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First-Gen San Gabriel High Senior Won 11 College Scholarships: He's Sharing his Story to Help Others

April 25, 2019, San Gabriel, CA — San Gabriel High senior and first generation Vietnamese-American, Kenny Lam, applied to 18 colleges and won 11 scholarships, including to Yale, Princeton and Brown University. Though Kenny prefers not to talk about himself, he agreed to a conversation to help other first-gen students learn from his journey.

Kenny says it wasn't until he was in high school that he realized his parents "have sacrificed so much for me and my sister." His mother and father were each part of families with 13 children and both had to stop their education early to help provide for their families during the war. After they married, his parents emigrated from South Vietnam in the late 1980's to build a better life in Rosemead, CA. They both work long hours, as they have nearly their entire lives. One of Kenny's goals in going to college is to be able to eventually repay his parents for all they have done for him.

Kenny says, unlike other students, his parents did not pressure him to excel but just wanted him "to like school and enjoy life." All of his goal-directed behavior was self-generated "so I could learn what I really cared about." He urges students not to begin thinking about college until their junior year in order to first learn what "what really engages you, what you are passionate about." Then "when it is time to think about college, you know what you are genuinely interested in."

Last year's SGHS Valedictorian and editor of the school newspaper, the *Matador*, Carlos Carillo, mentored Kenny on the whole college application process because, as Kenny says, "I had no clue." Kenny researched everything about it since neither of his parents went college. He says that thorough research into the process is the second step (after learning what you love) for any first generation student wanting to go to college. "It is complex so you want to know all about the application process before you decide where to apply."

On the school track team and active in Vote at 16 SGV, Kenny's real love is math and physics. His old-soul philosophy is "get out of my comfort zone for personal growth," and it led him to apply for 2018-2019 co-editor-in-chief of the *Matador* so "I could break out of my shell, learn more compassion and gain understanding of my peers."

Kenny is sitting in the office of Ms. Debbie Stone, SGHS Principal, a Latina and a first generation college graduate herself. Kenny returned recently from the East Coast where he visited Yale, Princeton and Brown because he really wants to go out of state, as he says, "to experience something new and not live in California forever." He is wearing a Princeton sweatshirt but says he is still weighing all the options. Kenny says, "Most important to me is the financial aid package. Then I ask 'how will I fit in?' Then I look for where I can do the best interdisciplinary work in math and physics." His mother had wanted him to stay close to home, but she has evolved and is now okay with his leaving for the East Coast.

In addition to Yale, Princeton and Brown, Kenny was offered scholarships to UC Davis, UCLA, UC San Diego, UC Berkeley, Harvey Mudd, Cal State LA, Cal State San Diego, Cal State Pomona, Cal State San Luis Obispo. Duke, Harvard and Pomona College said no. He is wait-listed for his first-choice, M.I.T., Vanderbilt and Washington University in St. Louis. We think that Princeton sweatshirt he's wearing may be a telling sign about where he will decide to go to school in the fall of 2019. Wherever he chooses, we know Kenny Lam will blaze a bright trail.

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SGHS senior and first generation Vietnamese-American, Kenny Lam, won 11 college scholarships. He talks about his journey to help the first-gen students.

