

The Rhodes to Oxford



Andrea DenHoed's academic home at OU has been the Honors College, housed in David L. Boren Hall. In fall 2008 the National Merit Scholar from Aurora, Colorado, will have a new identity as a Rhodes Scholar studying English literature at St. Anne's College, Oxford.

Andrea DenHoed had a dream and a plan to achieve her goal. Now she has joined an elite group of OU's most distinguished scholars.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Photos by Robert Taylor

Andrea DenHoed's story is a tale of interweaving roads—a crossing where India meets America, where the fictional universe of Bertie Wooster meets the imagination of a curious child, and where a fearless young scholar meets the world awaiting.

Andrea's tale is that of a Rhodes Scholar. In spring 2008, the letters/international studies senior became the 27th in an elite group of OU graduates who have won what one former scholar calls "The Heisman Trophy of Academics."

Hers is a story with an unlikely beginning, but one that makes perfect sense when all of the pieces are revealed. Like so many others, Andrea's story starts with a boy and a girl.

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Last summer, against the backdrop of an Indian monsoon, Andrea sat in her grandmother's Calcutta kitchen and marveled at the facts of her life. If her mother, Nancy, had not been goaded by friends into applying for a graduate exchange program in Wyoming, she might never have left India and met a young nursing student named Jeff. And Nancy might never have become both mother and teacher to four children in Aurora, Colorado.

The DenHoed children were home schooled. In addition to a regular curriculum, they were encouraged to follow their interests in self-directed study. When a 10-year-old Andrea became fascinated with Mark Twain, she was set loose to read all of his works. When Andrea discovered P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves and Wooster stories, she was free to explore a mysterious world called Oxford.

"I think I must have been about 12 or so when I realized that Oxford was a college," admits DenHoed, a lively 22-year-old with a wry sense of humor. Pre-teen Andrea marched up to her mother and announced that someday she would be attending Oxford University, to which her mother deadpanned, "Well, you'll have to become a Rhodes Scholar to afford it."

Andrea threw herself into reading everything she could find on Oxford and researched former Rhodes Scholars the way some kids research baseball players. Yet she never dreamed that she would someday become a Rhodes Scholar herself.

"I don't think I ever thought of it as a practical thing," she says.

That was, not until years later, when the National Merit Scholar came to the University of Oklahoma and was admitted into the Honors College. Andrea participated in OU's Honors

at Oxford program, which allows OU students to travel to England and study a subject in-depth for three weeks under the tutelage of an Oxford professor. Andrea studied the works of William Shakespeare and realized that the world she had only once imagined was very real indeed.

"Before the summer program, I'd wanted to study at Oxford the same way that I currently want to be a rock star," she jokes. "I guess being there helped me to see that it was actually doable. I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that I was so wide-eyed and awestruck, but I guess there's nothing wrong with that."

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The road to Rhodes is intense.

This year, Andrea was among a dozen OU students who passed through the rigors of an OU committee selecting applicants for the Rhodes Trust. A flurry of painstaking interviews, letters of recommendation and essay writing ended with two OU students—Andrea and Jim Hartline, a microbiology senior from Scribner, Nebraska—being sent to the district competition in Des Moines, Iowa.

Once in Des Moines, the OU students underwent a two-day selection process. It began with a reception to meet the other 14 district Rhodes applicants and the judges who would be scrutinizing them during a rigorous panel interview the following day. Only two would be chosen to represent the district and join 30



Melanie Wright, right, the Honors College director of curriculum and national scholarship competitions and DenHoed's friend and adviser throughout her undergraduate career, finds in OU's newest Rhodes Scholar an "interesting mix" of intellectual curiosity, sense of humor, complete fearlessness and a willingness to any new experience.

other Rhodes Scholars from throughout the United States.

“Honestly, I found the reception more intimidating than the interview,” Andrea says, adding that she observed some fellow applicants trying to meet all of the judges and share the finer points of their résumés during the reception. “But I finally realized the best strategy was just to be yourself. They’re looking for a person to award the scholarship to, not a résumé.”

The founders of the Rhodes Trust said the same thing a century ago. Rhodes Scholars were to be selected on the basis of academic achievement, but also for such traits as “energy to use one’s talents to the full, exemplified by fondness for and success in sports; truth, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak; and moral force of character and instincts to lead.”

It is a tall order, but Andrea fits the bill, says Melanie Wright, director of honors curriculum and national scholarship competitions for the Honors College. Wright met Andrea as an incoming freshman and has been both adviser and friend throughout her college career.

“We all assume a Rhodes Scholar would be interested in learning and intellectually curious, and Andrea is certainly. She is also comfortable with who she is, funny, enjoyable and utterly fearless,” Wright says.

Wright’s definition of “fearless” includes a National Merit Scholar with no background in sports joining the male-dominated OU intramural rowing team, which practices at 6 a.m. five times a week in downtown Oklahoma City. Or accepting a dare to enter the Miss OU Pageant and singing in front of hundreds. Or serving as a business intern in India and asking to use free time to teach English to impoverished elementary school students.

“She’s an interesting mix,” Wright adds. “I won’t call her an experience junkie, but she will try anything. She’s just always herself.”

That sense of self helped Andrea face the seven-member Rhodes Trust selection panel during 20 minutes of questioning. Among other things, they asked her to recite something she had written from memory; discuss Plato’s ideal city; explore the power of literature for good or evil and the responsibility of artists toward the subjects they are portraying; and give her opinion of the Wes Anderson comedy, “The Darjeeling Limited.”

