

Empowering
Low-Income
Taxpayers to
Reach Higher

CSUN VITA CLINIC

2022 ANNUAL REPORT



BOOKSTEIN INSTITUTE

CSUN NAZARIAN

COLLEGE OF BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

A MESSAGE FROM CSUN PRESIDENT ERIKA D. BECK



President Erika D. Beck
California State University, Northridge

CSUN proudly serves as an intellectual and social resource to our communities, with a transformative impact on our region and the entire state of California. Few programs embody that purpose more clearly than CSUN VITA.

For more than 50 years, CSUN VITA — a service of the CSUN David Nazarian College of Business and Economics — has had a twofold mission: to equip students with the expertise and confidence needed to embark on their professional careers, and to use those skills to serve individuals and families who otherwise would not be able to afford help with preparing their taxes.

As our region and the world's population work to recover from a global pandemic that disproportionately affected low-income populations and put socioeconomic inequities into sharp focus, this program's work in assisting community members has never been more critical.

This year, the CSUN VITA Clinic's impact was stronger than ever. More than 200 student volunteers were trained to provide free tax preparation at multiple in-person sites, as well as through a secure virtual platform, resulting in low-income community members having access to VITA Clinic services seven days a week throughout the entire tax season.

I am incredibly proud of the dedication of the VITA team and the program's growth. Thanks to supplemental funding from the IRS, CSUN VITA continued its support of clinics at Cal State LA, Cal State Long Beach and Cal Poly Pomona, extending its reach across Los Angeles County. In addition, CSUN VITA has inspired more than 8,000 clinics around the country, helping families in all 50 states.

My gratitude goes to Nazarian College Dean Chandra Subramaniam and Bookstein Chair in Taxation and Director of the Bookstein Institute for Higher Education in Taxation Rafi Efrat for facilitating transformative experiences for our students and their continued leadership, especially throughout the challenges of the pandemic.

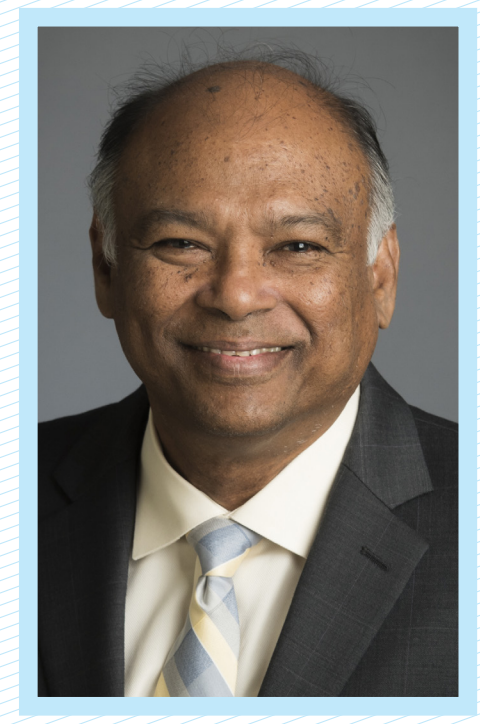
CSUN VITA is a brilliant example of how higher education and a university degree have the power to not only change individual lives, but to transform entire family trees and impact the world beyond our campus. I look forward to seeing our Matador students, faculty and community partners continue working to create a brighter and more equitable future through this vital service.

With Matador pride,

Erika D. Beck, Ph.D. President

President, California State University, Northridge

A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN



Dean Chandra Subramaniam,
California State University, Northridge

I am proud of the unwavering dedication the David Nazarian College of Business and Economics' CSUN Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Clinic has shown to our community and its low-income taxpayers during these unprecedented times.

The challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic tested us in ways we never imagined. The CSUN VITA Clinic was forced to stop providing face-to-face tax preparation services, but they did not relent and quickly transitioned to an IRS-approved virtual model to accommodate the many low-income taxpayers that needed their assistance. The clinic returned in full force this year, operating both in person and remotely, depending on the taxpayer's needs. This dual modality allowed student volunteers to provide low-income taxpayers with access to their services seven days per week throughout the entire tax season.

This year, 238 students volunteered more than 28,000 total hours to serve over 7,300 low-income taxpayers at eight locations in Los Angeles County. Even more impressive, the clinic helped taxpayers claim over \$8.8 million in tax refunds and more than \$2.6 million in earned income tax credits, and saved taxpayers almost \$1.2 million in tax preparation fees. This is an average savings of \$1,700 per taxpayer in the Valley. With such volume, the CSUN VITA Clinic is the largest provider of VITA services in the country.

