



## **Lesown Hallums, Jr. of the University of the Pacific and Cameron Nelsen of Antelope Valley College Recognized with CalHOPE Courage Award**

SACRAMENTO – FEBRUARY 6, 2024 — Two California college student-athletes, **Lesown Hallums, Jr.**, a guard for the **University of the Pacific** basketball team, and **Cameron “Cami” Nelsen**, a freshman outside hitter on the **Antelope Valley College** volleyball team, have been selected as the January recipients of the **CalHOPE Courage Award**.

The award, presented monthly since February 2022, honors student-athletes at California colleges and universities who have overcome the stress, anxiety, and mental trauma associated with personal hardships and adversity. In addition to being recognized by CalHOPE, \$1,000 will be donated in each of their names to support on-campus mental health services at their schools.

Here’s a closer look at the inspiring personal stories of these two student-athletes recognized with the CalHOPE Courage Award.

### **Lesown Hallums, Jr., Senior, University of the Pacific, Basketball**

As far back as Lesown Hallums, Jr. can recall, his life has been shaped by two enduring forces: basketball and an unstable family. While basketball served as a source of joy and opportunity, the challenges with his family made forging ahead in life a formidable task.

Difficulties commenced with his parents' acrimonious divorce, subjecting him to family court battles and the distressing task of choosing between his parents. His mother, residing in Brooklyn's projects, struggled while his father remarried, bought a house, and gained custody of him, his two siblings, and two stepsiblings. Despite his desire to live with his mother, he prioritized staying with his siblings.

Entering high school, Lesown's basketball talent enabled him to attend Brooklyn Prospect Charter School, offering a respite from family challenges. However, back home, his mother grappled with caring for his grandmother, who battled schizophrenia. Her worsening condition, coupled with her refusal of medication, led to violent episodes, prompting multiple police interventions. Returning home during summers, Lesown witnessed the toll on his mother, and the stress began affecting him as well. Eventually, his mother's breakdown necessitated hospitalization, forcing his grandmother into a shelter in the Bronx.

To distance himself from the troubles back home, he attended Mendocino College in the Bay Valley Conference. As a freshman, he finished fourth in the league, scoring 21.2 points per game.

Following the cancellation of the 2020-21 season due to COVID-19, he returned to the Mendocino College Eagles and increased his scoring to 25.1 points per game while grabbing 10 rebounds per game. He transferred to South Carolina State last season, averaging 10.6 points and scoring more than 20 points three times. This season, he returned to California, enrolling at Pacific, and through the Tigers' first 21 games, Lesown has started 12, averaging 7.5 point per game with seven double-digit scoring performances, including 25 points in the conference opener against the University of San Francisco -- the most points scored by any Tigers player this year.

In the classroom, Lesown has a 3.83 GPA, the highest on the men's basketball team, while taking 17 credits. He has one more year of eligibility left and is on pace to graduate in spring 2025 with a degree in sociology.

“Living with someone who has a mental illness brings significant stress into the lives of those around them. There's no doubt it's taken a toll on my mental health and well-being,” Lesown said. “The past few years have been emotionally draining, but I owe my resilience to the unwavering support of friends, teammates, and my girlfriend, who comfort me during challenging times.”

### **Cameron “Cami” Nelsen, Freshman, Antelope Valley College, Volleyball**

Cami Nelsen's journey is one marked by resilience and triumph over formidable challenges. Diagnosed with Stage 2 chronic kidney disease at age 6, she struggled with increasing anxiety about her health, compounding existing mental health issues. Cami suffered from anemia during middle-school, forcing her to give up soccer and increasing her anxiety and depression, resulting in self-harm. Admitted to the intensive care unit for emergency blood transfusions in 8th grade, Cami's physical health improved, but her mental struggles continued.

Transitioning from soccer to volleyball offered a fresh start, and she committed to the new sport, aspiring to play at the college level. However, COVID-19 led to an unforeseen battle—a rapid onset of an eating disorder rooted in trauma, social media, and genetics. A diagnosis of Anorexia Nervosa led to a year of hospitalizations, often in isolation due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Motivated by her love for volleyball, Cami's recovery journey took a new turn post-treatment when she faced the challenge of a knee injury. During this time when she was unable to play volleyball, the native of Quartz Hills, California turned to advocacy. She founded "The RecoverED Project," a 501c3 nonprofit supporting those in eating disorder recovery. Concurrently, she participated in the "Dove Self-Esteem Project", contributing to a viral commercial about eating disorders that garnered more than 10 million views on Instagram and earned an Emmy award nomination. This visibility led to her speaking during a congressional briefing on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., with the Eating Disorders Coalition, advocating for mental health legislation.

By April 2023, Cami, cleared to return to volleyball, contacted Mark Cruz, Antelope Valley's volleyball coach, and tried out for the team. She earned a roster spot, realizing her lifelong goal of playing a college sport. In her freshman season, she appeared in 14 of the Marauders 20 games and ranked second on the team with 78 sets and a .250 hitting percentage, while her 104 digs ranked fourth.

"I've learned over the past year or so that I need to share my story and advocate for mental health because, one, it's healing for me and helps me turn my pain into purpose, and two, I've learned that healing loudly will prevent others from dying quietly," said Cami.

### **About the CalHOPE Courage Award**

The monthly CalHOPE Courage Award is presented by the College Sports Communicators (formerly CoSIDA), in association with The Associated Press; CalHOPE, DHCS' crisis counseling and support resource; and the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Mental Well-Being. This year's honorees include **Jennika Davis** (soccer, UC Irvine); **Jannah Loggins** (soccer, San Jose State); **Nik Trapani** (baseball, San Jose State); **Elizabeth Fox** (water polo, Delta College); **Megan Janikowski** (soccer, Cal Poly Humboldt); **Jamel Pink** (football, Reedley College); **Brett Johnson** (football, University of California, Berkeley); and **Gabbie Silva** (volleyball, California State University, Dominguez Hills).

"CalHOPE is honored to continue recognizing student-athletes statewide who have overcome their challenges to perform their best as both scholars and athletes," said **Autumn Boylan, Deputy Director of the Office of Strategic Partnerships for the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS)**, which oversees CalHOPE. "CalHOPE's purpose is to build community resilience and help people recover from disasters and public health emergencies through free outreach, crisis counseling, and support services. We hope that by sharing these stories of courage, all will be inspired."

At the end of the school year, two of the student-athletes will be selected as the CalHOPE Courage Award winners. The previous winners were: **2023 - Anysa and Amaya Gray** (soccer, U.C. Berkeley) and **Nigel Wilson** (basketball, Pasadena City College); and **2022 - Julia Schwayder** (lacrosse, Occidental College) and **Breyon Jackson** (basketball, San Francisco State).

Stories about all CalHOPE Courage Award honorees are available at **CalHOPECourageAward.org** and via social media at **@CalHOPE\_Courage**.

Sports information directors at all colleges and universities in California are encouraged to nominate deserving intercollegiate student-athletes through March 2024 at [CalHOPECourageAward.org](https://www.calhope.org). The honorees will be selected by a panel of writers, editors, The Associated Press, and the College Sports Communicators.

### **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 navigate during times of crisis. 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 support 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), accessing the [live chat](#) feature, or visiting [www.calhope.org](https://www.calhope.org).

**College Sports Communicators:** The 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](http://collegesportscommunicators.com).

**The Associated Press (AP):** The AP is the essential global news network, delivering fast, unbiased news from every corner of the world to all media platforms and formats. Founded in 1846, The AP is the most trusted source of independent news and information. On any given day, more than half the world's population sees news from The AP. For more information, visit [www.ap.org](http://www.ap.org).

###