

Silverton alumna receives award upon college graduation

2002 Silverton grad named
outstanding female student

BY DANIELLE KUEHNEL
Appeal Tribune
June 21

“When I first set foot on Western’s campus in the fall of 2002, I expected great things of my college experience,” Mary Steers said at Western Oregon University’s commencement ceremony on Saturday.



Danielle Kuehnel / Appeal Tribune

And great things surely were to come for the 2002 Silverton High School graduate in the following four years at the Monmouth campus.

Mary Steers, Silverton High School class of 2002, received the Julia McCulloch Smith Award for outstanding female graduate this year at Western Oregon University.

Now the 2006 recipient of the prestigious Julia McCulloch Smith Award, given annually to one outstanding female graduate at WOU, can also expect great things for her future, as she attends Indiana’s Ball State University (BSU) in the fall to study gerontology.

Steers, who studied psychology, was presented with the Julia McCulloch Smith Award, established 75 years ago, at WOU’s annual awards dinner on May 2, in front of a crowd of family, peers and WOU faculty and staff.

“I actually wasn’t going to go [to the ceremony] because they’re long, and I had an intramural game,” Steers said. “But the Friday before the dinner, my dad called me, told me I was going and hung up.”

Since award recipients are not informed as to which award they will receive, Steers only realized that she would be gifted with the Julia McCulloch Smith Award after WOU Vice President of Student Affairs Gary Dukes began to read her résumé to the crowd.

“It was a little embarrassing to have him read about me,” Steers said. “It’s an honor, and I definitely didn’t expect it.”

Faculty and staff of WOU’s campus nominate recipients, and a committee of 10 school representatives, this year with six faculty members, makes the final decision as to who receives the award.

According to Dukes, the committee looks at students' academic achievements, overall GPA and how they contribute to the community.

"It wasn't one thing in particular that made us choose Mary," Dukes said. "She's well-rounded, and she's a very strong individual on campus with drive and perseverance. She will carry Western's name well."

"It's the premier award," said Steers' academic and thesis adviser Psychology Professor Rob Winningham. "This award is a testament to her work ethic."

While Steers spent her time at SHS playing soccer, basketball and softball and participating in student government and the National Honors Society, she spent much of her college career at WOU participating in psychology research; as a resident assistant and hall host; as part of the Honors Program, Psi Chi and Phi Kappa Phi; and as an intramural sports leader, all while maintaining an impressive 3.84 GPA.

"The most exciting thing is her hard work," Winningham said. "It's heartwarming that she wants to work with older adults. There's more of a need of it, but less interest."

"I'm interested in the cognitive neurology side of gerontology — taking the negative aspects of aging and turning them positive," Steers said. "I'd always been interested in working with kids until last spring when I took a gerontology class with Dr. Winningham. I got really excited about it, and realized that I was passionate about it, and it was something I wanted to pursue."

"Long-term health-care administration is something interesting to me. There are more residential needs in the future that we need to accommodate for," she said. "We need to provide opportunities for people who don't have a lot of money, and with social security going down the drain, I don't know where we're going to get the money."

Steers' recently completed senior thesis — entitled "The Effects of Age on Accurate Age Estimation in Older and Younger Adults" — culminated a year and a half of research reflecting her interest in gerontology. The piece discusses the differences of eyewitnesses to crimes ability to estimate a suspect's age based on the age of the witness.

"She's the ideal student a professor wants to work with," Winningham said of his work with Steers. "She's highly motivated, very empathetic and optimistic, and she is an absolute pleasure to work with."

After completing her studies at BSU, Steers plans on continuing in her education to earn a doctorate.