

FEATURE

Whiz Kid

Tracy Yang - A Truman Scholar and Rhodes Scholar

By Joe Kovac Jr

Tuesday, November 23, 2010

It was late one Friday night this decade when it first dawned on the teacher that the student was no ordinary freshman, no run-of-the-mill whiz kid.

The teacher and the student, a ninth-grade girl, were, of all places, in a school parking lot. They were sitting on a curb, talking, waiting for the student's ride home to arrive.

Their academic team meet was over and, after a tiring evening of competition, they were relaxing there in the dark, talking music, the violin, literature, art, the student's ambitions, her Chinese lessons.

"I remember thinking at the time, 'Wow, can this be for real?' " the teacher, Diane Smith, recalled Monday, after hearing that the student, Tracy J. Yang, now a University of Georgia senior, had been selected as a 2011 Rhodes Scholar.

"She was so articulate for her age, so interested in so many things. ... She was filled with energy and ideas and about pursuing interesting plans in those areas that she loved."

Yang, 21, a Westside High School graduate who was born and raised in Macon, is her home state's lone Rhodes Scholar this year.

Monday, as she prepared to head home to Macon for the Thanksgiving break, the anthropology major who plans to become a primary-care physician with an expertise in health policy, said, "It's been kind of crazy."

Yang was one of 14 finalists for the Rhodes Scholarships, widely considered the most prestigious academic honor, in a district that compromises Georgia and Virginia. In a half-



Tracy Yang, center, and classmates listen as University of Georgia President Michael F. Adams announces in March that Yang had been named a Truman Scholar. Yang, from Macon, was named a Rhodes Scholar on Saturday. Courtesy of THE TELEGRAPH

hour interview Saturday at Emory University in Atlanta, the Rhodes committee asked her questions about her areas of interest.

Yang, who according to a Rhodes news release, has researched "public health challenges inherent in reducing (a Latin American) parasite's impact on public health" as well as the "health disparities among marginalized populations in Georgia, New York and Nicaragua," felt her interview went well Saturday.

When it was done, she said, "I didn't have any regrets."

After that, while the panel deliberated, she waited more than three hours in a library room with the other candidates.

When she got the good news, Yang said, "I was obviously thrilled, but also extremely shocked because you don't want to get your hopes up too much for something like this. I think I hadn't been really allowing myself to believe that it could happen. So when I heard my name

UGA Honors Student Named 2011 Rhodes Scholar

Posted by Sonja Roberts

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University of Georgia Honors student Tracy Yang of Macon has been awarded a 2011 Rhodes Scholarship to attend England's Oxford University. She plans to pursue a master's of science degree in global health science.

Yang, who is a UGA Foundation Fellow, also was a 2010 Truman Scholar. She plans to graduate from UGA in May with a bachelor's degree in anthropology. She is one of 32 Rhodes recipients in the United States and the only one from the state of Georgia.

Yang is UGA's 22nd Rhodes Scholar and third UGA female student to be selected since 1976, the first year women were eligible to apply. Before Yang, UGA's most recent recipients were Deep Shah and Kate Vyborny in 2008.

"The Rhodes Scholarship is a signal accomplishment for a university student and a reflection of the rigorous academic environment on the recipient's home campus," said UGA President Michael F. Adams. "Tracy Yang is representative of everything that is good about the UGA student body. She is, first and foremost, a dedicated student, but she is also committed to a life of serving others. I have no doubt that she will be one of those people who have a significant and positive impact on the world."

With aspirations to pursue a career as a physician-policy analyst, Yang has concentrated her research as well as her local and international involvement on efforts to address public health disparities and improving access to services. As a sophomore, Yang conducted research on the parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi* under the guidance of Rick Tarleton, Distinguished Research Professor in Cellular Biology. The parasite, which causes Chagas disease, has infected approximately 18 million people in Latin America.

She also participated in the Nathan Schnaper Cancer Research Intern Program in summer 2008, and in a public health and emergency preparedness internship at Greater New York Hospital Association in summer 2010. She has traveled to Nicaragua, working with medical personnel who provide health services to residents through community hospital or home visits.

Yang currently is working as an intern with the Athens Health Network, part of a community-based initiative to address poverty issues in Athens. She also serves as a mentor and ESL teacher in the local community. Yang's interest in policy decision-making precipitated her involvement with UGA's chapter of the Roosevelt Institution, a national student-run think tank, in which she has served in several leadership roles. She also is an editor for UGA's Journal for Undergraduate Research Opportunities, an online

undergraduate research journal for the arts, humanities and social sciences.

"Tracy is an amazing person," said David S. Williams, director of UGA's Honors Program and the UGA faculty representative for the Rhodes Scholarship. "She displays an uncommon intellect, a deep sense of dedication, profound empathy and extraordinary energy. Yet, she remains completely down to earth and is a delight to be around. Rhodes Scholars are not just impressive intellects. They are supposed to make the world a better place. I have no doubt that Tracy will do just that." Rhodes Scholars are chosen in a two-stage process. Candidates must first be endorsed by their college or university; then selection committees in each of 16 districts invite the strongest applicants for an interview. This year, 837 students were endorsed by 309 colleges and universities.



called I was so shocked and so humbled, because, I mean, I had been sitting in this room getting to know these 13 other amazing people."

Yang, a Truman Scholar as well and the daughter of a Macon State College chemistry professor, said she hopes to study global health

science when she enrolls at the University of Oxford, in England, to begin her two-year Rhodes Scholarship next October.

“It’s a great opportunity, and I’m extremely excited about my future path and the direction it’ll lead me,” she said.

Yang, who enrolled at UGA in 2007, attended Springdale Elementary School, Miller Middle School and Westside High School, where she was the county’s STAR Student. She says she would encourage younger students to “seize the opportunities that you are given and to look for opportunities where they’re not already created.”

“I think it’s important to be able to manage your own education, of course, with a lot of help along the way,” she said. “But with a vision for where you want to go.”

Diane Smith, a teacher for nearly four decades, the one who led Yang’s academic team at Westside and who taught her Advanced Placement language and composition at Westside, recalls writing a letter of recommendation for Yang when she was seeking a plum scholarship to UGA. A scholarship Yang won.

Smith had tried to capture Yang’s love of learning on paper. She closed with a note on Yang as being someone to watch, mentioning the special young woman’s “trajectory.”

“How her trajectory,” Smith said Monday, “would certainly be an amazing one to watch.”

Smith, who still keeps in touch with Yang, said her former student “just continues to be astounding.”

It is something she, an astute educator, first sensed that night on the parking lot curb. Now, nearly a decade later, the brilliant former ninth-grader will soon graduate from her state university, long having answered her old teacher’s first question about whether Yang, the

rare Renaissance freshman there on the curb, was for real.

“Yes,” Smith said, “it is for real. That is simply who she is. ... I’ve taught for 36 years, and there are very few Tracys out there. Very, very few.”

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