

UW-Eau Claire: Continues Mary L. Hilfiker Scholarship Fund for Rice Lake High School students

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Mary Hilfiker's career has taken her far and wide. From the Hopi/Navajo Reservations of Arizona to Sitka, Alaska; South Korea; and beyond, the Rice Lake native and University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire graduate has dedicated a lifetime of work to education.

And with a recent commitment of \$1 million to the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, that legacy will continue.

The Mary L. Hilfiker Scholarship Fund is a permanently endowed scholarship for graduates of Rice Lake High School who have been accepted to and plan to attend UW-Eau Claire, including the Barron County campus.

The scholarship is renewable for up to four years, provided the student maintains a GPA of 2.75 or higher and remains enrolled full time throughout the school year. While the minimum annual scholarship award is \$1,000, more than half of recent recipients have received the full, \$2,500 award, totaling \$10,000 over four years.

Though scholarship preference is given to female applicants and those who plan to major in nursing, education or STEM-related programs, Hilfiker emphasized that any interested Rice Lake High School seniors should apply.

"Do not assume that you will not receive a scholarship — just like applying for a job — if you don't meet every criteria," Hilfiker says. "Exceptions can be made for certain requirements, as we want to encourage students to apply."

Hilfiker, now a resident of St. Paul, graduated from Rice Lake High School and

attended UW-Eau Claire, receiving her education degree in 1967 before embarking on a long career focused on teaching, counseling and educational administration. Her parents, Hulda and Ernest, also valued education. Hulda began her own career as a young schoolteacher and was a founder of the Rice Lake Area Scholarship Foundation.

Hilfiker herself received a small, state-funded scholarship to attend UW-Eau Claire. “At the time, I don’t think it was the money so much as somebody else having faith in me,” she says.

Hilfiker credits her time in college with an enormous expansion of her relationships, community involvement and confidence.

“When I got to college, my ability to get involved just exploded,” she says. “I was on all these committees and boards, in a sorority, and really valuing the social connections that college gave me.”

Summer Marske, a UW-Eau Claire senior and Rice Lake High School graduate, was one of the first recipients of the Mary L. Hilfiker Scholarship in 2018. And not unlike Hilfiker, Summer has been able to take full advantage of the opportunities UW-Eau Claire has to offer, thanks in large part to her scholarship.

“The scholarship has given me a lot of financial freedom throughout the academic year,” Marske says. “Instead of having to work a ton to make money, I’ve been able to focus not only on my classes, but on leading organizations, research, my career goals and studying abroad.”

Marske is a double major in Spanish and communications sciences and disorders who plans to attend graduate school in speech language pathology. She cited another large and unquantifiable benefit of the scholarship: the community built between its recipients and Hilfiker.

“We’ve been able to create a bond with her through luncheons that she hosts,” Marske says. “So she’s not just leaving it at the scholarship — we’ve been able to become close with Mary and form relationships with each other.”

Hilfiker agrees that these luncheons have built camaraderie among the scholarship recipients and enjoys listening to the older students share advice with the freshmen and sophomores, noting how impressed she is with each new cohort of scholarship

recipients she meets.

“I think Rice Lake High School does a very good job of preparing students for what’s after high school,” she says. “These Rice Lake grads are so confident, so well-spoken, and so gung-ho about life and what they’re going to be doing in the future.”

Applications for the Mary L. Hilfiker Scholarship are available through the Rice Lake High School Student Services Office at 715-234-2181 or online at https://rlhs.ricelake.k12.wi.us/student_services_home_page.

Current Hilfiker Scholarship recipients:

Bethany Johnson, Summer Marske (2018); Shyleigh Iveland, Anakah Denison (2019); Emma Panasuk, Taylor Zuzek (2020); Sarah Buchli, Cole Gregorich (2021).

The gift noted in this piece was received by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation’s Sustaining Human Innovation Campaign, which launched in the Fall of 2021. The campaign aims to generate sustainable funding in the form of endowments for student success, faculty investments, programs of distinction and private funding for facilities projects. The goal of the Sustaining Human Innovation Campaign is to secure more than \$125 million in gifts by June 30, 2026.

For more information, please visit <https://foundation.uwec.edu/>