IRVINE • As long as she can remember, Laurel Dang has wanted to be a doctor. The 22-year-old Fullerton resident has worked tirelessly to make her parents proud and is excited to experience life after college.

Dang, a first-generation college student, will graduate debt-free this weekend from UC Irvine with a bachelor’s degree in biology and with academic honors.

She plans to honor her father at her commencement ceremony, which falls on Father’s Day.

“My dad has been a great influence and supports me,” Dang said. “He’s so proud of me, and I haven’t seen him this excited in a long time.”

The Class of 2013 will celebrate the end of one life chapter and the start of another at UC Irvine’s 48th annual commencement ceremonies set for this weekend at the Bren Events Center.

About 6,000 of the roughly 8,600 students earning degrees from UC Irvine this academic year are expected to walk in the commencement ceremonies.

Flowers, balloons, gifts and hugs were in no short supply at the School of Social Ecology commencement ceremony Friday. Smiling graduates cheered as they walked to “Pomp and Circumstance” and greeted family and friends in the audience.

As the Class of 2013 eagerly waited for the ceremony to begin, many loved ones searched for decorated mortarboard of their graduates in a sea of black gowns.

Graduates used their caps to represent personal mantras, clubs and affiliations and messages of hope and thanks to their supporters in the audience.

Cynthia Hui, a 24-year-old first-generation college graduate, waited outside the Bren center with her brother and friends before the ceremony. Atope her head was a decorated cap with Pac Man about to reach a construction-paper diploma. It’s a symbol for reaching my goals,” she said.

Psychology major Daniel David, 23, searched for his family in the crowded plaza. He proudly wore several stoles representing aspects of his college life and upbringing, including one with the Filipino flag to honor his heritage. In his hands, David held his decorated cap with the message “thank you mom and dad.”

“It’s been a challenging but rewarding experience,” David said. “My family has always supported me and encouraged me to follow my dreams and aspirations. Everything I’ve learned here is my foundation for the future.”

The School of Social Ecology’s commencement ceremony included words of advice from Gaddi Vasquez, the senior vice president for public affairs at Southern California Edison.

Vasquez shared his story of overcoming adversity as a Mexican American immigrant who grew up in poverty. “We are truly blessed to live in a nation with a rich history of opportunity and the belief that hard work, perseverance and determination can yield a great return.”

Vasquez encouraged grads to seize the moment.

“The world awaits you,” he said. “Do great things, dream big dreams, and wherever life takes you, be a leader with a servant’s heart.”

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