

Garden Club of Cape Coral awards 2022 Merit Scholarships

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Courtney Dingerson was one of the Garden Club's 2022 Merit Scholarship recipients.

ALESSIA LEATHERS

Four Cape Coral high school seniors were recently granted a total of \$7,100 by the Garden Club of Cape Coral through its Merit Scholarship Awards Program. These awards are given annually to local students who excel academically and in their environmental efforts as active members in the community.

The 12th annual awards in memory of club co-founder Marty Ward were granted to Amelia Castro-Vargas of Mariner High School, Courtney Dingerson of Ida S. Baker High School as well as Sofia Huber and Destiny Lowe, both students of Cape Coral

High School. They were selected because of their academic achievements, community involvement and commitment to continue through their careers with their efforts in conserving our precious environment for the future.

In addition, the third annual award in memory of Donna Conway, funded by the Conway family and friends in 2020, was also presented to Huber due to her unique interest in studying regenerative agriculture. Conway was a long-time member of the club who initiated the club's main fundraiser March in the Park, held annually since 2009. Besides her focus on sustainable agriculture, Huber also was awarded due to her stellar academic performance and her passion for mentoring younger students.

Thanks to the precious support of club members and the community, 49 awards ranging in value from \$250 to \$1,600 have been presented to graduating seniors since the program was established more than a decade ago. The value of the awards is determined by the relevance of each student's course of study, extracurricular activities, community involvement and future career goals.

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 submission deadline in February, award notifications in March and presentations usually at the GCCC April meeting.



2022 Merit Scholarship winners included, from left, Sofia Huber, Amelia Castro-Vargas and Destiny Lowe. CARMEN SPRAGUE

GCCC meets on the second Wednesday of the month from September through May at 5:45 p.m. at Kiwanis Hall, 360 Santa Barbara Blvd. Guests are welcome.

For more information about the Garden Club, please visit the club's website at www.gardenclubofcapecoral.com

Meet the 2022 awarded graduating seniors:

- Amelia Castro-Vargas, 18. She wants to clean not only our planet, particularly the beaches and coral reefs of her native Dominican Republic, but also Earth's outer space. By designing a computer algorithm, Castro-Vargas plans to address the often disregarded problem of space pollution. *"By leaving space debris, we are risking a potential threat to the terrestrial environment and astral environment,"* observes Castro-Vargas. That's why after graduating from Mariner High School, she will start this fall studying computer science at Florida State University in Tallahassee, as a first step to pursue a space and technology career in the sister branch of the U.S. Air Force, the U.S Space Force. *"I want to work with engineers and scientists to provide the most effective solution to leave little to no trash in every mission,"* states Castro-Vargas. Clearly, the sky is not the limit for this young woman who might even break the glass ceiling in a spacesuit.

- Courtney Dingerson, 17. Passionate about helping others, it comes to no surprise that Dingerson wants to pursue a career in medicine. The program in biology offered by the University of Florida is her next stop this fall after graduating from Ida S. Baker High School. The hours she dedicates volunteering for different organizations, such as Kiwanis through their Key Club, and the National Honor Society, which she serves as a president since 2019, are only comparable to the hours she spends studying science. In fact, Dingerson received the Science Student of the Year Award in 2020-2021 for her enthusiasm and dedication in the field. After participating in a locally well-known gardening project throughout her years at Trafalgar Middle School, she didn't think twice about joining her high school's garden club. *"I believe through everyone's actions we can keep our environment flourishing; every drop of water makes ripple effects, as do our actions to preserve the ecosystem,"* notes Dingerson. Avoiding the use of chemical products outdoors and planting native species are two of her main priorities to honor her commitment of doing her part for a safe and healthy environment.



Three of the four awarded high school seniors with members of the Merit Scholarship Committee of the Garden Club of Cape Coral. CARMEN SPRAGUE

- Sofia Huber, 19. She could literally kiss the ground under her feet. Huber is a fervent advocate for soil health and wants to learn all about regenerative agriculture. She believes that sustainable agriculture is the solution to not only hunger and poverty, but also in the fight against climate change due to its ability to sequester greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide. According to Huber, *“advocating for the importance of soil health and sustainable agriculture practices as a solution to climate change is my biggest passion, and something I feel destined to pursue.”* Huber understands that science and politics go hand in hand. That explains why after graduating from Cape Coral High School, Huber will start this fall studying environmental science with a minor in political science at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers. *“As a human living on this planet, I feel as though I owe it to Mother Earth to take care of her after she has spent her whole life taking care of us,”* reflects Huber. She is the recipient of both Marty Ward and Donna Conway awards this year.

- Destiny Lowe, 18. She is highly concerned about the debris in our oceans. Her worries are real. According to the World Economic Forum, plastics will outweigh fish by midcentury if current production and improper disposal rates don't decrease. Lowe decided to address the issue and perform her own research by analyzing water samples from different beaches in South Florida to determine the number of micro plastics in our coast. Her research demonstrated that our beaches are no exception to plastic

pollution. *“I want to reverse the harmful effects that have taken a toll on our Earth,”* notes Lowe. Once she graduates from Cape Coral High School, Lowe will start this fall studying environmental engineering with a minor in marine studies at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers. *“With the increasing human population and the constant destruction of natural resources, I want to be able to do my part in seeking out environmentally friendly solutions that increase efficiency and provide innovative ideas,”* observes Lowe. The oceans are vast, but Lowe’s thirst for knowledge is certainly a good match.