

Students honoured by Town with John West Memorial Scholarships



Students from Aurora High School and St. Andrew's College are this year's recipients of the John West Leaders of Tomorrow scholarship.

Presented by the Town of Aurora each year to up to two students, and funded by a bequest to the Town of Aurora for this purpose the late mayor John West, the Leaders of Tomorrow scholarships recognize the achievements of senior students attending high school in Aurora and are moving on to post-secondary education at either university or college.

This year's recipients are Katherine Viney of Aurora High School and Michael Chen of St. Andrew's.

In the fall, Katherine will be attending the University of Guelph to begin her studies in landscape architecture, said Nichole Campsall, Coordinator of Youth and Community Development for the Town, noting that throughout her high school career Katherine maintained a place on the honour roll.

Her contributions have made a distinct and positive impact on the Aurora community through numerous volunteering initiatives with Neighbourhood Network, the Aurora Food Pantry, and Habitat for Humanity. As a teenager with Cochlear implants, she also works with parents and children who are Cochlear implant recipients at Sick Kids Hospital to talk about life with hearing loss, which helps them to better understand how Cochlear implants have assisted in her success. Katherine has a passion for helping others in giving back to the community. Katherine's dedication, commitment and engagement to a variety of local initiatives is truly inspirational. Katherine is very excited to be recognized with this scholarship award.

Chen, the second recipient of the scholarship, is no stranger to the Town of Aurora, serving as co-chair of the Town's Youth Engagement Committee but his contributions certainly don't end there.

Recently graduated from St. Andrew's College [he] maintained a 98 per cent academic average and scored in the 99th percentile for his SATS, said Campsall. In the fall, he will be attending the University of Pennsylvania where he will begin in the Huntsman Program for International Studies in Business. Michael is a positive presence in our community and has dedicated numerous volunteer hours in a variety of forms, such as starting Peer Mentors Aurora in 2020, a volunteer organization that pairs high school students with younger age children to help increase engagement and morale during the pandemic lockdown.

He is currently the co-chair of the Town of Aurora's youth engagement committee and he has assisted with planting trees for the Aurora Arboretum, to list just a few. He demonstrates exceptional leadership qualities and a commitment to making a difference in the lives of his fellow Aurora residents. He is grateful and honoured to receive this scholarship award and is so thankful for everyone who has helped him along the way growing up and living in Aurora.

Following the presentation last Tuesday, Viney and Chen joined Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillors Sandra Humfries, Michael Thompson, Rachel Gilliland, John Gallo and Harold Kim in the centre of the Council chamber to formally receive their award.

‘Congratulations on behalf of Council and the Town,’ said Mayor Mrakas. ‘We know you’re going to do the Town proud in your future academic careers.’

Following the presentation, both scholarship winners shared their excitement not just for the award but what lies ahead.

‘I am super honoured and grateful to receive this award. It was a huge surprise when I got the email and I’d like to thank the selection committee for the time they put into reading applications,’ said Michael. ‘I’m pursuing a dual degree at the University of Pennsylvania in Business and International relations. I’ve been debating for a long time, and that naturally led me to do a lot of reading in politics and economics. I’m hoping to use my learned knowledge to help better society in any way I can, whether it’s in politics, business, or something else!’

‘I loved my time with the Town of Aurora Youth Engagement Committee and I’ll still be looking to run my peer mentorship program from another country! There are also some Special Olympics swim coaching opportunities in Philadelphia that I’m looking to pursue.’

Added Katherine: ‘This recognition means that I have impacted the lives of others in a way that gets noticed by not only those being helped but others in the community too. It emphasizes that taking a short time out of my day to help another impacts their everyday life and shows that something as little as sharing my own experiences can go a long way.’

‘When I first entered high school I wanted to become a carpenter. That was the dream, so I took some construction courses in Grade 9, 10 and 11 and also some tech design courses in Grade 11 and 12. When Grade 12 came along it was time to decide on a career path and a school. I decided I wanted to attend the University of Guelph; I had visited there in the fall and it just felt like a second home to me, I knew that’s where I belonged for the next part of my life. When searching through the programs at Guelph I came across Landscape Architecture, a program that many people I knew had graduated from, and thought that was a unique career. As a landscape architect your goal is to take the natural environment and harmonize it with the fabricated environment [such as] buildings, roads, and parks. The reason I chose this profession is to be able to create external spaces that are accessible to everyone. Even if it impacts the life of one individual, I have accomplished my goal. Once I have gotten my degree in Landscape Architecture I hope to attend college for carpentry, but, of course, I will have to see where these next four years take me.’

Katherine says she hopes to continue as an advocate for those with hearing loss by sharing her story, including how hearing loss has assisted her in her success.

‘I would like to thank all of the teachers who have guided me to achieve my best, the doctors at Sick Kids hospital for their knowledge and care in my 14 years of hearing loss, and lastly my parents for providing me with amazing life experiences that have shaped me into the person I am today.’

By Brock Weir
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