

McKinley Foundation nears its \$1 million goal

By Susan Essoyan

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Back in the 1970s, Charles Higa, co-founder of Zippy's Restaurants, launched what has become the iconic Hawaii way to raise money for sports teams, clubs and schools: the Zippy's chili ticket.

Today, at 82, he is helping kick off the "McKinley Million" fundraising campaign with a \$125,000 donation to the McKinley High School Foundation, which grants college scholarships to graduates. The gift pushes the endowment to \$825,000, within reach of its new \$1 million goal.

"I didn't have the opportunity to go to college," the McKinley graduate explained. "My parents were struggling a lot. All the boys — we had four brothers — we all worked with my dad in his butcher shop. ... My three children went to McKinley High School, and I try to give back to the school."

Higa, a 1949 alumnus, will be honored this evening at a private event launching the campaign. Donors who give \$1,000 will earn dedication rights for a seat in the school's auditorium, but all gifts are welcome.

"We are looking for the public as well as the alumni of McKinley High School to help us reach this ambitious goal," said Huy Vo, a 2001 graduate and member of the foundation's board. "Any amount, small or large, we won't turn away, because we need all the help we can get."



The foundation has grown dramatically since it handed out its first few scholarships in 1990. This year it gave scholarships to 57 members of the graduating class, ranging from \$1,000 to \$4,000 for a total of \$73,000. Over the years, it has awarded more than \$1 million in scholarships to 713 students.

The oldest public high school on Oahu, McKinley has turned out a roster of notable graduates over the years, from Duke Kaha-na-moku to U.S. Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, and Carole Kai to Tammy Duckworth. Founded in 1865, the school was named after President William McKinley in 1907.

Many of its students are from immigrant families, with Chinese and Filipinos the largest ethnic groups today. More than 60 percent of its students qualify for subsidized lunch, a common measure of poverty.

"I and many of the people who are my vintage are mainly immigrant families, and going to college was a far-fetched dream," said Stan Seki, a 1957 graduate and former McKinley principal who helped start the foundation. "We felt that since McKinley continues to be a school with a lot of immigrants, now from China, Korea and Vietnam, it would be a good gift to have graduates give current students the chance to continue their education."

Vo, the youngest member of the foundation's board, was born in Hawaii in 1983 after his parents fled Vietnam as "boat people," landing in the Philippines and eventually making their way to Hawaii.

"My father was a food peddler," he said. "We grew up very poor."

Vo managed to land a scholarship from the University of Oregon and one from the McKinley Foundation that covered his tuition. He had to pay for everything else, including rent, food and other expenses, so he held down various jobs as a student.

"I had to do everything on my own," he said. "There were some periods where I didn't earn enough to pay for the electricity, so I would have an outage. ... Because I was on scholarship, I had to keep a 3.5 GPA. It was a very tough four years. Sometimes I did have to apply for food stamps. Sometimes I would eat at my friend's house for dinner."

"I really credit the foundation for helping me get to college to pursue that education that I needed in order to get a job," said Vo, a senior specialist in public relations at Hawaiian Airlines who was named Hawaii's Young PR Professional of the Year in 2011. "I'm doing everything I can to make the McKinley Million campaign a success."