



## Gretta Kirkby of Chico State and Mike Asante of Academy of Art University Named CalHOPE Courage Award Winners for December

**SACRAMENTO – DECEMBER 13, 2022** — Two California college student-athletes – **Gretta Kirkby**, a senior on the Chico State women’s volleyball team, and **Mike Asante**, a senior on the men’s basketball squad at Academy of Art University – have been selected as the December recipients of the **CalHOPE Courage Award**. The two inspirational student-athletes will be honored during an on-court ceremony at the Golden 1 Center during the Sacramento Kings versus Atlanta Hawks NBA game on January 4, 2023.

The monthly CalHOPE Courage Award honors student-athletes at California colleges and universities who have overcome the stress, anxiety, and mental trauma associated with personal hardships and adversity. Here’s a closer look at the December CalHOPE Courage Award honorees:

### **Gretta Kirkby**

The senior from Kensington, California has faced many obstacles during her four years at Chico State. Like many freshmen, she was overwhelmed with the stress and responsibility of being away from home and the added pressure of being a collegiate student-athlete. Although she had previously struggled with anxiety, it never reached a point where it dramatically impacted her life.

After spending nearly two years at home during the pandemic, she experienced intense anxiety returning to campus and re-integrating herself into the college environment. Additionally, several injuries that kept her off the court along with the tragic death of former Chico State women’s volleyball coach Cody Hein (who had recruited Gretta), contributed to an onslaught of issues with anxiety.

For the first time, anxiety was paralyzing her and affecting her daily life. Suddenly, getting out of the house and going to volleyball practice felt impossible, and it wasn't something that could just change overnight. However, with a caring support system of teammates, friends, and family, she was able to seek counseling and get the additional help she needed to persevere and get back on track.

“Dealing with my anxiety these last two and a half years, after a rough first two years of college, has been the most challenging and trying experience of my life,” explained Gretta. “I have learned so much about myself throughout my college years. I understand the magnitude of the impact that mental health has on people’s lives, and the importance of getting help. Every day, healing and practicing self-love are needed to keep a sound mindset. I have so much more compassion for people who suffer with anxiety and depression, and I want to help encourage and motivate anyone, especially student-athletes, to speak up and get help.”

In her four seasons, Gretta proved to be one of Chico State's most versatile players, logging time as both an outside hitter and defensive specialist, while also being an effective server. She racked up nearly 100 kills, 151 digs, and 21 service aces in her Wildcats career, and contributed to the team's success in ways that didn't necessarily show up on the stat sheet.

Gretta has been successful in the classroom as well, earning seven California Collegiate Academic Association (CCAA) All-Academic honors, three Division Two Athletic Directors Association Academic Achievement Awards, and the 2020 CCAA Volleyball Championship Scholar Award. Following graduation this month, with a Bachelor of Science in Exercise Physiology and two minors in Nutrition and Sports Performance, she plans to shadow health care workers in a variety of fields to help chart her future.

### **Mike Asante**

Following a successful high school basketball career, the 6-foot-7-inch native of Toronto was shocked to not earn a Division 1 college offer. Undeterred, he spent two years at two junior colleges in Texas - Kilgore College and Howard College - to improve his game. Despite having his sophomore season shortened to just 11 games due to injury, Mike impressed the coaches at the Academy of Art University and transferred to the Division 2 school for the 2020-21 season.

Just minutes into his first game with ART U, on January 22, 2021, he slipped on a fastbreak layup, tearing the patella tendon in his left knee on the takeoff for a dunk and landing awkwardly, breaking his left arm. In fact, according to his doctors, the injury was millimeters away from an artery that could have caused him to lose complete functionality in his arm. In the blink of an eye, Mike went from living his dream to a daunting two months of bedrest and a grueling 11-month recovery process to heal both his knee and arm, with no guarantee that he would be able to return to form and the court.

"My year of rehabilitation was truly a journey of self-reflection that tested my faith, self-confidence, and love of basketball," admitted Mike. "Learning to walk again and develop functionality in my arm was the lowest point of my life and the first time I questioned my basketball future. Now, every time I get on the court, I consider it a gift and am driven to perform my best."

Remarkably, Mike was back on the court on December 11, 2021, and quickly regained his form. He earned a rotation spot, averaging 10.8 points and 6.6 rebounds in 25 minutes a game. In March 2022, he helped lead ART U to its first PacWest Conference tournament title, a 20-12 record, and a berth in the NCAA Division 2 Tournament. In the conference tourney, Mike was at his best, averaging 13 points and 10 rebounds in the three games to earn tournament MVP honors.

For the current 2022-23 season, Mike has helped lead ART U to a 5-3 record, averaging 9.7 points and 5.5 rebounds. Set to graduate with his Bachelor of Arts in Communications and Media Technologies this December, Mike will begin a master's program next semester. He hopes to pursue a professional basketball career after college or work in the field of social media.

Said Dr. Jim Kooler, Special Consultant for DHCS: "CalHOPE is honored to recognize student-athletes throughout the state who, despite setbacks, have overcome life's challenges to continue to perform their best as both scholars and athletes. CalHOPE's purpose is to build community resiliency and help people recover through free outreach, crisis counseling, and support services. We hope that by sharing these stories that student-athletes have experienced, we will all be inspired."

The monthly CalHOPE Courage Award is presented by the College Sports Communicators (formerly CoSIDA), in association with The Associated Press; [CalHOPE](#), a crisis counseling and support resource for communities impacted by public health emergencies, operated by the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS); and the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Mental Well-Being.

At the end of the school year, two of the student-athletes recognized during this year will be selected as annual **CalHOPE Courage Award** winners, and a \$5,000 donation will be made in each of their names toward mental health services at their schools. Previous honorees this fall have included: **Cameron Brink** (basketball, Stanford); **Garrett Jensen** (baseball, San Francisco State); **Lexi Zandonella-Arasa** (soccer, Sonoma State); **Anysa and Amaya Gray** (soccer, U.C. Berkeley); **Sam Nimmo** (lacrosse, Whittier College); and **Ian Gilligan** (golf, Long Beach State).

Stories about all honorees are available at [CalHOPECourageAward.com](#) and via social media on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) at [@CalHOPE\\_Courage](#).

Sports information directors at all colleges and universities in California are encouraged to nominate deserving intercollegiate student-athletes through April 2023 at [CalHOPECourageAward.com](#). The honorees will be selected by a panel of writers, editors, and sports information directors from College Sports Communicators and The Associated Press. Fans can learn more and engage on social media on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) at [@CalHOPE\\_Courage](#).

#### **ABOUT CalHOPE**

CalHOPE is a multi-level campaign run by DHCS to connect people with vital mental health and wellness resources and information to help them find their way during difficult times. CalHOPE offers critical behavioral health crisis counseling programs and uses a public health approach that is focused on strength-based strategies of building resiliency and connecting people to the supports they need. CalHOPE partners with the California Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Mental Well-Being to promote the CalHOPE Courage Award. CalHOPE resources may be accessed by calling the program's warm line at (833) 317-HOPE (4673) or by visiting [www.calhope.org](#).

**College Sports Communicators:** College Sports Communicators is a 3,600-plus member national organization, comprised of the athletic communications, media relations, digital, and creative professionals throughout all levels of collegiate athletics in the United States and Canada. Founded in 1957, the organization is the second oldest management association in intercollegiate athletics. The organization's signature program is the Academic All-America program, honoring thousands of outstanding scholar-athletes annually. To learn more, visit [collegesportscommunicators.com](#).

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