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DiSpirito named finalist for prestigious Truman Scholarship

February 22, 2021

Dominique DiSpirito, a University of Maine junior dedicated to strengthening communities through environmental policy, is a finalist for a 2021 Harry S. Truman Scholarship.

The [Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation](#) awards its prestigious, merit-based scholarships to juniors pursuing public service careers. Recipients can receive up to \$30,000 for graduate or professional school, and earn access to "leadership development activities" and "special opportunities for internships and employment with the federal government," according to the foundation.

Finalists like DiSpirito, a political science major and Honors College student from Woonsocket, Rhode Island, are selected based on their record of community service and government involvement, leadership experience and academic, writing and analytical abilities.

The foundation selected 193 finalists from 129 institutions out of the 845 applicants from 328 institutions this year, a record number. According to its website, between 60 and 65 scholarship recipients are expected to be selected. DiSpirito, a first-generation college student, will be interviewed by one of the foundation's regional review panels on March 31. The Truman Scholars will be named April 14, according to the organization.

"I am honored to represent the communities that have invested their support and resources in preparing the next generation to make a difference, and I look forward to continuing to build resilience through community-based environmental initiatives," DiSpirito says.

Food insecurity, natural resource mismanagement and pollution plague many American communities and hurt their resilience. DiSpirito is pursuing a career that would allow her to tackle these plights through locally-supported environmental programs, a goal she has worked towards since her first semester.

The UMaine junior has volunteered for the Maine Day Meal Packout since fall 2018. During the 2019 and 2020 events, she served as the food bank liaison, ensuring they receive the about 70,000 donated meals donated each year.



When the COVID-19 pandemic first uprooted daily life last year, DiSpirito and a few volunteers connected with partner food banks and local service organizations through email and virtual calls to ensure people in need could still receive meals. They were able to distribute more than 73,000 meals to 16 food security programs statewide in 2020.

“At the end of the project, my community had become more resilient in the midst of the crisis of the century,” DiSpirito wrote in her scholarship application letter. “Our success taught me that any challenge can be overcome with resolve, creativity, and resourcefulness.”

The Senator Geroge J. Mitchell Center for Sustainability Solutions recruited DiSpirito as a food waste solutions intern in October. The UMaine junior has helped launch two of the center’s six consolidated food waste collection pilot projects, which, according to her, “has made me understand that effective solutions require an in-depth understanding of the problem and its sociopolitical context.”

In addition to combating food insecurity, DiSpirito’s undergraduate experience has also included aiding Kate Ruskin, a lecturer of ecology and environmental sciences, as a student research assistant, founding and managing the campus Interfaith Group, participating in the First Generation Student Steering Committee, through which she helped plan First Generation Week in 2019 and assisted with other programs; and co-hosting and co-organizing the annual International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day in 2019 and 2020. She has also devoted her time to advancing the Honors College in various ways.

The UMaine junior serves as president of the Honors College Student Advisory Board, creating and managing its organizational budget, conducting weekly general and executive meetings and proposing new programs. She also assists the college as an ambassador and is a member of the Honors Council.

“Dominique is the student every educator hopes for — very bright, engaged, hardworking, intellectually curious, compassionate, considerate and truly motivated by a desire to make a real difference in the lives of others,” wrote Honors College associate dean Melissa Ladenhein in her recommendation letter.

DiSpirito’s previously received the 2020 Maine Policy Scholars Fellowship, a Center for Undergraduate Research Fellowship, a Servant Heart Scholarship and two Mark and Katherine Zeitlin Haskell scholarships.

Earning a Truman Scholarship would help DiSpirito pay to attend Yale Law School and pursue a J.D. of Public Interest Law and a Master of Environmental Management. She would be the sixth recipient from UMaine since 1980, according to the foundation website.

“Dominique’s passion for and commitment to public service, combined with her limitless leadership potential, make her an excellent candidate for the Truman Scholarship,” says Mark Brewer, a professor of political science and UMaine faculty representative with the foundation.

Congress created the foundation, a living memorial to President Truman and presidential monument to public service, in 1975. The Truman Scholarship serves as the premier graduate fellowship in the U.S. for future leaders in public service.

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