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Ashland AAUW branch has been awarding scholarships to students for three decades

Ashland.news staff report

Resilient, tenacious, courageous.

That's how members of the Ashland American Association of University Women (AAUW) branch would describe recipients of thousands in scholarships recently awarded by the organization. Southern Oregon University hosted the annual Celebration of Scholars for both Rogue Community College and SOU students in Stevenson Union on Oct. 23.

The Ashland AAUW branch has been awarding scholarships to students for three decades. Organizers emphasized the "lofty ambitions" of the recipients and a strong sense of giving back to the community.

"It was a truly inspiring, humbling and gratifying meeting — both in terms of how much we can do and how much we can learn from our scholarship recipients," said Susan McCracken Jain, Ashland Branch president, in the AAUW newsletter.

The following students were selected for awards from RCC:

Randi Kearney graduated from RCC's LPN–RN Bridge Program with an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing. She was a Certified Nursing Assistant at Rogue Valley Manor before earning her Licensed Practical Nurse credential in Fall 2021. She gained experience in Addiction Recovery, Long-term Skilled Nursing, and Cardiac Recovery, and discovered a deep passion for behavioral health and education. Kearney works at Asante Rogue Regional Medical Center as both a Behavioral Health floor nurse and an educator in Nursing Professional Development, providing crisis-intervention training and mentoring new and experienced nurses. She is a Certified Nursing Assistant instructor at Pacific Healthcare Training. Kearney will transition to a four-year university to complete her Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) and ultimately plans to earn her Nurse Practitioner (NP) license.



“Through bedside care and teaching, I have seen how mental-health crises affect patients, families, and entire communities,” Kearney said. “Leading crisis-intervention training at Asante has shown me the importance of rapid, compassionate response and of equipping staff to de-escalate safely. I have seen that nurses often face rising behavioral-health needs with limited resources and shifting public policy. These challenges drive me to strengthen teamwork, advocate for better mental-health access, and mentor future caregivers who can lead with empathy and skill. My ongoing education toward a BSN and NP license will expand my ability to influence policy and deliver holistic care, ensuring that vulnerable patients receive the consistent, dignified support they deserve.”

Fallon Vanfossan is currently a student in the RCC Business Program and is working toward a degree in accounting. While starting as a marketing major, she quickly found that working with numbers in business was more suited to her abilities. She expects to graduate in 2026. Fallon ended her first year with a 3.98 GPA, while homeschooling her own children simultaneously. In addition, she taught science to high school students in a local co-op setting for the past two years. She enjoys helping children reach their full potential, both educationally and in their personal lives.



“When my oldest son began RCC full time as a sophomore in high school, through an early college program, I was inspired by his dedication. It was then that I decided to pursue my own degree,” Vanfossan said. “Business has always been an interest of mine, but being a stay-at-home, homeschooling mother for the past 10 years, I was intimidated by the thought of returning to school. My family has been immensely supportive of my goals, offering encouragement at every turn. Attending college with my oldest son is an incredible experience, and I am excited to watch both of our futures unfold.”

Madison Herinckx is a RCC nursing student. Herinckx began acquiring college prerequisites in high school. During her senior year there, she served as a Certified Nursing Assistant in the Intensive Care Unit during the Covid-19 pandemic. Madison then obtained her Associates of General Studies degree. She has built her healthcare experience across diverse settings, serving as a Certified Medical Assistant in Family Practice, Urgent Care, and now as a Certified Nursing Assistant on the Post Surgical Floor. Her goal is to graduate as a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, and then become licensed as a Nurse Practitioner.



“I grew up in a rural community with a struggling public school system,” Herinckx said in a written statement to AAUW. “During high school, I fought for my education; for the ability to obtain my CNA license and advanced my career, despite financial challenges. That experience taught me how persistence and determination can open doors regardless of the lack of resources. Serving the community as

a volunteer in the Emergency Department and working in Urgent Care revealed the challenges the underserved community faces, especially lack of access and advocacy. These experiences have inspired me to become a nurse practitioner, to become a voice for my patients and help overcome such adversity."

Alaa Karmi is completing an Associate of Arts / Oregon Transfer Degree at RCC and plans to transfer to SOU for a psychology degree. Karmi is a first-generation Palestinian American who was born in New York. She moved to Southern Oregon in 2015. It has been a life-changing move for her. Her dream is to become a therapist and serve her community in a holistic and cooperative way. She loves working with plants, animals, and people. For the past two years she has volunteered with Indigenous groups to grow and save heirloom seeds for genetic preservation. After a long break, she has been



able to go back to school and reach her goals of growth and personal fulfillment. On her days off she enjoys hiking, gardening, and spending time with her partner, James, and their dogs Tank and Iggy.