I am grateful to our donors and supporters, whose gifts are vital to the success of the CSUN VITA Clinic. Through contributions from our generous donors, Harvey and Harriet Bookstein, and a multi-year visionary grant from Wells Fargo Bank — as well as gifts from CIT, City National Bank, and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power — the CSUN VITA Clinic has been able to continue to expand and provide greater education and assistance to its volunteers and taxpaying clients.

Finally, I want to congratulate Dr. Rafi Efrat and the entire VITA team! Your commitment to the service of our community is truly inspiring, and I look forward to supporting and witnessing the continued growth and expansion of this crucial initiative.

Sincerely,

Chandra Subramaniam, Ph.D.

Dean, David Nazarian College of Business and Economics

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



Rafi Efrat, Director, CSUN VITA Clinic

I am pleased to report that powered with over 230 student volunteers, the CSUN VITA Clinic has far exceeded our results from last year by over 18%. During the just concluded tax season, students at the clinic have offered in person and virtual tax preparation services to over 7,300 low-income taxpayers. This is more than 18 times as many taxpayers served compared to the tax season in 2015, when less than 370 taxpayers were served.

The impact we have made in the lives of the taxpayers we have served and the community they live in is impressive. For example, as a team we have:

- Saved local residents an estimated \$1.3 in tax preparation fees. This is money the taxpayers can use to divert to other basic necessities.
- Brought over \$8.8 million in federal and state refunds back into our community, thereby boosting our local economy.
- Helped workers claim more than 2.6 million in federal and state earned income tax credits, thereby empowering people to move out of poverty.

Most dramatically, the CSUN VITA Clinic was ranked as the top VITA site among over 690 sites in California. CSUN VITA Clinic served far more taxpayers than all 4-year universities in the state combined. And for the first time in our 51 years history, CSUN

VITA Clinic was ranked the top VITA program in the nation (6,600 VITA sites operated nationally this past tax season). From Jan. 23 through April 18, dedicated volunteers were available six days per week and up to 12 hours per day.

This year we re-launched the CSU5 Plus VITA Collaboration. This initiative fosters unique collaborative arrangement for the 5 CSU campuses in Los Angeles County along with several community colleges to cultivate student civic engagement, advance their clinical skills, while making a difference in the lives of countless individuals throughout Los Angeles County. A transformative two-year \$200,000 grant from Wells Fargo Bank has infused a critical source of support for the offering of the tax preparation and community outreach services year-round. It also enables us to make long term planning to further expand and enrich the clinic's operations. Finally, it infuses the CSUN VITA Clinic with resources needed to institutionalize the CSU5+ VITA initiative.

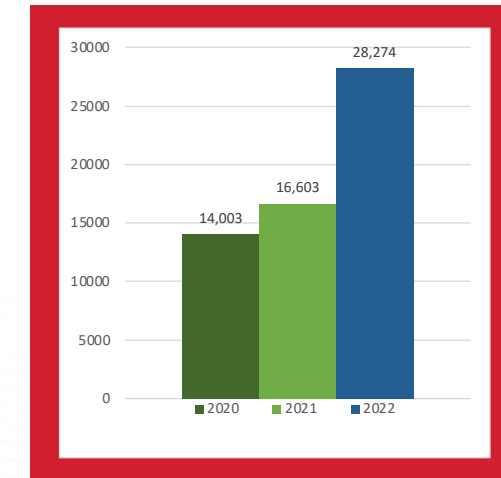
Financial help from the Department of Water and Power has enabled us to offer assistance to people who cannot get a social security number by furnishing them with an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN), which is a tax processing number the IRS issues. Also, with the help of City National Bank, the CSUN VITA Clinic was able to offer Spanish interpretation services at all of its seven sites.

Our success was made possible by the dedication, commitment and hard work of our student volunteers. Thanks to the endowment created by Harriet and Harvey Bookstein several years ago, we recognized the exceptional work of 5 volunteers with \$1,000 scholarships each.

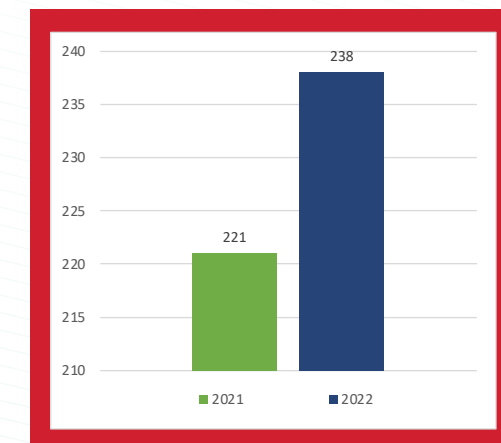
Rafi Efrat, J.S.D.

