



Greeley West senior Lanna Giauque, fourth from left, along with 11 other scholars from across the nation, poses with former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, center, at the Aspen Ideas Festival last summer.

Once-in-a-lifetime opportunity leads Greeley West scholars to create local 'Ideas Festival'

October 9, 2009 – Ideas can be viral, and one outstanding Greeley West High School student and one of her favorite teachers spent a week in the “hot zone” of Aspen last summer. West senior Lanna Giauque and history teacher Edie Reynolds were one of 12 pairs of public-school scholars invited to the Bezos Foundation’s Aspen Ideas Festival from June 30 through July 6.

In the rarified air, they received even more rare access to some of the world’s foremost thought leaders. Scholars met privately and in small groups with retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Pulitzer-prize winning writer Thomas Friedman, humanitarian architect Cameron Sinclair, longtime newsman Bob Schieffer, as well as numerous Harvard professors, CEOs, entrepreneurs, artists, and technology innovators.

“The fact that all these people were there just so they could hear opposite opinions from their own showed me that people really do care, really do want to make a difference, and they want to change things and the way things are,” Lanna said. “It was really eye opening.”

An aspiring research scientist, Lanna was most excited about meeting famed ocean rights activist Sylvia Earle. Looking ahead to her career, Lanna says she will have a hard time choosing between neuroscience, geoscience, and marine biology. As she looks to make discoveries in those realms, she is also aiming to prompt sociological and cultural understanding as well.



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Part of the Ideas Festival experience is taking it home and sharing it. The Bezos Family Foundation, run by the parents of Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos, provides all-expense paid accommodations for 12 exceptional students from public high schools. Lanna earned her extremely rare opportunity because of a lifetime of community involvement. Back when she was a fourth grader, she started a fundraising project to sponsor the art room at the then-new University Schools building. She raised \$8,000 through recycling newspapers and aluminum cans over the course of two years, and the recycling efforts continue to this day. She learned during her week in Aspen that members of the selection committee were impressed with her community-mindedness at such a young age.

Each morning, student scholars had breakfast together, then had their options of going to a smorgasbord of discussion sessions with the guest speakers, to whom they referred as “notables.” Topics of discussion included innovations in education, environmental science, and Islam’s place on the world stage. Group lunches were spent with one notable at a time, followed by more presenters in the afternoon.

“It was absolutely incredible,” Lanna said. “During lunch there would be big tables and people would be all around just discussing an issue. It was pretty intimidating but it was also really, really cool.”

For Reynolds, a teacher with 20 years of experience, the discussion among leaders in education innovation shed unexpected light. “We’re going through so much innovation here in District 6,” she said. “I began to realize how cutting edge some of the things we’re doing in this district are and how they tend to fit in with this vision of innovation that a lot of groups have for public education right now.”

Such afternoon discussions gave way to evenings that were part sight-seeing and part fine dining followed by extensive, continued talk of the day’s topics among the students.

“Everyone brought something different to the table,” Lanna said. “Everyone thought of things differently.” With one student who had citizenship in three countries, a boy from rural Maine, and another from the Bronx, the student-scholar group was a diversity lesson on its own.



Greeley West senior Lanna Giauque, left, and U.S. history teacher Edie Reynolds spent a week in Aspen at the Bezos Ideas Festival last summer.



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The scholars spent the evening of the Fourth of July at Mike and Jackie Bezos' house – “probably the biggest house I've ever seen,” Lanna said – and were treated to their own private fireworks display from the Bezos' patio. But that was not the most interesting aspect of the evening for Reynolds.

“It became very apparent to me how exceptional (the students) were the night we spent at the Bezos house because – I don't know how much they planned it – but they gave these impromptu performance sessions,” she said. “They were just astounding. Kids did a monologue from Shakespeare or did a rap song or sang a song from ‘The Music Man.’ It was an amazing performing group; I was just so impressed with them.

“In the sessions I was always amazed at the great questions they asked and the great insight they showed,” Reynolds said. “Lanna fit right in, clearly among her peers.”

To qualify for the Bezos Scholars Program, students must attend a public school with a significant amount of its population that receives free or reduced-price meals; score well on the ACT, SAT or PSAT; have a GPA of 3.5 or higher; be enrolled in AP or IB classes; pass through a screening process; write four essays; and impress a selection panel via a phone interview.

With so many high achievers discussing new and different ways of thinking about the world around them, Lanna and Reynolds, along with all other student-teacher scholar teams, were challenged to extend the concept of an ideas festival to their own communities. To that end, they have begun recruiting a couple dozen students and as many teachers to plan the first-ever Greeley Ideas Festival, scheduled for Feb. 1-5.

Inspired by their eclectic experience in Aspen, they are planning for activities and learning opportunities during the day at Greeley West, with nightly speakers and panels centered on the theme of “Diversity – the Equation for Success.” The first night will focus on education innovation and how District 6 is preparing students for the future; the second night will highlight religious diversity in the community; the third night will feature discussions about minority populations; the fourth night will be for understanding Greeley's new Somali population; and Friday will be the culminating celebration of diversity. Lanna and Reynolds are hoping to use their new connections to notables to bring a widely recognized speaker to the area for the final evening of idea sharing.

For both, the project is a natural outgrowth of the inspiration they were able to tap in Aspen. “I guess the overall impression that the Ideas Fest made on me was listening to people who were truly passionate about a cause or their business or leadership – whatever their cause might be, they lived and breathed it every day,” Reynolds said. “And so it really made Lanna and me think about ‘what is important to Greeley? What does this community need and what do we care about, too?’ Diversity seemed to make the most sense, and I think – because there's so many different people at this Aspen Fest, you're listening to so many different ideas and so much innovation – that you just couldn't help but appreciate the diverse opinions, views, passions that we witnessed.”

Organizers of the Greeley Ideas Festival will announce more details as the event draws near.