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## Award to stoke imagination of young research mind

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BY PAUL MAYNE



Sandra Sabongui loves the elegance of biology and chemistry. And now, after earning a \$60,000 Schulich Leader Scholarship, the Grade 12 Toronto Montessori School (TMS) student will study the disciplines she says have the “potential to improve the lives of billions and of generations to come.”

When Sabongui received an email in late April from a Western professor, letting her know she had won the scholarship, she had already written off the opportunity.

“I remember checking the scholarship website every day for weeks, reading the news about all of the winners being selected at other universities,” she said. “I was getting worried because the number of offers left was becoming narrow. At that point, I had already come to terms with the fact I probably wouldn’t be selected.

“But when I read the email I was both thrilled and shocked. My parents were ecstatic. It was a great thing, not because of the money, but because of the recognition that comes with the award and the feeling of hard work paying off.”



Special to Western News

Sandra Sabongui, 2016  
Schulich Leaders Scholarship  
winner.

Twenty partner universities in Canada are eligible to provide two Schulich Leader Scholarships annually. One designated for a nominee planning to enroll in an engineering program, valued at \$80,000, and one planning to enroll in a science, technology or mathematics program, valued at \$60,000.

The five universities that attracted the most nominee applications by the annual application deadline were granted an

additional two Schulich Leader Scholarships in each area This year, Western was able to offer four scholarships.

Sabongui is one of 50 recipients from the more than 1,500 nominations submitted this year. Created by Canadian business leader and philanthropist Seymour Schulich in 2011, this scholarship program encourages high school graduates to embrace STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) disciplines in their future careers.

Sabongui credits science for better understanding of ourselves and our world, and with that understanding, we can make changes for the better.

“Not too long ago, phenomena such as the depleting ozone layer seemed inevitable. With research into how this mechanism perpetuates, and with persistent collaborative efforts, scientists have identified how to decelerate and minimize the effects of this issue,” she said. “When you have the privilege of pursuing a career in scientific research, you are given the opportunity to change the world for the better.”

Sheila Thomas, Head of College at TMS, said Sabongui is an “all-rounder” who is committed to academic success. While naturally talented in the sciences, Sabongui does not rest.

“She gives her best, is involved in the co-curricular life of the school and does a lot of activities outside school, too,” Thomas said. “Her interest in research is something that was different as compared to other students in the cohort. Her involvement with the research project, her continuous commitment were additional points.”

A Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Award winner, Sabongui launched an independent charity for a primary school in her hometown in the Philippines. Through this charity, she organized five fundraisers to collect money to buy textbooks for students and complete the ground level of the school.

Along with her private pilot’s license, she has travelled internationally as a flautist in parades with the Philippines Heritage Band, a military marching band, for eight years.

“Dedicated. Committed. Going the extra mile to understand and perfect. Driven to excellence. These are all words or phrases that can be used to describe Sandra,” Thomas said.

Sabongui said her travels around the world, witnessing the way different health-care systems operate, has been an influential factor in her decision to pursue medical research. Also, witnessing the diagnosis and treatment of family members who have suffered from vascular diseases has weighed on her decision.

“My will to make a significant and positive impact on the world is perhaps the most significant factor that has lead me towards scientific research,” she said.

With numerous offers on the table, Sabongui knew Western was where she wanted to be after one visit.

“After visiting the campus, meeting some of the professors personally, and hearing them talk about their own experiences, I was more certain of the decision I have now made,” she said, learning of Western’s strength in the medical sciences. “There are lots of great research opportunities for me at Western. I would like to be involved in research throughout my undergraduate studies; this convinced me that Western is the right place for me.

“I am hoping to pursue a career in translational medical research, bridging the bench to bedside, and becoming a global leader in this arena. Once I am experienced, I may also want to teach and mentor future medical scientists.”

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