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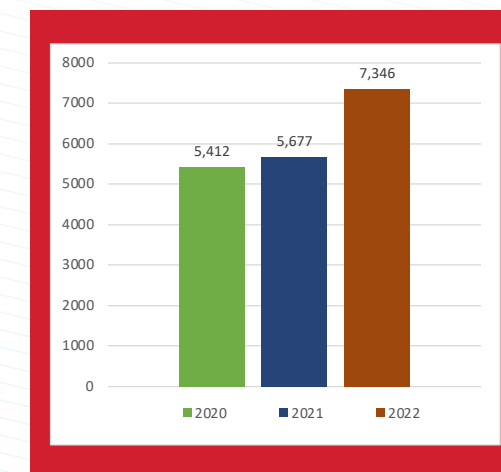
CSUN VITA CLINIC STATS



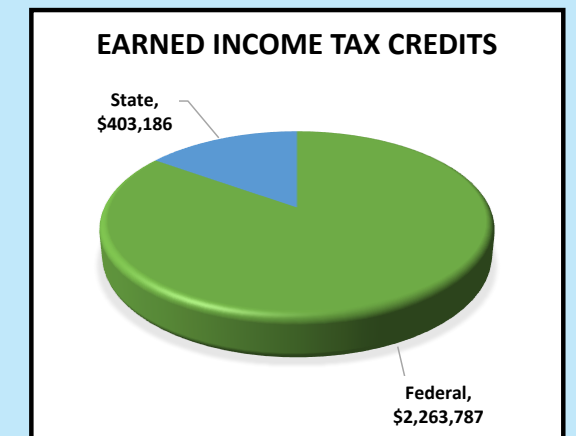
VOLUNTEER SERVICE HOURS RENDERED



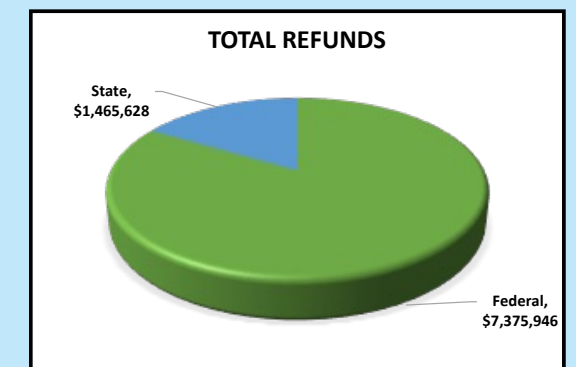
NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS



TAXPAYERS SERVED THROUGHOUT THE YEARS



2.6 MILLION IN EARNED INCOME TAX CREDITS



TOTAL REFUNDS \$8.8 MILLION

VITA

WELLS FARGO BANK'S TRANSFORMATIVE INVESTMENT IN THE CSU5+ VITA INITIATIVE

BY WYATT SAMUELSON



The intake table at the VITA clinic

Wells Fargo has awarded California State University, Northridge a two-year \$200,000 grant to help expand the university's income tax preparation assistance program for low-income families and individuals.

The funding will enable CSUN's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Clinic to operate year-round and also help the CSU5+ Initiative – comprised of other CSUs and community colleges -- develop and grow their VITA operations. Finally, the grant will support CSUN VITA Clinic's financial coaching services in the community.

"Well Fargo Bank's continued support of the CSUN VITA Clinic has been immensely critical for the clinic's growth for the past four years. With their steadfast generosity, we were able to expand the free tax preparation services and financial coaching offered to low-income tax payers," said accounting professor Rafi Efrat, director of the CSUN VITA Clinic and Bookstein Institute for Higher Education in Taxation.

"Wells Fargo is proud to support CSUN's VITA Clinic. We are pleased that through our donation we will be able to provide assistance to local residents with no-cost tax services and financial advice," said Jack Olree, Wells Fargo Vice President for the Southern California Social Impact group.

Earlier this year, more than 230 CSUN student volunteers completed an intensive training program on handling federal and state tax returns. With Wells Fargo's support, the CSUN VITA Clinic helped more than 6,700 taxpayers during this tax season, serving the most taxpayers of 6,600 VITA sites operated nationally in 2022.

