

# BRILLIANT STUDENTS ARE GOOD FOR THE UNIVERSITY *(and vice versa)*

By Melanie Robbins '06M.A.

Honors students may not all be geeks, but they do set themselves apart from the throng. Deanne Leonard '07 (psychology/biology), for example, last May's Herz Gold Medalist, is not only a straight-A student with a soon-to-be-published research paper under her belt, she's also bilingual and an opera singer.

When others were riding tricycles, Leonard, now 22, was learning Spanish. When her peers were thumbing away at Nintendo, she was a member of the Reno Philharmonic Chorus and the Nevada Opera Chorus, becoming a soloist for the University of Nevada Women's Chorus while still in high school. Music and language aren't her only talents, however. She wants to be a doctor — possibly a plastic surgeon specializing in reconstructive surgery. She began her studies at the University of Nevada School of Medicine this fall.

The Herz Gold Medal is the University's top undergraduate academic honor.

Aside from possessing vast intellectual scope and curiosity, these top scholars — who were some 450 strong and growing during the 2006-2007 academic year — also muster unusual determination and commitment, as well as leadership qualities beyond their years.

For example, Raymond Hooft, 18, an incoming freshman and National Merit Scholar from Sparks, says he had to take extra classes in high school in order to qualify to earn the National Merit Scholar distinction.

"It's more of a commitment in time, but if you are willing to put in the work, you will reap the benefits later," Hooft says.

The National Merit Scholarship Program is a prestigious national competition that awards top high school scholars with distinction for academic performance. The program is based primarily on test scores, but a competing student must also provide letters of recommendation, submit an essay and be committed to obtaining higher education. While the program awards some monetary scholarships, it is the institutions of higher learning that compete with each other for these top students by offering scholarship packages and perquisites.

Consider the leadership qualities being honed in Honors Program student Grace Morris, a 20-year-old junior who is majoring in both economics and international business. Like many top students, Morris devotes time to extracurricular activities in addition to studying hard. She serves as the current president of the Black Student Organization, as well as a volunteer mentor in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, a national one-on-one youth mentoring program that offers positive role models to children in need.

Morris says: "Volunteering doesn't take up a lot of your time, but it does make a world of difference to the kids, and not to mention, you leave feeling really good about yourself."

Since President Milton Glick took office on Aug. 1, 2006, he has pressed to recruit more National Merit Scholars, as well as other top scholars to the University, citing the value their presence adds to campus life:

"Having the best and brightest in our classrooms elevates the learning experience for everyone. When

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# LINCOLN HALL

*Tamara Valentine, director of the Honors Program, is dedicated to helping students like Kristen Spencer, 19, of Reno. Spencer is an undecided sophomore (and definitely not a “geek”) who’s leaning toward a science major. As one of the University’s top students, she appreciates the quality of the education she is receiving at Nevada: “The Honors Program is dedicated to giving everyone the step up needed to take their life to the top,” she says.*

Photo by Theresa Danna-Douglas

## 'Having the best and brightest in our classrooms elevates the learning experience for everyone.'

— Milton Glick

faculty know that they are teaching the best students, they treat all students differently. They have higher expectations and students respond accordingly," Glick says.

As a result of redoubled efforts by Student Services recruiters, academic advisers and faculty, the University welcomed its largest ever contingent — 10 students — of National Merit Scholars for the 2007–2008 academic year.

National Merit Scholars are highly coveted. Entering freshman Colin Kupitz, 18, of Las Vegas, notes, "Colleges were aggressively recruiting me for the last part of my senior year in high school. There were so many letters that I probably threw away a couple of offers for full rides — without realizing it."

Glick notes, however, that there's a lot more to developing a top-notch school than just having brilliant students, however desirable they may be: "Building a first-rate program isn't only about recruiting National Merit finalists — it's about providing programs, services and facilities that deliver a first-rate education and make our University a destination of choice for the best students in Nevada and the West."

