

Garden Club of Cape Coral Awards 2023 Merit Scholarships

The Garden Club of Cape Coral (GCCC) recently granted three Cape Coral high school seniors a total of \$7,050 through their Merit Scholarship Awards Program. These awards are given annually to local students who excel academically and in their environmental efforts as active members in our community.

The thirteenth annual awards in memory of club co-founder Marty Ward were granted to Reina Diaz of Island Coast High School, Eric Feichthaler of Oasis High School, and Chase Quorollo of Cape Coral High School. They were selected because of their academic achievements, leadership and hands-on participation in horticulture, agriculture, hydrology and natural resources, as well as commitment to continue with their efforts in conserving our precious environment for the future.

In addition, the fourth annual award in memory of Donna Conway, funded by the Conway family and friends in 2020, was also presented to Reina Diaz due to the constant dedication throughout her four years in high school to the study of agricultural sciences and the creation of raised gardens and hydroponic systems around several schools in Lee County. Donna Conway was a long-time member of the club who initiated the club's main fundraiser "March in the Park," which has been held annually since 2009.

Thanks to the precious support of club members and the community, fifty-two awards ranging in value from \$250 to \$2500 have been presented to graduating seniors since the program was established in 2011. The value of the awards is determined by the relevance of each student's course of study, extracurricular activities, community involvement and future commitment to the environment.

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

GCCC meets on the 2nd Wednesday of September through May at 5:45 pm at Palmetto Pine Country Club, 940 SW 9th Ct. Guests are welcome. Website:

www.gardenclubofcapecoral.com

Meet the 2023 awarded graduating seniors:

Reina Diaz, 18. Growing food is her passion. She holds two certificates in agriculture sciences from the Island Coast High School Academy of Natural Resources. As Lee County's first leading academy, this four-year program focuses on environmental studies and sustainability by integrating agriculture, aquaculture, hydroponics and alternative energies. That's where Reina had the opportunity to learn and teach others about raising tilapia, growing herbs and vegetables, and harnessing renewable energy through solar panels. "My passion for agriculture has grown upon witnessing the dedication, hard work, time, and

effort being contributed to my school's agriculture program with the help of students, my agriculture teacher, our principals, and district environmental education advisors," notes Reina. Florida Gulf Coast University and the University of Florida are the first two schools she plans to attend in her ambitious road to achieve the ultimate degree in Agribusiness. Reina is passionate about supporting sustainable agriculture, particularly in more urban areas, and to educate the next generation on important environmental aspects. "I have always loved to teach others, so I've also considered a career as a botany professor or agribusiness manager." Reina truly honors the adage "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." Fueled with passion and knowledge, she was awarded the Academy of Natural Resources Student of the Year not once but twice. Reina definitely has what it takes to achieve her goal of nurturing the world.

Eric Feichthaler Jr, 18. Avid explorer, honors student, published author and songwriter, creator and host of two YouTube channels, math tutor and instructor, dedicated volunteer, captain of two varsity teams, officer in different clubs and societies, and once intern for the City of Cape Coral Engineering Department are some of the roles Eric has assumed in his last four years at Oasis High School. Eric truly embodies the modern version of a renaissance young man. His achievements excel in quantity and quality. His love for Yellowstone motivated him to explore all 63 U.S. National Parks (yes, each one) and share his experience through an illustrated book and two YouTube channels that today have over 7,000 subscribers. His commitment to Kiwanis Key Club, among other local organizations, made him the recipient of the Congressional Award Gold Medal with over 600 hours as a volunteer of public service. Already accepted at the prestigious Georgetown University, Eric wants to pursue a degree in Environmental Sciences since loving and understanding nature is what constitutes his true north. "Learning about, visiting, and protecting America's national parks has been an important part of my life for ten years, and I plan to pursue a career in which I can find ways to protect these incredible, unique environments," explains Eric. His long list of awards, recognitions, and achievements are a testament of his indelible and indefatigable determination to protect our natural resources.

Chase Qurollo, 18. His positive attitude certainly helps him understand the ebbs and flows of life, literally. Hurricane Ian destroyed in the blink of an eye all the efforts and countless hours he put into building mats to test bioremediation techniques in the ponds at Cape Coral High School. However, and despite the obvious disappointment, his passion and spirit are still standing. "I am a faithful man that does not falter or deter when faced with a challenge," observes Chase with a big smile. Fishing might have taught him patience as well as his love for capturing nature (an elusive model, indeed) as an award-winning environmental photographer. Chase explains that "photography is my way of showing that the environment is beautiful and worth protecting." Chase believes in the need to adopt a techno-centric approach to restore the equilibrium of our ecosystems, like in the case of his high school project, which aimed to imitate natural processes to remove excess nutrients from bodies of water. The next step is moving to Orlando this fall to pursue a degree in Environmental Engineering at the University of Central Florida. His academic achievements as well as perfect attendance throughout his four years of high school certainly highlight Chase's unyielding decision to be an environmental steward.

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