The CSUN VITA Clinic also offers students an opportunity to gain knowledge and experience in their field of study.

Jose Oliva, operations supervisor, played an integral role during this tax season. He and his team directly trained volunteers, organized presentations and helped other CSUs and community colleges with the launch and operations of their VITA clinics. Oliva, now in his third year with the CSUN VITA Clinic, first started his journey as a tax preparer, then climbed his way to operations supervisor.

"As an accounting major, I first heard about the CSUN VITA Clinic through a fellow peer and I immediately fell in love with the program," said Oliva. "I developed a passion for the program and knew this is something that I wanted to learn and grow in."

"With the VITA Clinic operating six days per week during the tax season and serving over 6,700 taxpayers, recruiting dedicated student volunteers was especially important for a successful operation this year," said Oliva. "Wells Fargo Bank helped make the goal a reality."

ANNUAL REPORT

THE COORDINATORS AT THE CSUN VITA CLINIC

BY WYATT SAMUELSON

The role of a VITA Clinic coordinator is essential to the success of the overall VITA program. Though the role is multifaceted in nature, some of the day-to-day tasks include: oversight of the recruitment, education and training of volunteers; publicity; operations; data collection and quality control over CSUN's VITA sites.

First starting off as student assistants, Areli Araujo and Cynthia Montes have worked through every level of the VITA program as tax preparers, lead supervisors, operations managers and now, VITA Clinic coordinators.

As coordinators, the goal of their job is largely to ensure that clients are receiving the most professional and comprehensive free tax preparation services possible.

"VITA is home to me," said Araujo. "It's a service that helps thousands of people. Understanding taxes is not an easy task and it can be frustrating for a lot of taxpayers, and I want VITA to help alleviate that pressure for taxpayers." Managing seven in-person locations, five operations supervisors, 16 lead supervisors and two student assistants, the most important qualities of a coordinator are efficiency and adaptability.

Last year, as COVID-19 made it impossible for in-person appointments, digital zoom meetings and the "drop off method" (a service where clients drop off their tax documents to a physical site without contact with other people) helped fill that need for tax preparers.

Now, with in-person appointments available, one way the overall program has adapted is by offering all three methods of tax preparation to taxpayers. "We've transitioned to hybrid tax preparation," said Montes. "By learning from last year, we've implemented systems

that can help those less tech-savvy clients who need in-person, and those still at risk catching COVID with online and drop-off method tax preparation."

With this added efficiency, both Araujo and Montes hope the program can offer help to more than 6,500 taxpayers.

"The program is full of success stories," said Montes. "One that sticks out to me, is helping a client that was recommended by one of our volunteers. Her husband had stage 4 cancer and had no way to help the family financially, so his wife made it a plan to open up her own tamale business. We helped her get a ITIN so she could open a bank account and file her taxes. Once she learned how much she would be receiving back, she was so happy she cried. It's stories like these that make working for VITA such a heart-warming experience."



Cynthia Montes (left) and Areli Araujo

VITA

SERVING IMMIGRANTS WITH ITIN APPLICATION PREPARATION

BY WYATT SAMUELSON

Filling your taxes can be a grueling and daunting task for any taxpayer. For undocumented immigrants without a social security number, the task becomes impossible, as without one, you cannot file your taxes.

Sponsored by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the California State University, Northridge VITA Clinic is serving the local undocumented community by providing free ITIN application preparation.

With the help of an ITIN — Individual Taxpayer Identification Number — those without a social security number can file their tax returns, create payment plans and receive tax refunds from the IRS. Through their ITIN, clients can also claim dependents, which can greatly reduce their overall tax bill as well as put money back into their own pockets.

“A significant portion of the clients that come into our clinic are low-income individuals,” said German Cruz-Ruiz, operations supervisor at the CSUN VITA Clinic. “Without our help, many of them would be paying exorbitant fees to start the ITIN process. And that’s money they cannot afford to spend.”

As operations supervisor, Ruiz wears many different hats, but his primary job is to oversee and make sure the tax filing operation at CSUN’s VITA Clinic is running smoothly in an effort to help as many clients as they can. This includes ITIN application review, tax filing review, appointment scheduling and maintaining the overall efficiency of the clinic.

“We’ve had clients come into our clinic who have been working for years, but haven’t been able to file any of their taxes,” said Ruiz. “By providing them free tax

services such as tax preparation, assistance with ITIN applications and renewals, we can improve our client’s financial wellbeing.”

