

Funding the Future

As trustee Rich Handler '83 and his wife, Martha, increase to \$25 million the largest contribution to student scholarships in the University's history, meet a few of the students whose lives have been transformed by the Alan and Jane Handler Scholarship Fund.

Photographs by Adam Fenster

FOR AMY ROTH '11, BEING SELECTED AS ONE OF THE FIRST recipients of a scholarship supported by the Alan and Jane Handler Scholarship Fund has meant more than simply paying for her education.


"The Alan and Jane Handler Scholarship has enabled me to focus on what most interests me," says Roth, a psychology major who plans to attend nursing school and to pursue a career in mental health services. "I have had the freedom to find what I'm passionate about."

University trustee Rich Handler '83 and his wife, Martha, hope to ensure that deserving students continue to find that freedom at Rochester, thanks to their commitment of \$20 million this winter. Their additional support raises to \$25 million the scholarship fund they established in 2007.

The fund, named in recognition of Rich Handler's parents, Alan and Jane Handler, is the largest contribution to student scholarships in the University's history.

Since 2007, a total of 10 students in the College and the Eastman School have benefited from the scholarship, which covers all University expenses, including tuition and fees, room, board, and books. Handler Scholars receive awards annually throughout their undergraduate years, as long as they demonstrate adequate academic performance.

Recipients are selected on the basis of outstanding scholarly potential, financial need because of underprivileged backgrounds, and potential to be future leaders.

"These young men and women just need a little help before they set out to make the world a better place," Rich Handler noted in announcing the new commitment. "Martha and I increased our scholarship program to \$25 million because we were so pleased that the University did such an excellent job of selecting amazing students, who through no fault of their own are truly in need." 



■ Shay Behrens '14

Harlan, Iowa

"I grew up in such a small town that I could go to the closest city and still see people I know," says Shay Behrens '14 of her childhood and adolescence in an agricultural community in southwest Iowa.

Behrens, who graduated second in her high school class with a grade point average of over 4.0, says that although most of her classmates went on to college, she was one of only two who went out of state, and one of a very few who chose a school with more than a thousand students. "They go to schools with maybe a thousand kids—the smaller colleges," says Behrens of the typical graduates of her area high school.



Her decision to travel so far is all the more remarkable because Behrens—whose mother, a waitress, raised her alone—is the first person in her family to attend college.

She says her first semester at Rochester was “a hard transition.” But, she adds, “You have to get out of your comfort zone in order to learn things in life.” She first learned of Rochester during her junior year of high school, when her chemistry teacher nominated her for the Bausch & Lomb Honorary Science Award. The award recognizes high school juniors with outstanding achievement in the sciences and exemplary math scores on their PSAT exams. As a winner of the award, Behrens was permitted to apply to Rochester for free and, if admitted, to qualify for merit scholarships.

Among the factors that drew her to Rochester was her interest in the health sciences. A distinguished athlete and team leader in multiple sports in high school, Behrens says she’s interested in working

with athletes professionally. She has yet to decide whether that means being a physician, an athletic trainer, or a physical therapist.

She says she was tempted to enroll in a university that, unlike Rochester, offered preprofessional majors in physiology and kinesiology. But although her road from college to a career may be less direct at Rochester, it’s one that offers her a variety of options and a chance to explore. She’s discovered two new interests—psychology and philosophy—and plans a minor in Spanish. In addition, she’s part of the community service club UR Rotaract, the Charles Drew Pre-Health Society, and the Minority Association of Premedical Students, or MAPS.

Still, she misses sports. “This next semester, I’m going to play intramural basketball, because I’m absolutely dying without basketball,” she says, adding, “I might try volleyball and squash, because I don’t even know what squash is. So it seems interesting.”

—Karen McCally



■ Michael Fuller '13E

Philadelphia

If you traveled through the concourse of Suburban Station in Philadelphia's Center City a few years ago, you may have seen and heard a young ensemble that went by the name MANA Quartet. The classical musicians weren't the usual buskers—they were all still in high school—or the usual classical quartet, for that matter. In place of the typical cellist was Michael Fuller '13E, a bass player who first picked up the instrument in middle school.

"Ever since elementary school, music has been part of my life," Fuller says.

For the past year and a half Fuller has been honing his musical skills at the Eastman School as a Handler Scholar. In addition to his full load of courses, he tries to find the three to four hours a day—"that's ideal"—to rehearse, both on his own and with the school's ensembles. He's performed with the Eastman School Symphony Orchestra and the Eastman Philharmonia, an opportunity usually reserved for upperclassmen.

