

A close-up photograph of a black graduation cap with a gold tassel. The tassel has a black ball at the top and a gold ring with a '25 years' charm. The cap is resting on a light-colored wooden surface.

25 years

**CGA EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION SUPPORTS FOOD INDUSTRY  
EMPLOYEES' COLLEGE SUCCESS FOR 25 YEARS.**



# PAYING IT BACK, PAYING IT FORWARD

## BY CASSANDRA PYE

Twenty years ago, Monet Leyva accepted a temporary data entry position in Unified Grocers' customer satisfaction division. In the five years that ensued, she transitioned into a permanent call center associate role, completed high school, married and had a child.

Monet was promoted to supervisor and remained in the division for 15 years before shifting to a new role in consumer analytics – where she's part of a team which makes recommendations to Unified's customers on the profitability of existing and new products, based on consumer data.

As her daughter grew older, Monet took courses here and there in junior college, but knew she needed to do more. "I knew I would be in a position for more opportunities with a college education. It was a personal goal of mine to complete college."

Monet returned to school in 2014, choosing a weekend program for working adults and electing English as her major. She attended class one weekend each month, meeting for 10 hours on Saturdays and nine hours on Sundays. She took advantage of Unified's tuition reimbursement program and student loans, but her program was private, not public, and therefore more expensive.

"I applied online to several programs for supplemental funding and was really surprised when my application to the CGA Educational Foundation was accepted – I was honored and grateful," she says.

"It was also really helpful to get the award," she adds. "Getting those funds – \$800 total – allowed me to pay my tuition balance and purchase books."

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Foundation President Ron Fong suggests Monet's story is a classic one and may be a sign of things to come. In a typical year, according to Fong, CGAEF provides roughly \$150,000 in tuition reimbursement awards. This year, just prior to the end of Q1/2017, more than \$35,000 in requests have already been met.

"Something's happening," says Fong, who also serves as CGA President and CEO, "There's been a huge uptick in requests. It took us six months to distribute this level of funding last year. Our industry's employees see a degree as an avenue to promotion and I believe our members are doing more to encourage them."

And that's exactly what the CGAEF founders had hoped for. Lynda Trelut, then CGA Board Chair, recalls that in 1992 this first-of-its-kind effort for the grocery industry was aimed initially at helping grocers take seminars to remain current on business practices.

"There were no industry scholarship programs to speak of," says CGA's first female Chair. "The fact that it's evolved the way it has – and is much more solvent – is the dream we always had: helping young people stay in the business. I love how it has evolved."

The Foundation's mission was to establish scholarships, tuition reimbursement and career development programs for food industry employees who wanted to attend college and build their careers. Further, the founders hoped to sponsor meetings, seminars and workshops that would keep members informed on trends and issues affecting the industry.

Trelut expresses great satisfaction with the fact that CGA members seem to be more actively promoting the scholarship and tuition reimbursement programs to their employees and believes that may be the reason for the uptick, Fong describes.

"Grocers are running their businesses, and have so many things to think about so, in the early days, we didn't always get the word out," Trelut shares.

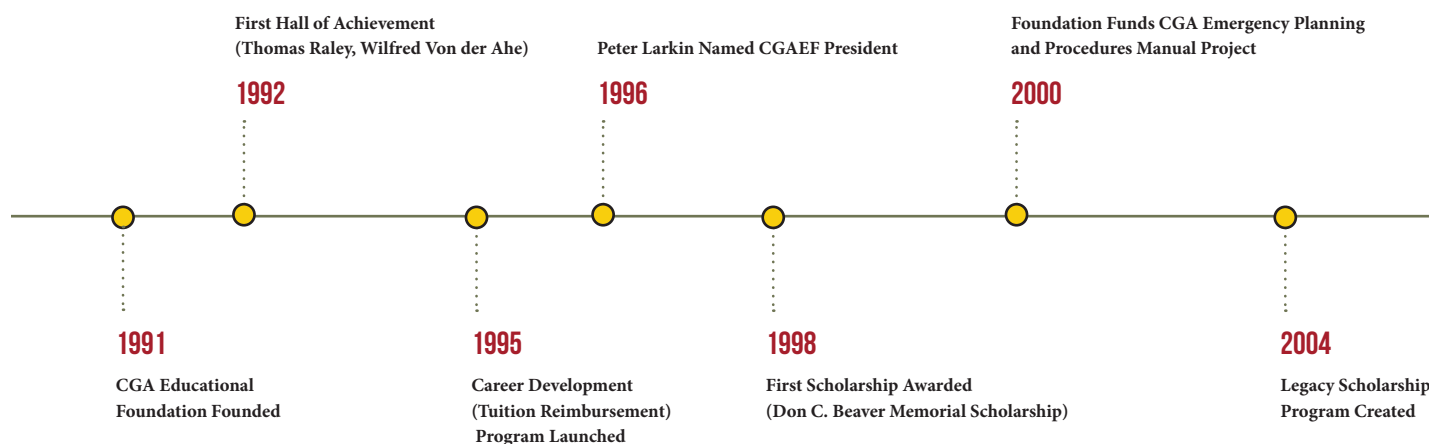
"I'm glad it's being publicized and utilized. We're keeping good people in the business and keeping them motivated."

