

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 24, 2026 **CONTACT:** Nancy Yeang **PHONE:** (909) 204-6012

Lynwood Unified High School Graduate Earns Prestigious Full-Ride Scholarship to USC

LYNWOOD, CA – Marco Antonio Firebaugh High School Class of 2026 graduate Valerie Gutierrez has been selected as one of only five Southern California recipients of the SoLa Scholarship, earning a full ride to the University of Southern California (USC) this fall.

Offered by the SoLa Foundation, the scholarship provides financial assistance, professional development opportunities and a supportive network for first-generation college students and South Los Angeles residents. The scholarship will enable Gutierrez, the first in her family to attend a four-year university, to pursue her dream of studying biomedical engineering, opening the door to a future dedicated to improving healthcare accessibility.

At Firebaugh High, Gutierrez distinguished herself as a scholar, leader and advocate for her peers, which made her stand out amongst the 405 applicants this year. She served as varsity tennis captain, president of both Project Impact and the National Honor Society and co-founder of Cheerful Joys, a student organization that brings together general and special education students through school spirit activities, cheer and pep rallies.

"Valerie exemplifies the determination, leadership and commitment to service that we strive to cultivate in all Lynwood Unified students," Superintendent Patrick Gittisriboongul, Ed.D., said. "Her accomplishments reflect years of hard work, and we are incredibly proud to see her earn this remarkable opportunity. We know she will continue to make a meaningful impact in college and beyond."

Gutierrez was also offered a scholarship to attend the University of California, Berkeley, but ultimately chose USC, a decision driven by both personal and academic aspirations. After visiting USC with her family years ago, Gutierrez knew it was where she wanted to continue her education.

"Being accepted to USC was one of the happiest moments of my life," Gutierrez said. "When I received the SoLA Scholarship, I was so excited because it meant I could attend my dream school without placing a financial burden on my family."

Her passion for biomedical engineering stems from personal experiences growing up in an underserved community and witnessing healthcare challenges firsthand, including her father's medical journey. After seeing him undergo multiple surgeries and managing the high cost of

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prosthetic devices, Gutierrez said she hopes to develop innovative technologies that make medical care more affordable and accessible for families facing similar circumstances.

"I want to help people," Gutierrez said. "I want to be part of creating solutions that improve lives and make healthcare more accessible for everyone."

Gutierrez credits much of her success to the support she received from educators and mentors at Firebaugh High. Her former International Baccalaureate teacher Manuel Duenes encouraged her to pursue new opportunities and wrote recommendation letters on her behalf. Gutierrez also credits Jessica Ramirez from Firebaugh High's College and Career Center for being a source of inspiration, support and guidance throughout her senior year.

Gutierrez said Engineering and Manufacturing career technical education pathway teacher John Ude also played an important role in her academic development, while College Access counselor Monica Garcia provided guidance throughout the college and scholarship application process, helping her prepare for scholarship interviews.

Gutierrez also earned a \$20,000 Greenhouse Scholars Scholarship, becoming one of the first graduates from the City of Lynwood to receive the award. In addition to financial support distributed over four years of college, recipients are provided resources such as one-on-one mentorship and internship opportunities through its Whole Person College Success program.

As she prepares to begin her next chapter, Gutierrez hopes her story will inspire younger Lynwood Unified students to pursue ambitious goals and take advantage of the support systems available to them.

"I want students to know that they shouldn't be afraid to ask for help and lean on the people around them," Gutierrez said. "There are so many people who want to see you succeed. Work hard, take advantage of opportunities and believe that your goals are possible."

Gutierrez also hopes to be a mentor to the next generation of Firebaugh High students and showcase the possible achievements through perseverance, dedication and community support.

"We have so much talent in Lynwood," Gutierrez said. "I want to help put Lynwood on the map and show students that they can achieve incredible things."

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

LUSD_SOLA_1: Marco Antonio Firebaugh High School Class of 2026 graduate Valerie Gutierrez has been selected as a recipient of the SoLa Scholarship, earning a full ride to the University of Southern California (USC) this fall.

LUSD_SOLA_2: Gutierrez, a Firebaugh High Class of 2026 graduate, served as varsity tennis captain, president of Project Impact and the National Honor Society and co-founder of Cheerful Joys.

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