The youngest of five who grew up in Philadelphia, Fuller says he's not sure where his interest in music came from, but he's never been very far from it. His mother played cello and violin as a young woman, but he's the only member of his family to try to make a career of music. He began with the trombone in elementary school before switching to the bass.

He's the first in his family to go to college, an achievement that, he says, "means a lot to my mom." But he says she's been careful to make sure he knows he's under no pressure when it comes to higher education.

At the Eastman School, Fuller is studying closely with James VanDemark, a professor of double bass and cochair of Eastman's strings, harp, and guitar department. "He's an amazing teacher," says Fuller of VanDemark. "He's definitely done great things for my music."

And where does he want to go with his music? For now, he hopes to be able to find opportunities to perform at venues in the United States and abroad. He's finding that music can take him places far beyond Suburban Station.

"Music got me out of Philadelphia," he says. "I knew I had to do something with it."

—Scott Hauser



■ Jonathan Peralta '13

New York, N.Y.

At Manhattan's Fiorello LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts—known as LaGuardia Arts—Jonathan Peralta '13 followed an academic program that included advanced placement courses in biology, chemistry, and calculus, in addition to an intensive program in classical voice and opera. As both a serious musician and an aspiring scientist, he calls Rochester “a natural choice.”

If his circumstances were different, Peralta, who continues voice lessons at the Eastman School, admits he may have been tempted to pursue a career in music. “I honestly sing all the time. I can't help it. I hum to myself. I sing to myself. It's pretty constant,” he says.

But he says he can't take that risk.

“I really have to guarantee that when I leave college, I'm going to be able to take care of myself. It's not like, ‘Oh I'm going to go and live at home for a while,’” he explains. “There is, to be very frank, no home for me to go back to.”

Peralta's father left the family before he and his twin sister were born. Their mother suffered from drug and alcohol addiction throughout their childhood, and the two children underwent multiple changes in custody. “We had moved maybe six or seven times,” he recalls. They went to a different school for each of their three years of middle school. Both their mother, and the grandmother who had done much

to raise them, died when Peralta and his sister were in high school.

Fortunately, Peralta says, he had a stable support system at LaGuardia Arts. “I can't express how much LaGuardia really shaped me and really helped me prosper,” he says. “It was the perfect environment for me, and I really made some connections to both faculty and students that I know I will keep forever.”

Now in his fourth semester at Rochester, Peralta says he's found a home on campus as well. “After really investing some time here, I finally do feel very well connected. I really do have a strong support system here.”

Like many sophomores, he's planning to pursue a different major from the one he initially intended. Once set on biology, he found himself more captivated by computer science. “I said, ‘Let me take the intro course,’ and I did, and it's something I did well in,” he says of the make-or-break Computer Science 171 that's the first step in determining who will make it through one of Rochester's more challenging majors.

He says he's sometimes surprised by how far he's been able to come. He notes that his sister has similarly thrived. She's a sophomore, also on a full scholarship, at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania.

Peralta knows his story is inspiring. And, he says, “I'm inspired by my own story! It's crazy to think, and it's surreal to me still.”

“I feel like the little train that could—and will. And chug-a-chug-a-choo-choo,” he adds decisively. “I'm ready to go.”

—Karen McCally

■ Aaron Roth '11

Savannah, Tenn.

Aaron Roth '11 was 10 years old when his family moved from Dallas to rural Tennessee, in a setting so isolated that they lived with no electricity or running water.

"My father really liked the rustic lifestyle," he says. "We lived in that setting for about six months, and then we moved a little closer to the nearby town and had more modern conveniences."

Homeschooled for most of his youth, Roth was 15 years old before he entered a classroom full of students. Having been surrounded by books and possessing a healthy appetite for reading, he was excited for the new opportunity, which he shared with his older sister, Amy, then 16.

But they found that they were significantly behind the other students in math and science. Those subjects, Roth says, are "a hard thing for homeschooling parents to take care of because there are a lot of resources you need."

He caught up fast. Roth is nearing completion of a major in brain and cognitive sciences.

His parents, he says, were initially surprised that he was even considering college. "I told them I was going to go to college, but I don't know if they fully expected it until I got in and said, 'I'm going, and I've got a scholarship.'" As it turned out, both Aaron and Amy would arrive at Rochester in the fall of 2007 as Handler Scholars.