Ruiz, coming from a first-generation home himself, understands the importance this service provides to the local undocumented community.

“This program has had an almost ‘pay it forward’ effect on me,” said Cruz. “I’ve been able to help so many of my own family and friends with tax help just by taking the initial opportunity to become a tax preparer for VITA three years ago.”

Ruiz is currently studying for his CPA in the hopes of becoming an accountant.



German Cruz Ruiz, CSUN VITA Clinic, Operation Supervisor

ANNUAL REPORT

CSUN VITA SPANISH INTERPRETATION PROGRAM WON VISIONARY AWARD RECOGNITION

BY WYATT SAMUELSON



Professor Svetlana Tyutina, Associate Professor of Spanish

The CSUN VITA Clinic’s Spanish Language Interpretation Program has won the Visionary Community Service-Learning Award earlier in the spring. The award, which is intended to honor the faculty member who has made the most outstanding contribution to the betterment of students and the community through a service-learning class, has recognized Professor Svetlana Tyutina for her work.

“Whether you speak English or Spanish, the ability to do your taxes shouldn’t be dependent on your grasp of a language,” said Svetlana Tyutina, director of the Spanish graduate program at California State University, Northridge.

The tax process can be complicated and difficult, even for native English speakers, but for non-English speaking clients, the process is almost impossible.

Sponsored by City National Bank, VITA has helped professor Tyutina and her team of interpreters work to close the accessibility gap between free tax preparation and non-English speaking clients.

The interpreters that work under Tyutina are advanced undergraduate or graduate students with near-native fluency in both English and Spanish. Students who are not already a part of the Spanish Program, must go through a proficiency test to ensure their grasp on the language is advanced enough for clients to confidently file their tax returns. This requires that an interpreter

not only knows the language, but has familiarity with Spanish business and tax-related terminology.

Tyutina and VITA supervisors determine the need for interpreters, using analytical data from previous tax years as well as weekly reports. This allows VITA Clinic sites to receive the adequate number of interpreters skilled with the specific languages that are needed for each site.

“We determine the need for interpreters on a site-to-site basis,” said Tyutina. “We often have certain sites that require more interpreters than others. And not all sites require Spanish-speaking interpreters. We have some sites that require interpreters to speak Armenian, Korean or even Tagalog.”

Due to COVID-19, the need for digital remote tax preparation help has been in constant demand. “At-risk” clients who need interpreters to file their taxes are able to hold a three-way HIPPA Zoom call with their tax preparer and interpreter.

Tyutina said there is a “two-fold benefit” when it comes to this program. Clients receive free tax preparation filing, but student interpreters obtain invaluable practical experience in Spanish for business.

“The need for interpreters has been on a steep rise in recent years,” said Tyutina. “Not only in tax preparation, but in courts, healthcare sectors, government offices and household positions. This experience allows students to see what a possible career as interpreters would look like, while giving them hands-on experience in the field.”

In her sixth year with VITA, Tyutina hopes she can expand the program as the demand for interpreters in clinic sites continues to grow.

VITA

CIT BANK PARTNERS WITH VITA TO OFFER TAX PREPARATION SERVICES AT YMCA SITES

BY WYATT SAMUELSON

Sponsored by CIT Bank, the YMCA – in collaboration with the California State University, Northridge VITA Clinic – offered free tax preparation services to local community members in the San Fernando Valley at their Reseda and Van Nuys locations.

With over 745 taxpayers served at the two sites, these sites proved to be among the more popular ones in the San Fernando Valley.

Graduating seniors Jesus Perez and Abdullah Albusaidi, now in their third year with VITA, both got their start as tax preparers for the program and have subsequently moved up to operations supervisors. Both Perez and Albusaidi split their time between CSUN's VITA clinic and the two YMCA VITA sites.

"We see people from all walks of life come into the VITA Clinic," said Perez. "Many don't have access to these types of services, and if they do, they often have to pay exorbitant fees for the same services we're offering."

As operations supervisors, Perez and Albusaidi work to make sure VITA Clinic sites are running efficiently in order to help the maximum amount of clients per day. This can include setting up the site, client intake, tax preparation, tax return review and whatever else is needed throughout the day.

"Taxes are a difficult process for most people," said Albusaidi. "We have many clients who appreciate the collaboration between YMCA and CSUN VITA because of the simple fact they have been attending YMCA for so many years. It makes them feel comfortable as they receive our tax services."

Between the Reseda and Van Nuys locations, each site files approximately 65 tax returns per week. Because of the high volume of clients that come into the YMCA VITA clinics, operations has a very important role.

