

# northwest

## Study On

### Just Out scholarship winners announced

by Malka Geffen

In January, *Just Out* began hosting Gay Skate Night every third Monday at Oaks Park. The proceeds from this ongoing event benefit the *Just Out* Scholarship Fund. The annual scholarship is available to queers and their children in Oregon and Southwest Washington. We are pleased to announce the recipients of the 2006 scholarships in honor of *Just Out's* 23rd anniversary.

**D**anielle Chong, a 17-year-old lesbian originally from Santa Barbara, Calif., will use her *Just Out* scholarship to continue her studies at Rogue Community College in Medford. Chong, who came out two years ago, has been living on her own ever since.



**Danielle Chong is studying criminal justice at Rogue Community College.**

"The hardest part was coming out to my family because both my parents are Catholic, and I already knew they weren't going to be OK with it. I knew I wasn't going to be allowed to live under their roof anymore," she says.

After taking the general education development test, Chong met a single father who needed an au pair and has found room and board through the employment. "I do love my parents, and I do understand that they don't accept it. There are always going to be people who are never going to change, but we're not going to change how we feel, either," said Chong, who is now in touch with her parents.

Successfully making it on her own is, according to Chong, her greatest accomplishment to date. With a full course load at Rogue, where she maintains a 4.0 grade point average, and her work as an au

pair, she said she's appreciative of the *Just Out* scholarship. "Thanks to the scholarship, I got to quit my full-time job at Burger King," she declares.

Chong is studying criminal justice and plans to become a probation officer after graduating. "I want to help kids who are kind of lost in adolescence who don't get support from their families," she says. "I'm hoping I'll get to help out in schools at a time when people are confused about who they are."

As a member of the sexual minorities community, Chong was active in her high school's Gay Straight Alliance club and is involved with the GSA at Rogue. "In high school I was president of the club, and this year I try to help out as much as I can. I help out with the Pride parade in Ashland every year," says Chong.

As a young lesbian who knows about the challenges of coming out, Chong advises other queer

youth to "be who you are and don't try to hide or deny it." She looks to the future and hopes people will become more accepting of same-sex marriage. "I think it's getting a lot better. People are starting to embrace differences. I can see how different it is now than 10 years ago."

**W**hile studying political economics at Evergreen State College, Erika Ash took a sign language class, which helped direct her new path. With the aid she's received from the *Just Out* scholarship, she continues her studies in the sign language interpreting program at Portland Community College.

Ash hopes to get a master's degree from Western Oregon University and become a teacher for the deaf. "I was drawn to the language itself at first, but when I learned more about the deaf culture, I drew parallels about being part of a minority community knowing the struggle of trying to face adversity," she says.

Ash, 27, spent some time working for AmeriCorps and as a house cleaner. "I feel proud for letting myself take time to figure out what I want to do—to explore and get connected so there's purpose in what I'm doing," she says.

She attends gatherings of Deaf & Hearing Out Reach, the local signing community of deaf and hearing queer and queer-friendly people. Ash, who has been involved with the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center and Basic Rights Oregon, says she is also active "in my own life being out and trying to effect change with people I interact with and being a role model and speaking up about issues."

Recalling the challenges she faced when coming out at age 15, Ash said she struggled with telling her mother, who came from a strong Roman Catholic background. "I was assuming responsibility for my family's feeling and had to learn to let go of that," she says. Ash notes that her sister was a great source of comfort. "She'd come to my room and tell me, 'I want to hear about your crushes!'" For anyone struggling with the decision to come out, she suggests trying to "figure out what your support's going to be and realize that you have to live your life for yourself and let go of feeling responsible for other people's hang-ups."

Last year, when Ash was considering ways to access funds for school, she came across the *Just Out* scholarship. "Because I read *Just Out* and am a queer community member, I thought, 'How amazing that my own community is giving out money for school' and thought I'd go for it." Ash owns a house in Portland with her partner of five years. When she's not learning sign language, she enjoys doing outdoor sports and cooking macrobiotic meals. **10**

For more information on the JUST OUT SCHOLARSHIP FUND visit [www.justout.com/scholarship.aspx](http://www.justout.com/scholarship.aspx).

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