Andrea felt good about the interview. Then she waited “two long, long hours” with the other 31 applicants. Finally, the interview room door opened, and Andrea and three other students were asked to come back for second interviews. Nerves now stretched tight, she answered another 10 minutes of questions that included comparing Chairman Mao with George Washington and applying post-modern literary criticism to *David Copperfield*. Andrea responded confidently and breathed a sigh of relief.

One more question, the judges said: apply the same literary criticism to *Moby Dick*.

“I had to tell them that I’ve never read *Moby Dick*,” she says sheepishly.

“I really thought I had flopped my second interview. I walked out of there thinking, nope, no way, absolutely not. The last



OU Rhodes Scholar #27, Andrea DenHoed, stops by the campus statue of OU Rhodes Scholar #8, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Carl Albert, who won the coveted scholarship in 1931.

words out of my mouth were, ‘I’ve never read *Moby Dick*.’ ”

Another agonizing wait later, the judges opened the doors, lined up and simply announced the names of the two winners.

The details of the moments that followed are a bit sketchy.

“Honestly, the whole thing is like a fog,” Andrea admits, saying that she remembers hearing her name, but not much else. The applicant standing next to Andrea later told her she made a choking sound, like “Errrrk.” Andrea knows she phoned her mother, though she does not know what either of them said. The fog lifted about the time she called her father at work and heard him scream her name over and over, across the hundreds of miles separating them.

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Today more than 3,000 miles separates Jason Sanders from Oxford. But the OU Rhodes Scholar to attend Oxford most recently says the experience is still with him; in fact, it has changed the way he views the world.

“Oxford gives you the time and physical space to reflect on where you want to go in life in a way that doesn’t occur in the undergraduate experience,” says Sanders, a 2000 OU alumnus who will be the first graduate of Harvard University’s new MD/MBA program.

Oxford also allows plenty of time for deep reading and asking fundamental questions about life and the human experience.



Even a Rhodes Scholar like Andrea DenHoed has research to do and papers to write as she finishes her senior year in letters and international studies and prepares for an even greater academic challenge at Oxford.

“You have the license, or maybe even endorsement, of your professors to think bigger than you did before.”

Sanders says his education was vastly enriched by opportunities to travel between terms. During his three years abroad,

he explored the United Kingdom, Central and Eastern Europe and Scandinavia.

Even more enrichment came from Sanders’ classmates, whom he says were as influential on his learning as any professor.

“You get that global perspective, all the various pieces of the puzzle,” he adds.

Sanders’ fellow Rhodes Scholars have gone on to careers as Supreme Court clerks, medical researchers and instructors at the U.S. Naval Academy. But he is quick to add that Rhodes Scholars “don’t wear their accomplishments on their sleeves—that’s part of the culture of Oxford, one of the hallmarks of the group.”

Another little-known truth is that many Rhodes Scholars leave Oxford with a degree but without the traditional paper diploma.

Instead, they leave with the experience of a lifetime. “It’s what you take with you,” Sanders says.

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In the days following her selection, Andrea would fly back to Oklahoma, field a dozen media calls and discover her name on the Rhodes Scholar list, the same list that she used to research as a child.

“It was a surreal experience,” she says.

More concrete is the fact that Andrea already is studying from reading lists preparing her to delve into Oxford’s bachelor’s of arts in English. Next fall, she will be a member of St. Anne’s College and work closely with a tutor to explore English literature and produce weekly papers that will be judged cumulatively at the end of her three-year degree.

“The academic component is so thrilling to me—the ability to study something that intensely and just focus on it and learn it in-depth is so exciting,” she says. “I’m looking forward to a system that will push me, having someone there to challenge my ideas and guide me through a rigorous study.”

When Andrea returns home, she will forever be a changed person, but always a Rhodes Scholar, says Honors College adviser Wright. “Most of the Rhodes Scholars live up to what they’re expected to do, which is to come back and be a leader. They’re going to make their mark on the world.”

Andrea plans to make her mark in the college classroom. After earning an Oxford degree, she hopes to complete a Ph.D. in English and share the power of literature—a power that has transformed her own life since childhood and written a story that has its roots in India and America and now spans another ocean into the future.

“I know where I want to go in life,” she says simply.

First stop: Oxford, England.



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OU’s RHODES SCHOLARS

| | |
|------------------------|------|
| WILLIAM L. KENDALL | 1904 |
| E.K. KLINE | 1907 |
| W.J. HOLLEMAN | 1920 |
| JOSEPH A. BRANDT | 1921 |
| W.E. ROBERTSON | 1924 |
| CHARLES E. SPRINGER | 1927 |
| SAVOIE LOTTINVILLE | 1929 |
| CARL ALBERT | 1931 |
| WILLMOORE KENDALL | 1932 |
| JOHN FISCHER | 1933 |
| DAVID ST. CLAIR | 1933 |
| GEORGE C. MCGHEE | 1934 |
| J. RICHARD CARPENTER | 1935 |
| LEROY W. EARLEY | 1938 |
| JACK M. LUTTRELL | 1938 |
| J. RAYMOND HINSHAW | 1947 |
| WILLIAM L. HOWARD | 1948 |
| LEWIS SALTER JR. | 1949 |
| ALDON D. BELL | 1951 |
| GUY W.H. PARKHURST JR. | 1964 |
| JACK S. DENNIS | 1965 |
| WILLIAM C. MCGREW III | 1965 |
| PETE KYLE McCARTER JR. | 1967 |
| PHILLIP L. JACKSON | 1973 |
| TIMOTHY L. TABOR | 1975 |
| JASON R. SANDERS | 1999 |
| ANDREA M. DENHOED | 2008 |