

Garden Club of Cape Coral Awards 2024 Merit Scholarships

The Garden Club of Cape Coral (GCCC) recently granted four Cape Coral high school seniors a total of \$7,050 through their Merit Scholarship Awards Program. These awards are given annually to local students who excel academically and in their environmental efforts as active members in our community.

The fourteenth annual awards in memory of club co-founder Marty Ward were granted to Lilah Castro and Riley McFarland, both of Cape Coral High School as well as Kylee Lange of North Fort Myers High School. They were selected because of their academic achievements, leadership and hands-on participation in horticulture, agriculture, hydrology and natural resources, as well as commitment to continue with their efforts in conserving our precious environment for the future.

In addition, the fifth annual award in memory of Donna Conway, funded by the Conway family and friends in 2020, was also presented to Nathaniel Lawson of Cape Coral High School due to his dedication throughout his high school years to mentoring other students as they work in the school's Bella Verde Farms. Donna Conway was a long-time member of the club who initiated the club's main fundraiser "March in the Park." This event has been held annually since 2009 and is the source of the funds for the club's activities including scholarships.

Thanks to the precious support of club members and the community, fifty-six awards ranging in value from \$250 to \$2500 have been presented to graduating seniors since the program was established in 2011. The value of the awards is determined by the relevance of each student's course of study, extracurricular activities, community involvement and future goals to preserving the environment.

Besides being a senior and a Cape Coral resident, applicants must present two references, academic history, active participation in horticultural or environmental projects, and a 250-word personal statement. Applications open in January, with a submission deadline in February, award notifications in March and presentations of the awards at the GCCC April meeting.

GCCC meets on the 2nd Wednesday of September through May at 5:45 pm. Please check the club's website for place as it will change next year. Guests are welcome. Website:

www.gardenclubofcapecoral.com

Meet the 2024 awarded graduating seniors:

Lilah Castro, 17. Her passion is water and soil conservation. That's the reason why Lilah assumed a leading role in implementing a hydroponic system at her high school. She has also assisted other volunteers in understanding the benefits of utilizing water in a vertical way as a sustainable method for crop growth. "This is due to its vertical layout, which allows for water not utilized by one plant, to be advantageous for the one below it," explains Lilah. Defined by one her teachers as a science and math young woman, Lilah's seek for excellence goes beyond STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). She is the president of the French National Honor Society, the co-president of her

school's Bella Verde Farms and vice-president of the Key Club. In 2023, she was awarded by the National Hispanic Recognition Program. Lilah combines all these leading roles with over 200 volunteer hours to her school as well as her love for sports, such as Varsity Softball and Varsity Cheer. In fact, she has been awarded as the "most persistent" player by her softball coach. Florida Gulf Coast University is the next step in Lilah's career, where she plans to pursue bachelors and master's degrees in Environmental Engineering. "I seek to help preserve our soil, clean our water, and prevent the further degradation of our ecosystems," notes Lilah. Her academic achievements, leadership experience and perseverance are certainly crucial assets in her desire to help achieve a better world.

Kylee Lange, 18. She loves calculus as much as she loves the natural world. Participating at the Model United Nations conference on biodiversity ignited her desire to conserve and restore ecosystems. That's why she is excited about starting a new chapter in her life by studying environmental engineering at Georgia Institute of Technology. "I want to help communities in the U.S. and internationally that are struggling to live alongside their environment and struggling because of different environmental issues facing the world," explains Kylee. She understands that people and the environment are not two separate entities. Furthermore, she believes that "We affect each other, and as a species, we need to stop treating the natural world like it is invincible." Kylee wants to be part of the solution and dedicate her life to improving societies and the environment. She knows time is of the essence. Not in vain, the list of extracurricular activities, which involves volunteer hours at her church and working as a supervisor in a local water park, is as long as her achievements and awards not only in academia, but also in music (captain of her school's marching band), writing, and sports. From 2016 to 2023, Kylee has been the recipient of the Carson Scholarship, an academic and volunteer-based scholarship given by the Carson Foundation. More awards and recognitions are in store for her, no doubt.

Nathaniel Lawson, 18. He sees the trees and the forest. Nathaniel's attention to detail and his desire to restore large ecosystems allows him to not lose sight of both. Rain or shine, he is where help is needed; either planting at the school's garden over the summer or volunteering on the weekend at a local event to explain the benefits of gardening responsibly. You might also find Nathaniel trying an original recipe with the fruits and vegetables of his labor because cooking is his particular way to show appreciation for the people in his life. Teachers at his school admire his maturity, kindness, positive take in life and uncompromising ability to overcome hardships. "My love for the forests of our nation is something I have known for nearly as long as I can recall, and the years I spent living within them will be the only motivation I need to protect them for as long as I live," confesses Nathaniel. He wants to revolutionize the logging industry, "so that we may better utilize the forests as a natural resource and prolong its survival." The program of environmental engineering offered by Florida Gulf Coast University will help Nathaniel achieve his goal. The unique student- led garden on campus known as the Food Forest will also definitely satiate his passion for gardening during his college years.

Riley McFarland, 18. Riley does not stop. Besides her outstanding academic achievements, she volunteers for local organizations, has a part time job, holds awards in creative writing and excels in sports, such as track and field, cross country, lacrosse, and swimming. She is a four-time state medalist swimmer and has been recognized as one of the fastest local girls. No running track, field or pool is too big for her. Witnessing firsthand natural disasters motivated her to study the impact of humans on

global ecosystems and vice versa. In fact, right after Ian hit our area, Riley rolled up her sleeves in hurricane pickup efforts with her youth group from church and participated in a rescue rebuild program a year later. Riley's main interest focuses on agricultural runoff and how nitrogen and phosphorus pollution contributes to harmful algae blooms in our local waters. Besides pursuing a career in environmental studies at Florida State University, Riley is determined to volunteer and travel around the world to be a part of conservation initiatives at the bottom level. She knows that gaining hands-on experiences will enhance her "perspectives and knowledge on environmental issues and their relation to different cultures."

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For more information, please contact Alessia Leathers at alessialeathers@yahoo.com