

Eliana Marie Winterbauer-Light Scholarship for Promotion of Social Justice

(11/13/1995 - 4/14/2020)

In memoriam for Eliana Winterbauer-Light, we are seeking donations to establish a scholarship that will support students who could not otherwise participate in a college internship in several of the fields that Eliana cared about. Specifically, the scholarship would support students pursuing an internship with the Psychology and Social Justice Internship Program, which has four clusters: (1) prison reentry/decarceration, (2) domestic violence, (3), LGBTQ support/advocacy, and (4) faith leaders and social justice.

Eliana Winterbauer-Light was a 2017 graduate from Marquette University in the Honors Program, majoring in psychology and minoring in philosophy and French. Eliana was brilliant, creative, and compassionate, and had just begun her career as a mental health professional when her life was cut short by a wrong-way driver in a motor vehicle collision. In her short life she made a positive impact both on those who knew her and on the community through the many causes she worked on and supported. She cared, with strength of conviction, for causes that promote social justice, support communities, and improve the lives of individuals - especially the disenfranchised.

Throughout her academic life Eliana received many awards including one in high school that speaks to her character. The Titans' Outstanding Principles Award, given to students who make a daily, positive difference through their actions and values by demonstrating "quiet courage" traits such as integrity, selfless service, respect, and responsibility

One of Eliana's defining characteristics was her intellectual curiosity. From a very early age, Eliana enjoyed exploring the ideas and ideologies of various members of her politically and religiously diverse family. She would ask thoughtful questions to understand their beliefs and perspectives, and always flourished in an intellectually diverse environment. As she grew, she would approach others with a genuine interest in their thoughts and beliefs.

Eliana believed in maintaining personal health and well-being, both mental and physical, in order to be present and helpful to others. She was an advocate of healthy eating and fitness, meditation, and was an avid reader -- she didn't even own a television. She would rather make a personal connection with someone than spend time watching a television show or movie. She also believed in the importance of psychotherapy to talk through the day-to-day challenges that every individual faces. She studied and practiced mindfulness, how to be present and live in the moment. In addition, she instituted eco-friendly practices that promote sustainability, even successfully convincing her employer to start an on-site composting initiative.

Eliana had an abundance of friends from various cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. She traveled the world in her short life and made friends wherever she went. It was important to her to expand her understanding of people in general and knew that embracing diversity was an important step in this process. Eliana was known among her friends as the go-to person when they were in need. She always seemed to know what to say and do to help or give comfort. Eliana was also sought out because she was fun to be with, had a brilliant sense of humor, and a great laugh.

Eliana was a world traveler who enjoyed immersing herself in local cultures. During a summer program in Rwanda, she and another student completed an Honors research project called “HIV/AIDS: The Unseen Predator of the Rwandan Genocide.” She also visited Rwandan jails and prisons and studied the mindset of the people who committed crimes of genocide. She later wrote in her journal:

“Spending time with people that have endured a suffering that I will never know but still smile, love, dance, and create ways to share their story taught me that atrocity, prejudice, and oppression needs to be equally healed and prevented by small acts of love and happiness as they are by big changes of policy ... even though those small acts may take time to become wholly genuine.”

Eliana was a former president of Marquette Empowerment, a group that engages in social action to combat injustice and advocate for social change to alleviate sexism, racism, classicism, and homophobia. She also worked with Project Return, a Milwaukee-based organization that helps incarcerated people successfully reintegrate into the community. She volunteered at a Crisis Center that helped women who were victims of domestic violence and also volunteered at Guest House of Milwaukee, an organization that helps the disadvantaged find jobs and meet basic needs. She supported the Black Lives Matter movement and worked to help others understand the importance of the campaign.

Eliana had the rare attribute of leading by example in all aspects of her life. For example, this could be seen in Eliana’s approach to political debate. Despite being a fierce advocate for many social causes, she never allowed herself to be drawn into the anger and outrage that often characterize contemporary political discourse. Rather, she approached debate with grace and open mindedness. She engaged in passionate, but respectful discourse and had a unique way of making others feel heard and valued while firmly standing her ground. Many who had the privilege of knowing her often left conversations with much to consider about their beliefs, actions, and worldview. Eliana changed people’s lives subtly and without agenda.

Eliana’s most recent occupation was as a behavioral health specialist at Rogers Behavioral Health Center, helping adolescents to cope with mental illness. It could be an emotionally taxing job at times, but she would always speak kindly and compassionately about the patients she helped. Eliana took the opportunity to grow from her experiences at work, looking to learn from the residents and any of the unique situations she would find herself in. She had intended to attend graduate school and make a career out of helping others. Eliana had plans and goals that she ultimately would not be able to realize, and we can only speculate how many hearts she would have touched and people she would have helped had she had more time to pursue her dreams.

These are only a sampling of the many activities, interests and causes that Eliana participated in or supported throughout her 24 years. She was loved beyond words by her family including her parents, two older brothers, grandparents, and many aunts, uncles, and cousins as well as her close friends and significant other. She was stunningly beautiful, and her inner love and strength radiated through her smile and big brown eyes. You would be hard-pressed to find anyone who cared for their family, their environment, and about the welfare of others as much as she did. She wanted her life to have a larger purpose, and her family hopes that by making this scholarship available that others will be enabled to continue her good work.