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Central grad in rare company



By [Mike Beitz](#), The Beacon Herald
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AM



An ambitious, social justice-minded Grade 12 Stratford Central Secondary School student has received one of the most prestigious academic scholarships in the country.

Jen-ai Lai was one of just 40 students from across Canada to be awarded a Schulich Leader Scholarship. Based on criteria that includes leadership in school and community life and academic excellence, there were 977 nominees..

"It's an honour," said the modest 18-year-old on receiving the \$60,000 award, offered for the first time this year to support undergraduate students entering science, technology, engineering and mathematics programs at one of 20 designated Canadian universities.

After she graduates from Central, Lai will be attending the University of British Columbia in the fall, studying science. She's hoping to specialize in biology.

She didn't hesitate for a second when asked what she plans to do with that education.

"I've always known, since I was five years old, that I would like to be a physician," said Lai.

Indeed, helping others is a thread that runs through many of her pursuits and interests.

Lai was a member of the Rotary Interact Club at Central, as well as Future Problem Solvers.

She has volunteered in rural China to help provide better sanitation systems there and even co-founded a charity - Hope for Happiness - which raises awareness and funds for a war-torn community in South Sudan. There's also a local initiative called Grow a Row that involves producing pesticide-free vegetables for the House of Blessing's food bank.

"Everyone has some sort of passion that drives them," said Lai. "My passion, if I could sum it up in one word, is people."

Central Secondary School teacher and guidance counsellor Mark Cassone said that strong social conscience was a big part of the reason he nominated her for the Schulich scholarship. That, and the fact that she has excelled in every single subject she has taken (her lowest grade throughout her high school academic career was an impressive 93%).

"She has enormous potential," said Cassone. "She has talent, desire, she's creative and has the attitude required to reach the high standard she sets for herself. She really does demonstrate the traits that we're trying to instill in our youth."

Lai said the scholarship will provide her with an invaluable opportunity to study at one of the country's top universities.

The money, while not the primary factor in her decision to attend UBC, will also help.

"I can now focus on my studies and go on to do other things with my other time," she said, adding that she'd like to expand Hope for Happiness to include more volunteers and even bigger projects.

Currently, the charity supports a village of about 300 people in Sudan.

"What if it could be 3,000?" she said.

Cassone said he has no doubt that Lai will have an impact on the world, in whatever she chooses to do.

"She knows what's important in life, and I think will make a mark on everyone else's," he said.

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