the guiding organization a synergistic blend of leaders from different walks of life.

The organization’s 1986 debut was lively and fun, presaging summers to come. Artist Maher Morcos’ 16-foot sculpture of Tom Hernandez was unveiled at the Fairgrounds’ entrance during the first Don Diego Fund Gala, which took place the night before the Fair’s Opening Day. The annual Dinner and Concert Gala has become legendary. As the annual primary fundraiser, it showcases each year’s class of scholars, and enables recipients to meet and thank their donors.

In accordance with the intent of awarding scholarships to deserving students associated with activities and events at the Del Mar Fairgrounds, particularly agricultural pursuits, three $1,000 scholarships were initially offered. One each was given to an outstanding FFA and 4-H student; the third to the winner of the Fairest of the Fair, a competition that was discontinued in 2005.

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Growing Opportunities

Now firmly planted in the Fairgrounds, and nurtured by robust Board commitment and donor generosity, Don Diego Fund’s impact on students and the community grew. Fast. Far. And wide.

Scholarship awards increased to $1,500 in 1988 and $2,000 in 1990. The following year, two FFA and two 4-H Scholars received $3,000 each. By 1995, the scholarship amounts rose to $5,000. Categories also expanded: to Exhibitor/Participant in 1996; Employee in 2002; and Vocational Education in 2015.

Beginning in the early 2000s, the number and monetary amount of awards began to increase dramatically as the Board added scholarships at $2,500, $1,500 and $1,000 levels. In 2013, it established the $5,000 Spanjian Family Scholarship.

As the program evolved and the name changed from Don Diego Fund to Don Diego Scholarship Foundation (DDSF) in 2013, guidelines solidified. Today, eligibility is based upon a San Diego area applicant’s participation in activities and events at the Fairgrounds, including the San Diego County Fair.

In 2019, DDSF reached a milestone of awarding more than one million dollars in college scholarships and agricultural grants. A man ordered a “Will You Marry Me?” Legacy Brick. He escorted the love of his life to the Fountain, unveiled the brick, got down on one knee, opened a jewelry box to reveal a gorgeous engagement ring, and popped the question. Astonished to tears, she cried, “YES!”

New Programs Take Root

To raise funds and connect the wider community to DDSF, the organization initiated new programs in the twenty-teens. The Legacy Brick Program enables people to commemorate a special person or memorable moment with a customized brick installed at the DDSF Legacy Fountain at the Fairgrounds’ Plaza de México.

One of the most engaging Fair opportunities is Plant*Grow*Eat, a program that teaches elementary school children about agriculture and nutrition in a fun, hands-on way. Kids become organic farmers, growing edible plants from seed, then proudly bringing their crop to the Fair where they earn ribbons and explore agriculture areas. Beginning in the early 1990s, DDSF has solicited donors, including businesses, community organizations and individuals, to sponsor buses that annually transport thousands of students from Title I schools for this transformational experience.

Honoring an Icon

Affectionately known as the “Father of Don Diego,” Robert Spanjian was foremost among many Board members who over the years frequently reached into their own pockets to augment scholarships.

Founding Members

Dave Barham
Edmund and Inez Burke
Charity Fair Horse Show
Del Mar Thoroughbred Club
Paul Ecke
Ray Harmon Family Foundation
Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Klein
Mr. and Mrs. Warner Lusardi
Ben Osher
Sheila and Patrick Rose
San Diego Gas and Electric
Mr. and Mrs. Morris Sims
Southern California Edison
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Spanjian
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Spanjian
Mr. and Mrs. Donald Stone
Watt Industries

Charity Fair Horse Show President and DDSF Board member Susan Farrior presents a 2010 donation to then DDSF Chair Allan Royster.

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Charity Fair Horse Show President and DDSF Board member Susan Farrior presents a 2010 donation to then DDSF Chair Allan Royster.
In March 2020, life changed for DDSF, and the world. The COVID-19 pandemic brought everything to a devastating halt, forcing suspension of the San Diego County Fair for only the second time in its 140-year history. The first time was during World War II, after which it roared back in 1947 with the theme, Outdoor Life, and the introduction of Tom Hernandez as goodwill ambassador, Don Diego. The pandemic put a harsh pause on DDSF’s Plant*Grow*Eat program and Gala. Disappointed but undeterred, the Board forged ahead with ambitious efforts to begin raising its second million. Pursuing an aggressive marketing strategy, the DDSF expanded its databases while creating and cross-pollinating targeted communications on social media and print platforms with impressive results.

Individual and corporate support has been the backbone of DDSF since its inception. In addition to the Spanjian award, the Zable Foundation has been a long-time sponsor of 4-H and now Junior Livestock Scholarship programs. After an Endowed Named Scholarship program was inaugurated in 2020, Board and community members enthusiastically rose to the challenge. The first scholarship honored San Diego’s iconic Tulloch ranching family. Others swiftly followed. By 2021, 11 Endowed Named Scholarships had been established by people passionate about making an enduring investment in the future.

Expanding farther, two Board families established one-time, four-year-scholarships totaling $20,000 each; one in 2020 and one in 2021. The awards have enabled students of great promise and great need to attend prestigious universities as they strive to become leaders of our community.

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In celebration of our 35th anniversary, we determined to carry forward the DDSF tradition of giving back by establishing an Alumni Scholarship. Past recipients will be invited to join together and pool financial resources to provide an annual scholarship.

As we emerge from these arduous times, we are buoyed by the continuing high caliber of our Scholars and the certainty that Don Diego Scholarship Foundation will persevere to build a better San Diego, one scholarship at a time. With a total $1,191,000 awarded to 298 students 1986-2021, we dedicate this Chronicle to everyone who has donated time, wisdom and money over the past 35 years.

Thank you!
Board Members 1986-2022

Chairs:
Robert Spanjian
Barbara Dunphy
Jim Morris
Allan Royster
Paul Ecke III
Jon Liss
Roxana Foxx
Juanita Hayes

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Pierre Sleiman
Alysha Stehly
Megan Tevrizian
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William Tulloch
Bob Vice
Louis Wolfsheimer
Gene Yee
George Young
David Watson
Robert Valdez

Current Leadership Team

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Juanita Hayes, Chairman; John Hoeflich, Vice Chairman; D Prestininzi, Secretary; George Karetas, Treasurer

Board:
Lisa Barkett, Alyson Connelly, Sandra DiCicco, Glenn Drown, Susan Farrior, Joe Harper, Kirby Morrison, Frederick Schenk, Stephen Shewmaker, Alysha Stehly

Chairs Emeritus:
Paul Ecke III, Roxana Foxx, Jon Liss

Executive Director:
Chana Mannen

Mission:
Don Diego Scholarship Foundation promotes education in a fair and fiscally sound manner by providing scholarships to deserving San Diego area graduating high school seniors and graduates who have been associated with activities at the Del Mar Fairgrounds, including the San Diego County Fair. The Don Diego Scholarship Foundation also provides grants for agricultural education.