Laurel Towers is a former elementary school teacher and school administrator who is now a doctoral candidate in learning and mind sciences. She is a researcher in the School of Education’s CARE Lab, which conducts research to improve the educational experiences of learners with autism by investigating the relationship between students and their classroom environment.

“I decided to pursue a PhD because I wanted to better understand the process of how children interact with teachers in the classroom, how these interactions impact learning opportunities, and how individual student differences, such as experiences of trauma and neurodiversity, interact with the learning process,” she said.

Laurel is currently researching professional development for general education elementary teachers to help them effectively notice and support students’ emotional regulation—work that is directly funded by her scholarship award, including future plans to coach eight teachers on students’ emotional regulation.
Growing up as a Yemeni-American student, Laila Alhussani didn’t have Muslim or Arab teachers in her school, which left her feeling isolated and displaced. Additionally, she suffered from anxiety, and her school lacked resources to support students' mental health. In order to fill these gaps for future students, she decided to become an elementary teacher and bring her full lived experience to her future classroom.

“One of my focuses as an educator is not only valuing diversity, but celebrating it,” she said. “For me, culture is a vital aspect of life, and I enjoy learning about other cultures and how to be respectful of these cultures.”

Because of her Annual Fund scholarship, Laila’ pursuit of her education isn’t a financial burden on her family, including her mother and brother who has a disability. More than anything, she says, she dreams of creating an elementary classroom environment where she can center diversity in all its forms, including neurodiversity.
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On the cover: Claudia Escobar, PhD ’20, received an Annual Fund PhD Scholarship in 2019, and is now the Associate Director of Learning and Research for the School of Education’s Wheelhouse Center. Dr. Escobar’s PhD emphasis was in school organization and education policy, and during her program she was a graduate student researcher with the California Education Lab and UC Davis Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.