"Thankfully, attending college again has been a wonderful and deeply enriching experience," Karmi told AAUW. "I feel fortunate to have this opportunity to acquire skills that will aid in my dedication to serving my community. Living in a natural setting has been incredibly healing and rewarding for me and I hope to incorporate nature, art, and positive community action in the process of mental health support."

The following Southern Oregon University (SOU) scholars are recognized with an AAUW Ashland named award, in honor of their respective donors:

Wendy Maynard, the Lang Family Scholar, is a graduate student in the Master in Clinical Mental Health Counseling program at SOU. A longtime Ashland resident and single mother of two, Wendy returned to school for a second career as a Licensed Professional Counselor. She maintains a 4.0 GPA and recently began her internship at Kolpia Counseling Services, a community clinic serving vulnerable and underserved populations. Balancing graduate school and single motherhood, Wendy is dedicated to her coursework, raising her children with love and consistency, and giving back to Ashland through volunteering and training at Kolpia.



"I grew up in a home without financial or emotional stability, experiences that shaped my passion for the transformative power of therapy," Maynard said. "Returning to school as a

single parent has been humbling and demanding—juggling coursework, parenting, and finances—but it has been the most purposeful work of my life. This scholarship eases the heavy financial burden of graduate school and gives me the chance to more fully focus on my studies and clinical training. My goal upon graduation is to provide trauma-informed, culturally responsive care to people often left behind—women, LGBTQ+ clients, neurodivergent individuals, and low-income families in Southern Oregon."

Scarlet Celestino, the Kate and Jim Wolf-Pizor Family Scholar, is a second-year graduate student in the Master in Clinical Mental Health Counseling program. Celestino is a 2024 graduate Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and double minors in Gender, Sexuality, & Women's Studies and Social Sciences from SOU. She is twice honored with the named Jim and Kate Wolf-Pizor Family Scholarship. She has volunteered lobbying for behavioral health funding, producing LGBTQ+ activism events, in leadership roles in the SOU Psychology Club and Queer Student Union, and as a research assistant. Scarlet recently started a counseling internship at Options, where she is eager to learn, develop professionally, and provide mental health services to our community.



"My education plan is to become a counselor specializing in gender affirming care. With this path, I hope to lessen stigma around mental health, and nontraditional gender identities. My research highlighted mental health disparities in the LGBTQ+ community, a topic gaining lots of evidence, but few solutions. I'm dismayed to see this vibrant community reduced to harrowing statistics. Thus, I am determined to continue studying LGBTQ+ mental health, contribute to research, and pay this forward. I will promote empathy and acceptance in my community and greater sociocultural network. I want to greet my clients as neighbors, not as numbers."

Christina Berger, the Judy Yin Shih Scholar, is a graduate student in the online MBA program at SOU. She is a recipient of The Judy Yin Shih Scholarship. Christina earned her Bachelor of Science in Innovation and Leadership from SOU, graduating summa cum laude with a 4.0 GPA and honors as a Phi Kappa Phi member. She currently serves as Grant Reporting Specialist at Southern Oregon Education Service District (SOESD), supporting K–12 systems in implementing inclusive, measurable, and career-aligned pathways. Her cross-sector leadership includes serving as the Student Representative on the SOU Board of Trustees, an ACC AmeriCorps Alumnus, and a founder of CBergerDesigns, a local screen printing and embroidery business



that delivers stress-free, high-quality logo wear for professional organizations. She has contributed to statewide broadband equity efforts through roles with Oregon Humanities, Oregon State University's Broadband Equity Coalition, NTEN, and the American Connection Corps.

"As a TRIO student at Rogue Community College, I became acutely aware of the systemic barriers that inhibit academic progression, particularly for rural and underrepresented populations. My undergraduate capstone revealed digital access as a critical determinant of success. That research sparked my commitment to broadband equity and trauma-informed leadership. I aim to build resilient systems that empower individuals to thrive, regardless of geography or circumstance."

The AAUW was founded in 1881 by women who defied society's conventions by earning college degrees, and works to increase access, opportunity and equity in higher education for women through research, advocacy and philanthropy, according to the AAUW website.

For a schedule of AAUW's local events, go online to ashland-or.aauw.net.

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