The quality of the educational environment is exactly what brought Leonard — who would be a top student in any setting — back to continue her graduate education at Nevada, never hoping for any place "better."

"I really like the University of Nevada School of Medicine. It was my first choice not only because there are small class sizes, but because the environment itself is warm and inviting," Leonard says.

Leonard also chose to stay at Nevada because of the quality of her undergraduate education. Like all Honors Program students, she was encouraged to study abroad and do research — programs that are available to all undergraduates through two innovative programs — the University Study Abroad Consortium and the Office of Undergraduate Research — that, just like Glick envisions, ramp up the services offered to all students to a highly competitive level.

Through USAC and with the financial support of the national Phi Kappa Phi Study

Abroad Award, Leonard spent a summer in Puebla, Mexico and honed her Spanish by taking a medical terminology course. She can now not only converse fluently and is up on the latest slang, but can also communicate complicated medical information such as prescriptions and diagnoses in Spanish. Her skills were put to the test recently while volunteering at a local hospital. Staff called on her to translate for a Spanish-only family and explain complicated procedures and medication information, which she did during a six-hour marathon session.

"It was an amazing experience," she recalls.

Leonard also co-authored a research paper on visual perception with her mentor, Michael Webster, Foundation Professor of psychology. She presented her research at the 2007 meeting of the Vision Sciences Society in Sarasota, Fla., in May. The paper, "Cone-specific gain changes compensate color appearance for differences in spectral sensitivity," will soon be published in the *Journal of Vision*.

Of her Nevada undergraduate experience, Leonard says, "The Honors Program is a very outstanding learning environment, and I would like to express my gratitude to the wonderful faculty, administration and staff at this University." This sentiment is echoed by other top students who have experienced Nevada.

Christina Kim '05 (political science) took on the academic challenges of the Honors Program with gusto: "The requirement of writing an honors senior thesis was invaluable. I think that undertaking a thesis project not only helps with research and writing skills but also provides a good way of wrapping up your undergraduate years. What better way to graduate than with a polished work product that you spent countless numbers of hours on?" Kim, 24, from Reno, began graduate studies at the UCLA School of Law this fall.

### Join the Honors Program Alumni Chapter!

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And Jonathan Floriani, 20, a junior from Las Vegas majoring in biochemistry, raves: "The Honors Program is an amazing guide that enhances an already excellent curriculum here at UNR."

Students give much of the credit for the terrific Honors Program to its director, Tamara Valentine, and her hands-on staff. Floriani recounts how Valentine and the Honors Program staff went beyond the call of duty to help him start and operate a successful student organization. Synergy Operations "has been successful in building events that encourage teamwork, brains and brawn," he says of the organization he started last year.

Studying and even living together in the dorms create bonds of friendship between students, as well as generate an ideal learning environment. Floriani lived in White Pine Hall his entering year: "I met a majority of the friends I have now within the hall... during our usual shenanigans. These are the people that I can rely on for the rest of my life."

Two years ago, the Honors Program and the Department of Residential Life, Housing and Food Service created the Honors Residential Scholars Community, a living learning community on the second floor of Argenta Hall just for honors students. "They automatically have a community when they come in, which is good for students," Valentine says, adding that this "instant" community of top learners is especially important for students from Las Vegas, who don't know the northern Nevada students.

Kupitz, the National Merit Scholar from Las Vegas who began his studies this fall, says the guaranteed admission to the Honors Residential Scholars living learning community was the "sticking point" in selling him on Nevada: "The perks at Reno's Honors Program are better than those at any other college... the nicety of living near and with people that will be in my classes, combined with early enrollment, UNR's scholarship and the Millennium Scholarship, made Reno seem like the perfect choice. And it didn't hurt that I loved the campus when I went on the tour." 

# Donors seek to keep brilliant minds in Nevada

By Melanie Robbins '06M.A.

The problem with National Merit Scholars is that everybody wants them. With 90-plus each year in Nevada and offers pouring in, keeping these top national scholars can be like trying to keep water in a sieve.

