

California politicians such as Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky.

'82 Linda Bannister PhD, professor of English at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, was nominated for the Daum Professor of the Ballantine College of Liberal Arts, an annual award given to a senior member of the school's faculty.

• **Daniel D. Beintema** recently left his longtime position with the Chula Vista (Calif.) Nature Center to join the San Diego Foundation, a resource for information about charitable giving and community needs, where he has been appointed director of the San Diego regional disaster fund and director of development of the environmental endowment. • **Thomas Gaskill** has been named vice president and executive director of the Military Growth Task Force, a 13-county economic development group based in Kinston, N.C., that will help the North Carolina Eastern Region manage growth associated with an impending military buildup in the region. • **Steven Johnston** recently published his second book, *The Truth About Patriotism*. He is an associate professor in the Department of Government and International Affairs at the University of South Florida. • **Jeffrey**

Mark Luscher was named a winner of the 2008 Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching Program. He is a mathematics teacher at Santiago High School in the Corona-Norco (Calif.) Unified School District. • **Diane Schrader** has joined the USC Policy Development and Communications department as communications manager where she will provide communications support for both the USC Health Sciences and University Park programs. • **Tracy Taft** of La Canada Flintridge, Calif., was recently promoted to director of operations of AH California LLC, a parent company of the national sandwich franchise AHC Zoro's Subs. He was formerly the regional account executive for Coca Cola Fountain Group/Round Table Pizza.

'83 Edward Cibener is principal of the Progressive Achievement Center in Carson, Calif., a school that serves students with disabilities in the greater Los Angeles area.

He lives in Stevenson Ranch, Calif.

• **Sean Leonard**, founder of S. L. Leonard & Associates, received his second Presidential Honoree Award from the American Institute of Architects for 2007 Building Team of the Year. He was the executive project manager for The California Edgdownment headquarters building in Los Angeles. He lives in Camarillo, Calif.

• **Jeff Simmons** is a 25-year veteran of the San Joaquin County (Calif.) Sheriff's

ALUMNI PROFILE

Quick Stepper

Debra "Dede" Okonkwo '08 pulled on a pair of sweats and pirouetted, rumbaed and tapped into summer.

Inside her South L.A. dance studio, the image of her petite frame in a cotton candy-pink sweat suit bounced off the wall-to-wall mirror panels in the room. It would seem that even multiple Dedes couldn't accomplish what this one has in her 18 years.

At 16, Okonkwo opened Dede Dance Studio near her family's home. The nonprofit studio draws disadvantaged children and teens from the community who learn everything from tap and ballet to flamenco and African dance. Some of her students come from families who are homeless.

Fundraisers allow her to provide some parents of her dancers gas money to bring their children to the studio. At times, Okonkwo picks up her students and brings them home.

"I think each child should be given an opportunity to have a hobby they love," Okonkwo says. "So I've decided to devote my time to giving back in this way."

Okonkwo, a first-generation U.S.-born child from Nigerian parents, was the youngest among some 4,800 students receiving their bachelor's degrees in USC's graduating class of 2008, earning her diploma in English from USC College at 17.

Her mother, Kendra, says her wunderkind daughter has an old soul. That may be true. Now 18, Okonkwo is already thinking about a legacy. And it's all about leaving the world a better place than she found it.

"When I'm gone from this Earth someday I want my legacy to be about serving underprivileged youths," she says. Never hollow words for this lifelong hooper.

This summer, there were no relaxing afternoons at the beach for the new graduate. After organizing her students for summer dance camp, she taught dance each day while attending classes toward a master's degree at the USC Rossier School of Education. She also worked at a dress shop to cover the cost of costumes and other expenses for her dancers.

So what's the rush? Okonkwo says she has much to accomplish before someday becoming the U.S. secretary of education. She takes her mentor role to her 50 or so dance students seriously.

Okonkwo has become a role model even for some of her students' mothers.

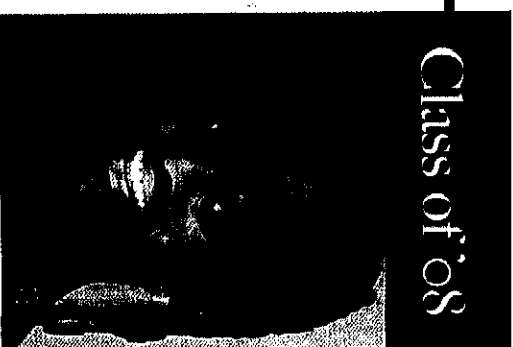
Evelia Aguirre's 5-year-old daughter Maya Montelongo takes dance lessons from Okonkwo. But it's Aguirre who is so inspired by Okonkwo that she wants to return to college. She's elated to regularly bring Maya to USC, where Okonkwo's dance students often perform during festivals and events. Before performances, Okonkwo gives her dancers a tour of the campus and talks to them about college.

As a child, Okonkwo wanted to be a Trojan. "Every Sunday after church we would pass by USC and I would say, 'I'm going to that school,'" Okonkwo recalls. "My friends would tell me: 'You can't go to USC. It's too expensive and too prestigious.'"

But they didn't know Okonkwo, an intellectual prodigy who began taking courses at a community college at 10. By 14, she graduated from high school with an A.A. degree then went to Spain to study the language. She enrolled in nearby USC at 15.

"Having positive thoughts and telling yourself 'I'm going to do this and I'm going to accomplish that' really does work," she says. "And it helps having parents who believe in you."

—Pamela J. Johnson



Class of '08