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Savana Cooper, Oakridge High School Senior and Global Awareness Scholarship Winner



McKenna Whipple, left and Savana Cooper, who graduated from Oakridge High School this year, earned \$3000 each in scholarship from a program sponsored by Building A Better World. Whipple will head to Africa with the award.

Out of Africa: Oakridge youth off to Tanzania with Scholarship

By Malachi Barrett
mbarret@mlive.com

MUSKEGON, MI — McKenna Whipple will travel to Africa next summer to volunteer with The Rift Valley Children's Village, a privately funded orphanage in the Karatu region Tanzania.

Whipple and Savana Cooper were awarded \$3,000 from a unique scholarship this year by demonstrating a well-rounded philosophy in regard to global awareness, community involvement and independent travel.

It's all part of a unique scholarship program that sends Oakridge High School graduating seniors to various locations around the world. In the hopes of "Building a Better World," Oakridge seniors write competitive essays to earn a grant for the upcoming year, generally two for college tuition and one for travel.

PASSION FOR CHILDREN

The oldest of 22 grandchildren in a family of teachers, Whipple said she was inspired to follow her passion to work with children across the Atlantic Ocean.

"I'm really excited to be able to teach others about (my trip) and learn techniques of what they use in their school system then bring it back," she said. "I want to bring back some of the culture, then share and spread it." The village is a service of the Tanzanian Children's Fund, founded in 2004 as a home for marginalized children. Whipple will work in a classroom as a "Momma" for three weeks, teaching the orphans and living alongside them. She was inspired to apply for a volunteer position after watching an episode of "60

Minutes" dedicated to the organization. She applied later that night, and was undaunted when the 12-page recruiting packet told her about the lack of hot showers and other American luxuries.

"One of the main reasons I want to do it is to learn about new cultures and experiencing not only a way to help people but also throw myself into a new culture," she said.

"That is the experience you wouldn't get if you stayed in the United States."

Whipple has been trying to learn Swahili to prepare for the culture shift,

but also wants to bring some of her culture to Tanzania. She was a member of the Spotlight Dance Academy in Grand Haven for 12 years and hopes to teach the children ballet.

Whipple will travel with her aunt, a Grand Rapids nurse who will work in a rural medical center, and her father, who will help with care taking and chores.

INSPIRED BY TEACHER

Though her scholarship isn't given for travel, Savana Cooper won the Global Awareness Award for her expanded perspective. She is using the prize money to fund her college education at Western Michigan University, where she plans to study abroad, possibly in Germany. Cooper said Oakridge High School teacher Bob Wood is her favorite teacher of all time.

"Mr. Wood is biggest inspiration he is my favorite teacher all time and my professor at MCC in my political science class," Cooper said. "He wants to make people awake. So do I. I want to be awake to issues going on in the world looking out our front door."

Wood began the Building a Better World scholarship in 2003 with three modest \$300 scholarships funded by a few teachers from Oakridge and Wood's mother. Thirteen years later, 36 scholarships have been awarded for more than \$40,000. Oakridge graduates have voyaged to across the United States and to Europe and Asia.

"It was such a grassroots thing," Wood said. "Teachers and kids donate, and so do businesses, the Oakridge Education Association and past winners. It's a big community scholarship."

Scholarships were awarded to students who demonstrated a solid philosophy in regard to global awareness, community involvement and independent travel.

"It's vital now in particular when there is so much tension (in the world), people can formulate ideas without really knowing what they are talking about," Wood said. "When you go out and meet people, you realize we're all trying to have a better life and be happy."

Last year's winner Victoria Mueller returned from a two-week trip to Thailand in July, where she visited Thai exchange students Toon Mtrn and Bam Dancharoenpol. Wood said Oakridge hosted 15 foreign exchange students last year, which exposed the American student body to different cultural and community perspectives.

"We all became really close friends. When I heard about the scholarship, I thought it was perfect because I could go and see how their culture is and how they do things over there," Mueller said.

Mueller was the valedictorian of her class and served as president of National Honor Society, but had never left the United States. In Thailand, they visited beautiful Buddhist temples in Ayutthaya, Wat Pho and Wat Phra Khao Yai and got a taste of the local cuisine during her stay.

"A lot of the foods they eat are very spicy," she said. "We had huge prawns and calamari, big fish that weren't even skinned. I ate the soup that was super spicy and it wasn't until afterward when I found out it had pig's blood in it. I was like 'OK, never again.'"

In her essay, Mueller spoke about her desire for adventure. After the trip, she said she learned to appreciate Thai culture as well.

"I think people should see more of the world because then you see how other people live," she said. "Their respect is different, we respect our elders but not like in Thailand. They have a very deep respect for their king and his family. Everyone was very friendly and when I went to the markets they would say 'hello' and have a conversation with me if they spoke English."

Wood said donations are always needed to keep the scholarship alive each year. Donations can be made online or by check to OHS Building A Better World Scholarship, at 5493 E. Hall Road in Muskegon.



Victoria Mueller, recipient of the 2015 Independent Travel Scholarship, rides the Bangkok Transit system with Oakridge High School Exchange students Bam Dancharoenpol and Toon Mtrn.