

LOCAL NEWS

ST. PAUL MAPLEWOOD NORTH ST. PAUL FALCON HEIGHTS

B

HOMEROOM ST. PAUL

Scholarship opens future to eighth-grader

Washington Tech student is first Minnesotan chosen for far-reaching award



Tho Bui

BY DOUG BELDEN
Pioneer Press

Tho Bui, who arrived in St. Paul from Vietnam as a second-grader and who now dreams of becoming a college math professor, gained a powerful partner this fall.

The eighth-grader at Washington Technology Magnet Mid-

dle School is Minnesota's first recipient of a Young Scholars award from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. The scholarship provides guidance and open-ended financial support for Tho's entire academic career — potentially through graduate school — assuming he keeps his grades up. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime

opportunity I would say," said Michelle Leba, Tho's world geography teacher.

"From a junior high perspective, I've never seen anything like this, ever," said Steve Cox, the school's resource teacher for the gifted and talented. "I'm not sure he understands the power of that scholarship just yet."

Young Scholars is one of several scholarships funded through a foundation set up in 2000 with money left by Cooke, a wealthy Washington businessman who died in 1997. Almost 800 students applied this year to be Young Scholars, and 63 were selected.

Cooke, the former owner of the Washington Redskins, Los Angeles Lakers and New York's

HOMEROOM, 3B

Scholarship opens future to eighth-grader

Washington Tech student is first Minnesotan chosen for far-reaching award

BY DOUG BELDEN
Pioneer Press

Tho Bui, who arrived in St. Paul from Vietnam as a second-grader and who now dreams of becoming a college math professor, gained a powerful partner this fall.

The eighth-grader at Washington Technology Magnet Middle School is Minnesota's first recipient of a Young Scholars award from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. The scholarship provides guidance and open-ended financial support for Tho's entire academic career — potentially through graduate school — assuming he keeps his grades up.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I would say," said Michelle Leba, Tho's world geography teacher.

"From a junior high perspective, I've never seen anything like this, ever," said Steve Cox, the school's resource teacher for the gifted and talented. "I'm not sure he understands the power of that scholarship just yet."

Young Scholars is one of several scholarships funded through a foundation set up in 2000 with money left by Cooke, a wealthy Washington businessman who died in 1997. Almost 800 students applied this year to be Young Scholars, and 63 were selected.

Cooke, the former owner of the Washington Redskins, Los Angeles Lakers and New York's Chrysler Building, never got a post-secondary education. He wanted his foundation to create opportunities for high-performing, low-income students to reach their educational goals, said Vance Lancaster, director of marketing and communications for the Virginia-based organization.

Tho (pronounced "Ta") is scheduled to meet with an educational adviser from the foundation later this month, and one of the first things they'll discuss is where he should go to high school.

He is considering public school — specifically, Central High — as well as parochial options such as Cretin-Derham Hall and St. Agnes, which is about a block from his Frogtown home.

Nearly half the Young Scholars attend private or boarding schools during high school, Lancaster said. Often, students qualify for some aid — the average family income of this year's students is less than \$25,000 per year — and the foundation picks up the rest. The funding works in a similar way when it's time for college.

Along the way, the money also can be used for summer enrichment programs as well as computers and other educational resources.

"What we support depends on the needs of the students," Lancaster said.

On average, the foundation spends about \$15,000 per year on each of its Young Scholars, Lancaster said, in addition to helping them find other sources of aid. That figure is about the same for college and graduate school. Total support from the program for a Young Scholar who goes all the way through a doctoral program could easily exceed \$200,000.

For Tho, in the short term, the award means he'll be able to attend summer educational camps he hasn't been able to afford. "I don't think of it as a free ticket but almost like a pass," he said of the scholarship.

He said his parents were elated when the packet arrived informing him he'd won. "They did a little screaming. I guess they were happy."

"We're so proud of him," said Hang Bui, Tho's sister and spokeswoman for the family. "We know that it will be a big opportunity for Tho to go as far as he could and open the door to work for him."

Tho's teachers say he's earned the opportunity.

In addition to being one of the highest scorers on Washington's math team and playing in the concert band, Tho excels in the classroom, they say.

He is always a step or two ahead on the geometry syllabus, said teacher Denise Kapler. "He really pushes to learn more and more and more." The other day, Kapler said, Tho decided to go online at the end of class to work on the so-called "millennium problems," identified as the seven most important unsolved mathematical problems of this century.

"He's beyond bright," said Leba, Tho's world geography teacher. "It's very hard to describe the unique combination of academic and social skills that he has. It's a unique combination."

Doug Belden can be reached at dbelden@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5136.

Tho Bui

Age: 14

Family: Middle child of five. Lives with parents in Frogtown neighborhood.

School: Eighth-grader at Washington Technology Magnet Middle School in St. Paul.

Goal: Teach math at a college.

Achievement: Recipient of a Young Scholars award from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which will provide guidance and funding throughout his academic career.