Shiloh London, hired in 2012 as the Foundation's first full-time Executive Director, says several measures have been executed over the years to raise awareness of the scholarship opportunities – including the launch of a CGAEF stand-alone website and a recruitment tactic which proved successful in today's high-tech environment.

The Foundation directed employees to text "tuition" to the number "313131" to reach the program directly. With that text, employees receive a text with instructions for how to apply.

"This completely changed the game," claims London. "Everyone has a cell phone with them in the break room – where our posters are – or when they're talking with their HR director, so it was the appropriate method to drive awareness." Since instituting the program, the office has received over 1,500 texts.

## CGA EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION TIMELINE



**“THE FOUNDATION’S MISSION WAS TO ESTABLISH SCHOLARSHIPS, TUITION REIMBURSEMENT AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS FOR FOOD INDUSTRY EMPLOYEES WHO WANTED TO ATTEND COLLEGE AND BUILD THEIR CAREERS.”**



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And the Foundation tries to keep things simple: a single online application puts a prospective awardee in the pool for all available scholarships.

“Giving away free money is not as easy as you may think,” says London. “But we try to make the process easy by having a simplified online scholarship application.”

The CGAEF scholarships are provided to employees and, primarily, their dependents. The tuition reimbursement program is offered only to employees. A typical tuition reimbursement award is \$200 per class,

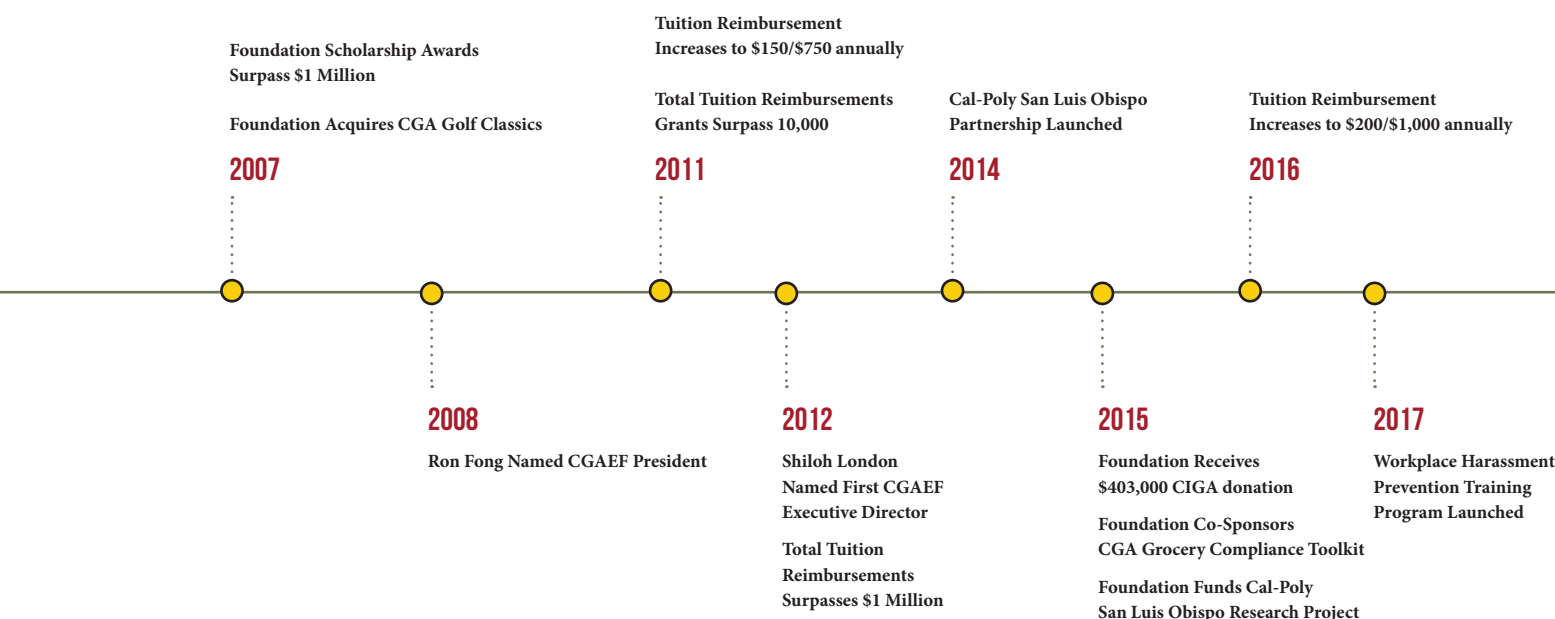
up to \$1,000 per year. Scholarships range from \$1,000 to \$5,000. London cites significant growth on the tuition reimbursement side. The Foundation is on track to reach a record \$200,000 in tuition reimbursement grants in this 25th year of operation.

