Campus activist wins $30K Truman Scholarship

Arizona State University

Helping a Bhutanese refugee family when she was an ASU freshman sparked a passionate interest in human rights for Danielle BÃ¤ck. Her desire intensified as she became more involved in student justice organizations.

Last year she founded the ASU Coalition for Human Rights, mobilizing a dozen different student groups to coordinate their far-flung efforts. Now the ASU economics junior, in ASU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, has won a Truman Scholarship, the nations highest undergraduate leadership award.

The $30,000 award is given to about 60 college juniors each year who show outstanding leadership potential, intellectual ability and the likelihood of "making a difference" in a career in public service. ASU has had 17 Truman Scholars in the past 20 years, one of the best records of any public university.

Though she knew she was a finalist, BÃ¤ck thought she had blown her Truman interview when she was asked to come to the ASU national scholarship office March 28 to begin a new round of applications. She had worked for hours that day at an outdoor event for Students for Justice in Palestine, and she rushed in late to the office, sweaty and hot.

As she sat down to talk with Janet Burke, director of national scholarship advisement, she was surprised to hear the voices of ASU President Michael Crow and Mark Jacobs, dean of Barrett, the Honors College, behind her. Burke unveiled a small banner, and the three gave her their hearty congratulations.

"Dr. Burke tricked me," she said, grinning. "It was so unexpected. I was really disappointed in myself, thinking I must have done badly in the final interview. The Truman is just such a wonderful opportunity, both for the scholarship and for the network of other Truman Scholars."

BÃ¤ck wants to use the award to study for a masters in public health and a medical degree, at either Mayo Clinic or Johns Hopkins University.

She grew up in Chandler, the daughter of a Lutheran minister who also is a psychiatric nurse. She always was interested in medicine, and as she got more involved at ASU she became aware of how much public health and human rights are intertwined, especially in developing nations.

Thanks to a Flinn Scholarship and other programs, BÃ¤ck has been able to travel and study in the Middle East and Africa during breaks from school. Her work with an Interfaith Peace-Builders Delegation in Israel and the West Bank last summer affected her deeply.

"Seeing Israelis and Palestinians protesting together was transformative for me," she said. "Because of the blockade on Gaza, 80 percent of the people in Gaza are dependent on the United Nations for food, and there are shortages of necessary medical supplies. Patients are prevented from leaving to receive specialized treatment, and doctors are often denied requests to receive additional training abroad. The medical system is on the brink of collapse."

Another life-changing experience was leading support groups for children with HIV/AIDS in the community of Lomé, Togo, over winter break.

BÃ¤cks current focus is on campaigning for the establishment of an Advisory Committee for Socially Responsible Investing at ASU, to give voice to student, faculty and community human rights concerns. She also is working to establish a sweatshop-free line of ASU apparel for merchandising on campus.

After graduate school BÃ¤ck plans to work with a public health organization in the Middle East, eventually taking a leadership position within an international health organization such as Doctors Without Borders or Physicians for Human Rights.

This year the Truman Foundation received 602 applications from 264 colleges and universities.

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