

UW-Madison: A few of the outstanding students spring commencement 2020

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MADISON – The coronavirus outbreak changed a lot of things at UW-Madison this semester; the excellence of this spring’s graduating class was not one of them. As we prepare to celebrate commencement virtually on May 9, here are just a few of the seniors and graduate students who achieved remarkable things during their time with us. Consider their accomplishments a small representation of the caliber of the Class of 2020.

CREATING ART SPACES FOR HERSELF AND OTHERS

In middle school, Shasparay Lighteard wanted to be a stage actress, but the roles she sought didn’t always come her way. Then she discovered a neighborhood poetry slam. “For three minutes and 10 seconds, I was able to say my piece,” says Lighteard, of Austin, Texas. She learned a valuable lesson that day: sometimes you need to create your own opportunities.

At UW-Madison, where she is a First Wave Scholar, the nationally acclaimed poet founded and produced the inaugural Black Arts Matter festival. “I wanted to highlight black people in Madison while exposing the community to artists it didn’t necessarily know existed,” she says. A second festival is in the works.

For her major, Lighteard chose theater, the medium that she felt had not fully embraced her as a child. “I guess I believe in myself enough now to come back to this world,” she says. Post-graduation, Lighteard will continue artistic pursuits. She also has been accepted to the arts administration graduate program at the Bolz Center at the Wisconsin School of Business. Her advice to others: “Create the space

you want to see.”

SERVING HIS COUNTRY AS PART OF THE STATE’S COVID-19 RESPONSE

Alex King started feeling the pull of the military as a teenager. He liked the idea of serving his country, and he wanted to be part of a team, something bigger than himself. He also knew he wanted to attend college. Today, those two spheres have overlapped in an unexpected way.

As King completes his final days of classes as a senior at UW-Madison, he also is supporting the state’s COVID-19 response as a member of the Wisconsin Air National Guard. A political science and legal studies double-major from Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, King is among the Guard’s finest – in April, the Wisconsin Air National Guard announced King as the 2019 Airman of the Year. Get inspired here.

REACHING THE TOP ECHELON ACADEMICALLY

A Rhodes Scholarship often is considered the pinnacle of college academic achievement. This year, three UW-Madison students made it all the way to the finalist stage. Claire Evensen of Verona, Wisconsin, Kevin Crosby of Brandywine, Maryland and Lauren Jorgensen of Stillwater, Minnesota, were among 236 finalists vying for the coveted 32 scholarships. Evensen and Crosby will be earning bachelor’s degrees this spring, Jorgensen a master’s degree. Read more about their accomplishments here.

ADDRESSING HUNGER PROBLEMS ON CAMPUS

This past academic year, Monica Starck and Brianna DeNamur had full responsibility – and were held accountable – for designing, implementing and managing a new campus initiative. The two seniors were the inaugural co-directors of the UW Frozen Meals Program, an effort to reduce food waste and food insecurity by taking leftover food from campus dining halls and getting it to students who need it. They developed the business plan, wrote grants, created a strategic plan and much more.

“They learned and demonstrated what it really takes to address a social problem and sustain it,” says lecturer Monica Theis of the Department of Food Science. Starck, of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, is graduating with a double-major in nutritional sciences and life sciences communication. DeNamur, of Rhinelander, Wisconsin, is earning a bachelor’s degree in nutritional sciences with a certificate in global

health. Read more about their efforts [here](#).

SOUNDING THE ALARM ON THE CORONAVIRUS

For many UW-Madison students, senior Amy Shircel performed a valuable public service – perhaps a life-saving one. Her early, harrowing account of needing hospitalization for the brutal symptoms of COVID-19 put a human face on the pandemic and underscored the need for stay-at-home orders. Shircel, of Kenosha, Wisconsin, first tweeted about her ordeal in March. Millions have now seen that tweet or one of the many follow-up interviews the 22-year-old did with national and international media outlets.

“Even if you think you’re healthy, even if you think you’re invincible, you can be like me and feel like you could almost die from it,” Shircel told *The Daily Cardinal*. Now fully recovered, she has donated plasma in hopes that her antibodies can treat others. A double-major in political science and environmental studies, Shircel plans to apply to law school in the fall.

LEAVING HER MARK IN MULTIPLE ARENAS

Artist. Journalist. Scholar. Leader. Shiloah Coley excelled at many things during her time at UW-Madison. Her achievements culminated in a Truman Scholarship, one of the most prestigious undergraduate honors in the country. One of just 62 national winners in 2019, Coley, of Olympia Fields, Illinois, will receive \$30,000 toward graduate school. She is majoring in journalism, with certificates in studio art and African-American studies.

As a doctoral student in sociology, Coley plans to focus her research on the impact that arts programming, access to arts education, and public art practices have on low-income communities of color. First, though, she will begin a master of fine arts degree this fall at American University. Read more about Coley [here](#).

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT, PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE

Emiliana Almanza Lopez has spent much of her college career focused on environmental justice – researching it, helping others understand it, seeking solutions. She specializes in issues of racial justice within the broader environmental realm. “Even many environmental organizations do not fully take into account the disproportionate environmental degradation on communities of color and poor

communities,” says Almanza Lopez, of St. Paul, Minnesota.

Last year, she was selected as a Newman Civic Fellow, a prized national honor awarded on the basis of her commitment to environmental justice and her leadership potential. During her senior year, Almanza Lopez has developed and facilitated workshops for other students while working for a second year as the social justice education intern at the Multicultural Student Center. She also has been involved with the Wisconsin Student Climate Action Coalition. Majoring in environmental sciences and sociology, Almanza Lopez plans to work for the Democratic Party of Wisconsin during the presidential election campaign while applying to law school.

INTERVENING TO SAVE A LIFE

Bystander intervention – or stepping in with care and confidence when you see someone in need or a wrong that needs to be righted – is an important part of the culture at UW-Madison. Last fall, senior Nate Coulthurst became one of three people who helped save a man from drowning in Lake Mendota. “I was shaken up afterward,” says Coulthurst, of Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. “But at the time, this adrenalin rush is going through you.” He and his fellow rescuers earned high praise from both city and university officials. An agricultural and life sciences major, Coulthurst is considering graduate school as his next step.