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DAILY BRUIN



Student receives scholarship to provide health care to low-income communities

BY SAMEERA PANT

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Ahmad Elhajja, a second-year psychobiology student, won the Strauss Scholarship this past April for his organization, the International Collegiate Health Initiative.

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This post was updated May 9 at 5:32 p.m.

Ahmad Elhaija first developed a plan for a new nonprofit organization when he was 15 years old.

Five years later in April, Elhaija won a \$15,000 scholarship for establishing the International Collegiate Health Initiative.

Elhaija, the founder and chief executive officer of ICHI and a second-year psychobiology student, received the Strauss Foundation Scholarship, which provides funding for students to create and develop their own service projects. ICHI, founded in 2017, aims to provide low-income communities with access to health care services, Elhaija said.

Growing up in a low-income area of West Anaheim, Elhaija said he struggled to find sufficient treatment for his asthma and cyclic neutropenia, a rare blood disorder characterized by recurring low levels of white blood cells.

“I used to bounce around from clinic to clinic, hospital to hospital, to try to get my disorder treated,” Elhaija said. “When I was older, I had access to Kaiser Permanente and I feel that if I had one location where I could go to, I could trust, that would have helped me instead of having to go from place to place.”

Elhaija said he hopes ICHI will be able to help other low-income communities access the medical treatments they need.

ICHI aims to set up a community clinic in the cities of Maywood and Bell, both of which are adjacent to East Los Angeles, Elhaija said.

Elhaija said he chose Maywood for the clinic site because of its population density and high rate of uninsured and low-income individuals.

“It was a very religious community, (with) low rates of STDs, low rates of pregnancy,” Elhaija said. “Yet one of the clear problems was the lack of health care present and the willingness for the community to improve and have programs like ours within the city.”

ICHI plans to host the clinic once per month for now, alternating between the two locations, said Elhaija.

“If the cities liked what we were doing, they would provide us with further funding to expand the program,” Elhaija said.

ICHI is also partnering with the Social Enterprise Academy to create a paid mentorship program to give students access to mentorship, test preparation and internships at the clinic and different medical centers in Los Angeles. The Social Enterprise Academy is a program that allows UCLA students to help nonprofit organizations find ways to increase their earned income.

ICHI aims to further develop its mentorship program and community clinic and provide nutritional services to high-need populations. Funding from the Strauss scholarship will be used to further develop the community health clinic project, Elhaija said.

Diego Zavala, ICHI’s community programs office coordinator and second-year mathematics of computation student, said he joined ICHI because he also struggled with accessing adequate treatment for health issues as a child in Mexico, where he was born.

“I didn’t receive the best treatment in Mexico just because they don’t have the best technology there,” Zavala said. “When I came to the United States, I was able to get treatment just because of the health care (system here).”

Zavala said this experience made him want to help out families that don't receive or aren't aware of health care benefits.

Zavala said that the ICHI aims to host their first clinical fair in Maywood around October.

"It was in our sights to host it before we graduated, I just didn't think it would come so soon just because of funding," Zavala said. "It's like the most rewarding experience from being in ICHI."

Ashin Jose, ICHI's chief operations officer and a second-year financial actuarial mathematics student who has known Elhaija since high school, said he knew ICHI would be successful right from the beginning.

Jose added Elhaija had a strong passion for helping the underserved during high school as well.

"He developed programs that provided assistance to underserved communities," Jose said. "For example, he started this organization called the SAT ACT club to provide practice exams and study materials for underserved students within our school community."

Jose said Elhaija's determination and charisma is what makes him a skilled leader.

"He has the capacity to share his passion with others, which is a crucial skill you need as a leader (in order) to inspire others." Jose said.

Elhaija said he hopes to expand the ICHI to other countries.

"The whole idea is we create a system that can be replicated at any college anywhere around the world. ... We could have this potentially at places in Syria, in Palestine, in places of high need all across the world." Elhaija said.



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