Roth says he's enjoyed being able to sample a variety of subjects—he's taken courses in history, philosophy, math, and music—but brain and cognitive sciences is the area that captivated him. Last summer, Roth worked in a robotics lab at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne in Switzerland. He's animated as he talks about his interest in the future of brain and machine interfacing, and the possibilities of such research.

"There's already research being done with neural implants and using your thoughts to control computers," he explains, citing cases in which electrodes placed on the motor cortexes of the brains of paraplegics can allow them to control cursors with their thoughts, opening e-mails, for example, and browsing the web.

Although Roth is a senior, it won't be his last year at Rochester. He's been admitted into the Kauffman Entrepreneurial Year, or KEY, program, which provides a tuition-free fifth year for students to pursue a project of their own design and take courses to support their entrepreneurial interests.

"I wanted to take some more computer science courses, and I was interested in web design," he says. He and a classmate are designing and implementing what Roth calls a "buy-sell website," just for the campus community, to help students buy, sell, or exchange used items without having to post flyers on already-crowded bulletin boards around campus. Meanwhile, he's taking courses in computer science and business to support the project.

"We're not sure yet when we're going to launch it," he says of the site. "Maybe this semester."

—Karen McCally





■ Amy Roth '11

Savannah, Tenn.

"I'm fascinated by the way people think, and what influences factor into that," says Amy Roth '11.

That fascination fueled her decision to become a psychology major. She came to Rochester planning to pursue psychiatry but felt bolstered by the freedom the curriculum offered her to explore her options.

Roth found out she had received a Handler Scholarship when she was attending freshman orientation.

"It definitely eased my financial issues," she says.

Until grade 10, Roth was homeschooled with her brother Aaron '11 in Savannah, Tenn. They decided to attend a public high school to ready themselves for college. The second and third eldest of five children, Amy began high school at age 16; Aaron at 15.

"As awesome as parents might be, there's no way they can be as skilled in every subject as someone who's trained in it," she says.

Their ambitions were realized when the siblings both enrolled at Rochester—and both received Handler Scholarships.

"It felt like I'd been given a new lease on life," Roth says of her arrival at Rochester. "I could design what I wanted to do."

"I've been given room to come into my own here," she says. She's been busy in the classroom and out, dancing with the Afro-Expressions performing arts group and serving as its business manager, as well as joining the Psychology Undergraduate Council.

In spring 2010, Roth studied in Vienna for a semester; in the summer, she took part in an internship in London at the Collingham Gardens Children and Family Unit, a psychiatric hospital for preteens. The experience had a profound impact on her own professional plans.

"I helped the nursing staff, and I saw how much hands-on patient experience you get as a nurse," she says. "I don't want to be in and out of patients' lives. I want to create a more holistic health environment." Roth hopes to begin nursing school in the fall.

Roth is thankful for the help she's received in preparing herself for a life of helping others. "I can't tell you how much of a relief the scholarship has been. And one thing Rich has stressed is the importance of giving back, or paying it forward.

"I'm so grateful for the help I've received, and the generosity."

—Kathleen McGarvey



■ Alejandro López-Samamé '12E

Lima, Peru

When Alejandro López-Samamé '12E first took up the trumpet at age seven, he found a kindred spirit of sorts.

“I’ve been trying all my life to be a leader in everything I do. That’s what the trumpet does in an orchestra—it leads other instruments in certain dynamics due to its tone.”

López-Samamé—the only musician in his family—may have taken naturally to his instrument, but his path to music school wasn’t so clear.

He was born and raised in Lima, Peru. “It’s a hard place to come from, when you’re talking about music,” he says, because there’s not a lot of support available for musical study or classical music instruction.

López-Samamé admired the work of James Thompson, a professor of trumpet at the Eastman School, and, eager to make his acquaintance, found his Skype address and made contact. Thompson was quickly impressed by the promise of the budding, largely self-taught performer, identifying him as an “amazing player who needs to be at Eastman.”

But it wouldn’t have been possible without the Handler Scholarship, says López-Samamé, now a trumpet performance major at Eastman.

In 2009, López-Samamé returned home for the summer as first trumpeter with the National Opera of Peru. Last summer, he took part in three important music festivals, including the Schleswig-Holstein Festival in Germany, which included a tour of 25 countries.

“Eastman has opened so many doors for me,” he says.

And while he’s always aspired to stand out as his instrument does, he says that the Handler Scholarship has helped to give him the necessary quality to achieve that: “Confidence.”

—Kathleen McGarvey