

Alex Smith's scholarships offer hope

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

People with endless money can spend it any way they wish. We get the feeling, though, that despite his football millions, Alex Smith doesn't have help to tend to his every need.

The Paris Hilton model just doesn't fit a 23-year-old quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers who approached San Diego State University about sponsoring college scholarships for students formerly in foster care. They don't have the money and the support group - family, school friends - that most kids come by naturally. They could use a break. And though they're few in number, the prospect that college can be an option could raise those numbers significantly.

Kids who have been in foster care seldom maintain the ambition and grades to pursue higher education. They are held back a grade, absent, truant or disciplined more often than the general school population. "Emancipated" from the foster care system at 18 - ready or not - they are more likely than the average kid to become homeless, jobless, drug-addicted or incarcerated.

After multiple placements in foster homes, many have felt on their own well before they turn 18. They often feel alienated, too.

Whether Alex Smith knew the statistics when he proposed the scholarships to SDSU, he certainly felt the need after visiting San Diego County's San Pasqual Academy, whose students come from foster care and mostly move on to college.

SDSU, of course, is cooperating. The contributions of the university and the Alex Smith Foundation will cover five years of educational and living expenses for 10 young adults formerly in foster care. That number could rise to 50 scholarships a year.

Smith isn't investing just millions. He's investing in young graduates of the school of hard knocks who face more than the usual barriers to an opportunity so many of us consider a birthright.

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