"We wear many different hats at the VITA Clinic," said Perez. "We could be setting up the site one day, then preparing a tax return or even reviewing a tax return on another day. We do whatever is needed at that time."

Due to last year's COVID-19 pandemic, the YMCA VITA clinics have adopted multiple ways of filing clients' tax forms. For example, clients can now exclusively file their return through a digital space, or they can drop off their forms at a site and even come in person to any of the VITA clinics.

Both Perez and Albusaidi plan to use their knowledge and experiences to pursue careers in accounting.



The CSUN VITA student volunteers at the YMCA

ANNUAL REPORT

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ROLE IN VITA

BY WYATT SAMUELSON



Ammar Al Harthy

As international students – Al Harthy coming from Oman and Gazi from Albania – they hoped to broaden their horizons in America; but as they both joined VITA, they realized they could help people too.

"The VITA program, no joke, has been the best experience I've had since I came to the states," said Al Harthy. "I've learned many skills in my time here. How to talk to clients, how to prepare returns or how to handle client situations that come out of the blue. It's been a great experience to learn these skills while also making an impact in the community."

The tax process in America can be difficult and often requires facing a learning curve. As international students, there's added pressure from simply not being familiar with the ins and outs of the tax system.

Both Ammar Al Harthy, a senior studying financial analysis, and Megi Gazi, a senior majoring in accounting, started their time at VITA as tax preparers with the hopes of gaining real-world experience to use in their respective future careers.

When being promoted to lead supervisor, Gazi had a difficult first day.

"When I first got promoted to lead supervisor I was so nervous because I didn't want to mess anything up," said Gazi. "But I came in and let my operations supervisor know how I was feeling, and she shadowed me the entire day making sure I could ask questions as I went through the process. The difference in how I felt in the beginning and how I felt at the end of the day was tremendous. I felt like a different person."

As Al Harthy and Gazi grew more into their roles in VITA, they started to understand the importance this program holds in the community.

"The best part about the job is working with the community," said Gazi. "Clients are so thankful to us because we're able to help them get a refund. Seeing their appreciation makes our day."

Al Harthy is pursuing a career in financial analysis and Gazi in accounting. With the skills they learned while in VITA, they both hope to find permanent careers in the United States.



Megi Gazi

TAXES FROM A TENT: THE STORY OF MAX GLADDEN

BY WYATT SAMUELSON



CSUN VITA Student volunteer waiting for his next client

“I lost my job during COVID and had to live in a tent on a side of a Winnebago with my partner,” said Max Gladden. “Well, he lived in the Winnebago because of his severe medical condition which put him in constant pain most of the day.”

Gladden, who uses they/them pronouns, has performed drag for more than 30 years under the stage name “Maximiliana.” Most of their income was through independent contracting. However, when COVID-19 first appeared over two years ago, they lost their job and had few options left.

In order to save some money on rent, Gladden and their partner rented out a Winnebago. Unfortunately, due to an acute medical problem, their partner had to occupy the space while Gladden slept in a tent next to the Winnebago.

“My partner has complex regional pain syndrome,” said Gladden. “It basically leaves him incapacitated in pain for most of the day. I am the main earner in our relationship and there was no way I could hold down a job while also taking care of him and our expenses at the same time.”

While briefly unemployed, Gladden and their partner were unable to receive their COVID-19 relief stimulus checks because of unfiled tax returns. Gladden quickly called 311 and learned about the VITA program at California State University, Northridge.

“We filed all of our taxes digitally right out of my tent,” said Gladden. “They were so helpful and patient with me the entire time. I wish I had knew about this program sooner.”

With their taxes filed, Gladden received their COVID-19 stimulus checks. This money would make all the difference in their lives as they used their stimulus payments as a downpayment for an FHA loan for a home in Trono, California.

“With my partner’s condition,” said Gladden, “we were in dire need of space and a quiet place to live. The only reason we were able to get this place is due to the diligent help of Cynthia Montez (CSUN VITA coordinator) and her VITA team.”

Gladden and their partner are looking brightly toward their future. With COVID-19 infection rates steadily decreasing, they hope to be able to perform drag again and find bookings for performances.



Max Gladden, Taxpayer

OUR VITA TEAM



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Lucy Nalbandian, CSUN VITA Clinic Faculty

Social Media Specialist

Daisy Macias
Lizette Macias

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Areli Araujo, CSUN VITA Clinic
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Cynthia Montes, CSUN VITA Clinic
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VITA

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