

AMTA's Scholars

By Brandon Harper

Every year, thousands of college graduates from across the country continue their studies through one of several academic scholarship programs. Through awards like the Rhodes, Marshall, Truman, and Fulbright scholarships, students add to their already strong base of knowledge, and expand their academic horizons. Close to home, students and alumni of the American Mock Trial Association enjoy incredible success in being nominated by their academic institutions and being selected as finalists and recipients of these terrific awards.

The 2015-2016 scholarship season has been a successful one for AMTA students. Among those receiving academic scholarships is Neil Alacha (2016 Rhodes Scholarship, Harvard University); Skyler Ross (2016 Marshall Scholarship, Yale University); Eric Neumeister (2015 Fulbright Scholarship, Dickinson College); and Davis Thompson (2015 Fulbright Scholarship, Middle Tennessee State University). Additionally, at least two AMTA students, Abdullah Hasan of the University of Connecticut and Davis Thompson of Middle Tennessee State University, have been named 2015 Truman Scholarship Finalists. Several other students were nominated by their universities and were finalists for these tremendous honors.



"Th[is] is a picture of some dear friends I made during that time. I lived in the somewhat off-the-beaten-path city of Nanchang, in Jiangxi province, and had very little interaction with westerners," says Virginia Newman, who did a Fulbright after mocking for the University of Georgia.

She says, "After years of doing mock, I became someone who was willing to go into new experiences and meet new people, knowing that it wouldn't be easy, but that I would walk away a stronger person for it. Mock gave me the confidence to speak broken Chinese with strangers, until eventually, I became fluent!"

Dr. Sara Zeigler, Dean of University Programs at Eastern Kentucky University and past president of the American Mock Trial Association, notes that these scholarships choose recipients based on “maturity, strong interpersonal skills, and an ability to recognize and correct for their own biases and interests. Mock trial develops all of these skills, not only through substantive work on the case materials, but by the very nature of the activity.” The qualities that make for successful AMTA competitors are, according to Dean Zeigler, “the qualities that leaders exhibit—and also the characteristics that scholarship committees seek in applicants.”

According to a summary provided by the Rhodes Trust, Rhodes Scholars are granted financial awards to pursue a degree or degrees at the University of Oxford. Scholars are chosen based on their “outstanding scholarly achievements” and their “character, commitment to others, and to the common good.” Recent AMTA Rhodes Scholars include the University of Pennsylvania’s Rutendo Chigora (2015) and Yale University’s Vinay Nayak (2014).

The Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation supports the graduate education and professional development of outstanding young people committed to public service leadership. In 2012, AMTA alumnus and Amherst University graduate Nathan Nash served as a Truman Scholar. Nash, “found the mock trial experience and community enormously helpful,” in encouraging him to pursue legal internships in local and state government. In turn, Nash said, “these governmental positions inspired me to apply for the Truman Scholarship to further my interest in law, policy, and public service.”

Students with a passion for teaching often apply for Fulbright Scholarships. The Fulbright Scholarship “offers research, study, and teaching opportunities in over 140 countries to recent graduates and graduate students.” Former AMTA competitor and University of Washington alumnus, Nick Crown, served as an English teacher during his Fulbright Scholarship year. While Nick found his AMTA experience beneficial in his decision to later apply to law school, he stressed that mock trial had additional benefits. Nick’s mock trial experience, “also came in handy during my Fulbright year. I taught English to high school students, so it helped to have experience speaking publicly and relaying information to an audience. I doubt I would have applied for the program if I didn’t feel confident speaking on my feet. That, too, I owe to mock trial.”

The Marshall Scholarship provides up to forty scholars per year the opportunity to study graduate level work in any field in a UK institution. Macalaster College alumna and principal at Robins Kaplan LLP, Katherine S. Barrett Wiik, served as a Marshall scholar at Queens University Belfast in 2002. Ms. Wiik found a strong nexus between her AMTA experience and her Marshall Scholarship term because both relate to, “critical thinking skills in an applied setting.” Wiik noted that many Marshall Scholars were people “who are looking to change the world through law and policy,” something that she also found during her AMTA years. Wiik also studied abroad during one fall at Macalaster and came back to compete on her mock trial team that spring. The tension between study abroad and mock trial is something that many students encounter. To that end, Wiik stressed that study abroad is a “door opening” and “mind opening” experience, and encouraged AMTA students interested in Marshall Scholarships to

consider taking a semester to build relationships abroad and have an international experience.

Since AMTA's founding 31 years ago, dozens of our competitors and alumni have received these and other noteworthy academic and professional scholarships. Indeed, more than 30 students and alumni have been awarded Rhodes, Marshall, Truman, and Fulbright scholarships in the last decade.

While certainly impressive, this student success comes as no surprise to Justin Bernstein, president of the American Mock Trial Association. Justin notes that "mock trial is as challenging as any undergraduate activity available. It tests critical thinking, communication skills, and creativity. So it's no surprise that our competitors would have a big leg up when it comes to scholarships that reward those traits."

Congratulations to all of AMTA's scholarship applicants, finalists, and recipients!

Editor's Note: Brandon D. Harper is a Member of the AMTA Board of Directors and Law Clerk to a United States District Judge in the U. S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. Harper is a former mock trial coach at the College of William & Mary, the University of Pennsylvania, and Washington University in St. Louis, the same school where he was a four-year AMTA competitor.