Monet Leyva took advantage of the \$200 tuition reimbursement award for four of her classes. And she sees a direct correlation between the support she received from CGAEF and her prospects down the road.

“When I applied for this new position, I was told that my experience was helpful but the fact that I said I would complete my bachelors this year really, really helped,” she beams. Leyva was also selected to attend the USC Food Management program and says she really enjoyed the marketing courses the most. Next steps? She’s decided to seek her masters in business or marketing.

Fong applauds Monet’s efforts and so many like her.

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"These are the kinds of stories which are told throughout the industry," he asserts. "With the support of a very strong and engaged Foundation Board of Trustees, Shiloh and her team continue to expand the number of educational opportunities for our members and their employees."

"This effort is having a profound impact on our industry," Fong continues. "We are leveraging our industry's resources to help our members to attract, retain and promote talent truly from within. This is exactly what the founders envisioned when they disbursed that single \$2,000 scholarship in 1992."

Fong says he's proud of the continued growth in utilization, brought on by increased awareness on the part of CGA members.

CGA Chairman and Pavilions Senior Vice President Jim Wallace says his story is much like Monet's.

"When you first start in the industry – in high school or with a little college – money is pretty good and you can live on it," Wallace says. "But, when our son was born, I realized I needed a formal education, both to advance my knowledge base and to grow my leadership skills."

The Albertsons executive attended school at night, first a junior college and then obtained his bachelors at the University of the Redlands. "It took seven years to get there and I went the non-traditional route, but I ended up doing it because I think education is so important in our industry."

Wallace's two children also received CGAEF scholarships as undergraduates, something he calls "a wonderful gift" for employees and their dependents. "If we can help our employees – all the better," he adds.

Former CGA and CGAEF President Peter Larkin says the Foundation is now a model for the food industry nationally.

"Most importantly, it appears that a large number of scholarship and tuition reimbursement recipients are remaining within our industry," he says. "And that's a good thing."

Fong agrees, adding, "We have an obligation to our members to have the leading philanthropic arm of our industry. We want to continue to grow as our industry grows and undergoes change. Taking some of the financial pressure away helps that employee base become stronger."

In looking back at the Foundation's tremendous growth, Larkin, who now directs the National Grocers Association says the Foundation really expanded due to two programs complement each other.

"The tuition reimbursement program represents a model of collaboration between two organizations – the Foundation and the Western Association of Food Chains (WAFC)," he recalls.

"WAFC had recently launched a retail management certificate program designed to provide opportunities for store level and office level supermarket employees," Larkin says.



*Wilfred Von der Ahe, The Vons Companies was one of the first inductees into the Foundation's Hall of Achievement.*

"The Foundation took advantage of that timing and decided to use its funds to help with tuition and books – to increase the number of industry employees who would participate."

The CGA Educational Foundation has, since its inception, granted over \$5 million in scholarships and an additional \$1.4 million in tuition reimbursement funds, exclusively for industry employees.

For Fong and his team, administering the Foundation's programs is more than just a job. "This is our responsibility," he says. "We wouldn't exist without our members – they support our events, programs and services. That's why we're here. That's why we have an obligation." ■



**"WE ARE LEVERAGING OUR INDUSTRY'S RESOURCES TO HELP OUR MEMBERS TO ATTRACT, RETAIN AND PROMOTE TALENT TRULY FROM WITHIN. THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT THE FOUNDERS ENVISIONED WHEN THEY DISBURSED THAT SINGLE \$2,000 SCHOLARSHIP IN 1992."**

**-RON FONG  
CGAEF PRESIDENT**