Donors like Sara '73 (English/journalism) and Leonard Lafrance feel strongly that it doesn't have to be that way. Inspired by Dean Ted Batchman's concern and President Milton Glick's initiative to bring more National Merit Scholars to the University, the Lafrances have established a \$100,000 scholarship fund to benefit top scholars studying engineering and computer science.

"It was a way to give back," says Sara, who, along with her husband, had a successful 23-year career in the software industry, prior to moving to Incline Village in 1998.

The National Merit Scholarship Program is an academic competition that began in 1955. Of 1.4 million high school-age entrants each year, some 50,000 qualify, based on test scores, for recognition. Of those, only about 8,200 advance to the finalist stage and receive Merit Scholarships from the program.

In 2005, Sara and Leonard established the Lafrance Family Foundation with the mission of recognizing, nurturing, and supporting gifted young people in developing areas of the world as well as contributing to educational programs and establishing scholarships for gifted children in the local area. Their contribution of a National Merit Scholarship for the College of Engineering is in keeping with this endeavor.

Their scholarship fund is working. Three engineering National Merit Scholars have chosen Nevada over other potential schools.

According to Raymond Hooft, 18, an incoming freshman from Sparks who will be majoring in civil engineering, the scholarship clinched the deal. But it was also the warm welcome he received from the University's



Photo by Theresa Danna-Douglas

*Sara and Leonard Lafrance are thrilled to help National Merit Scholars such as incoming freshmen Tyler Aas and Raymond Hooft, who are aspiring engineers.*

recruitment team that made him feel like staying in his hometown.

"It was how much they seemed to want me. I met with President Glick and Provost Frederick, and after meeting with all different kinds of people, I kind of felt at home," Hooft says.

Tyler Aas, 18, also an incoming National Merit Scholar from Reno, said the money was important to his decision, too. Having taken two math classes at Nevada while a senior at Reno High School, Aas says that he "already had a good impression of the school." Aas will major in mechanical engineering.

Joshua Gansberg, 18, also an incoming mechanical engineering major and a National Merit Scholar, hails from Carson City. He chose Nevada because of its proximity to his home, and because the quality of education here is comparable to that he could find anywhere.

"Why go far away to get basically the same caliber of school?" he notes, rhetorically. Like others, Gansberg fielded a number of offers from other institutions.

Despite still being just a short drive from their parents' homes, all three freshmen will be striking out on their own for the first time and are looking forward to living in the Honors Residential Scholars Community, a living learning community in Argenta Hall.

As another aspect of giving back to the

University, Sara chairs the College of Engineering Advisory Board, and the Public Affairs and Advocacy Committee for the University Foundation Board, where she is a trustee.

"The College of Engineering has phenomenal, leading-edge programs. It's a well-kept secret, but it shouldn't be," Sara notes.

The college maintains 15 laboratories and research centers, including Computer Vision and Robotics, Bridge Engineering, Virtual Reality, and Earthquake Engineering, which is among the top ten facilities in the nation, boasting the \$20 million James E. Rogers and Louis Wiener Jr. Large-Scale Structures Labora-

tory. The 9,000-square-foot laboratory holds the only set of three, 50-ton earthquake shake tables in the United States.

Dean of the College of Engineering Ted Batchman notes that the Lafrance's gift will support not only the student recipients, but also the community:

"Through the Lafrance Family Foundation, Sara and Leonard Lafrance support excellence. For years the college has been hearing from our industry partners and our community members that we are losing Nevada's excellent students. We've heard the best and brightest students go to schools in other states. These are our future leaders and this scholarship helps us keep them here as citizens, key managers and entrepreneurs."

Sara and Leonard are also members of Sierra Angels, a Northern Nevada investment group that focuses on promising early stage companies. Sara is active in several educational and service organizations, including Guide Dogs for the Blind, and serves on the Board of Trustees for KNPB Channel 5, Reno Public Television.

Leonard has recently been involved with the development of another software company, and SCORE (Service Core of Retired Executives) a national non-profit association that counsels small businesses.