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USA TODAY's college all-stars gifted in class and beyond

By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

The nation's most gifted college students rightly take pride in their academic achievements, be they in the area of environmental policy, medical research or the classics.

But give them the chance to talk about their proudest accomplishments, and a refreshingly eclectic set of extracurricular interests and talents slips into view.

Matthew Baum, a soon-to-be Yale University graduate whose research on Fragile X Syndrome may someday lead to better treatments for mental retardation, is a wrestler on the side and started a club for beer aficionados. Harvard chemistry major Allen Cheng, 20, who envisions a career as a physician-scientist, finds pleasure in kendo, a form of fencing based on the art of Japanese samurai swordsmanship. And when Aaron Krolikowski is not advocating for environmental justice, he just might be on stage with the Buffalo Chips, a collegiate male a cappella group.

"Music has always been an important part of who I am," says Krolikowski, 22, who will graduate next month from the University at Buffalo and hopes to serve someday in state public office. Writing and arranging music is an escape, he says, and performing is "exhilarating."

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Those are just three of the students named to USA TODAY's 2009 All-USA College Academic First Team. The 20 winners, selected by a panel of judges from among hundreds of college juniors and seniors, each will receive a \$2,500 cash award. Second- and third-team members also were selected, along with honorable mentions. "We're delighted to honor such a multi-talented group of achievers," says Susan Weiss, managing editor of USA TODAY's Life section.

They're selected based on their intellectual endeavors, community service and campus leadership; they all boast high grade-point averages, campus honors and prestigious prizes. Collectively, they have amassed more than a dozen national awards; four are Rhodes Scholars, and eight are members of Phi Beta Kappa national honor society.

Their scientific interests range from the tiniest cell in a research laboratory to outer space in all its wonder. They help teach classes and work with faculty on their research. And they are global citizens. Their studies and service work have taken them to a shantytown in sub-Saharan Africa, an international conference in Bali and orphanages in Nepal.

But they find value, too, in other creative outlets, whether it's running a marathon, sky diving or learning to cook a raccoon.

Such diversions are important — necessary, even, says Baum, 22, who co-founded the Berkeley Beer Club, an unofficial beer-appreciation club that he says emphasizes quality, not quantity. Unlike the English with their afternoon tea, "we do not have an activity ... to give us a few moments to take a break from our busy lives and discuss ideas, problems, or just talk," he says. "It makes me happy to see my friends smiling and talking with one another, even if they have a paper due the next day."

Rooted in family

When asked what has motivated them to achieve their accomplishments, many of them quickly credit their families.

"More than anything else, my parents taught me that no one is inferior or superior to me," says Meredith DeBoom, 22, the daughter of corn and soybean farmers. Her first job was pulling milkweeds for a penny apiece; after graduating from the University of Iowa in May, she's headed to Washington, D.C., where she'll analyze environmental policy in the office of the U.S. secretary of transportation.

Her parents, she says, gave her the confidence to "march up to the corner office to express my views" and the humility to "roll up my sleeves and wash dishes."

Anh Tran, who graduates next month from the University of Minnesota, similarly acknowledges the gift her parents gave her and her sisters.

"My parents fled from Vietnam 18 years ago. They left everything they had," says Tran, 22. Their only goal: "a better future." Her undergraduate studies and advocacy work on diabetes have taken her to Tanzania; now, she's getting ready to study diabetes risk for Asian immigrants on a Fulbright grant to the United Kingdom.

As you would expect, life experience has helped determine the direction that a number of First Team members have taken:

- Carrie Bryant, 23, a Middlebury College graduate who is heading to the University of Oxford to continue her study of the classics, has balanced her academic pursuits with community service work aimed primarily at helping children with pediatric multiple sclerosis. She was diagnosed with the illness after graduating high school and says she is motivated to help others "because there is a lack of resources devoted to this population."

- Jarrad Aguirre, 22, who graduates next month from Yale, plans a career in medicine and global health policy, with a particular interest in disadvantaged and underserved communities. "A family friend's death due to AIDS, a brother's fight with addiction ... my family's reliance on food banks, and many other experiences have convinced me that our society fails to treat all its members with equal respect and consideration," he says. "There are so many resources and so much goodwill in the world, and it is my hope to tap into these to remedy our failings as a society."

- Carrie Johnson, 21, who graduates in May from American University, has spent college pursuing two passions: studying alternative energy and eliminating rural poverty. Her goal is to help her home state, South Dakota, become a leader in wind energy, and she believes Indian reservations hold special promise. "Wind is going to be instrumental in ... combating global climate change," she says. "Throughout South Dakota and on its reservations, which are some of the most impoverished places in the United States, it sure is windy."

'Greater than yourself'

If there's another hallmark of this year's First Team members, it's that they recognize their good fortune, are grateful for their talents and have made sure not to squander opportunities to help others similarly aim high.

West Virginia University engineering major Emily Calandrelli, 21, encourages young women to get involved in the sciences when she makes presentations about her adventures with NASA. And when Charlene Bashore, 22, who graduates in May from Arizona State University, helps put on leadership retreats for high school students, she cites "the importance of being part of something greater than yourself."

"The mere fact I'm at an American university with the chance to learn whatever I want puts me in such a privileged group," says Bashore, a biochemistry major who also plays the violin, is learning Polish and helps raise start-up funds for a school for girls and women in Malawi, Africa. "I try to experience as much of life as I can and try to help others access those same opportunities."

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