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Hard work earns teen Gates grant

The Everett senior earns a Millennium scholarship that will pay for college as far as a doctoral degree.

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EVERETT - Phuc "Philip" Bui has nearly perfect grades and a passion for learning that is tough to rival. But the Everett High School senior always questioned whether college was a real option.

Money is tight for his family. And his parents, who immigrated from Vietnam, know little about the American education system.

Bui asked the same question over and over: "How am I going to afford college?"

Now, the 18-year-old's toughest question is which high-caliber university to attend.

Bui recently received a Gates Millennium Scholarship, which will cover the bulk of his higher education costs - even through his doctoral work, if he chooses to go that far.

Bui, the youngest of three brothers, will be the first to go to college.

"I was definitely stoked for it," Bui said of the scholarship. "I didn't really think I was going to get it."

Teachers and counselors who are close to Bui said there was no question in their minds that he was destined to go further than the halls of Everett High.

"This is a special kid," English teacher Ann Stewart said.

The Gates Millennium Scholars program, established in 1999, was initially funded by a \$1 billion grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Virginia-based nonprofit looks for bright minority students who face significant financial barriers to attending college.

The scholarship will help cover the remainder of Bui's college costs that aren't covered by other scholarships.

Exactly what that amounts to remains to be seen.

Bui has been accepted to the University of Washington's Honors Program, Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, Amherst College in Massachusetts and Stanford University in California.

He has about three weeks to figure out which one to attend.

"I'm having a hard time with my decision," he said.

Life definitely has a rosier outlook, however, knowing cost won't be an issue.

Thuy Bui and Ha Nguyen, Bui's parents, immigrated from Vietnam with their three sons in the early 1990s.

Thuy Bui had been a teacher in Vietnam, but has struggled to find work in the United States and now works at a machining company, his son said.

"It was a pretty tough transition for my parents," Philip Bui said. "It's definitely been a roller coaster the last four years."

But Bui has maintained an eagerness for learning, first sparked at the Everett Public Library, where he'd gobble up everything from science texts to Harry Potter novels.

Biology has stuck with him most.

He scored the highest possible score on the test for a college-level advanced placement biology class. And for his senior project, he job-shadowed two neurosurgeons at the Everett Neurological Center.

One of his volunteer activities at the district's science resource center has had him cleaning out dead snails from their shells that are used for classroom experiments.

"It made me realize science is more than the Nobel Prize and fancy dinners," Bui said. "Sometimes you have to get dirty."

Everett High biology teacher Cynthia McIntyre said Bui has a passion for learning that few teens pursue with such vigor.

"It's that curiosity to not just hear about it ... but to dig deeper and explore. He's always had that," McIntyre said.

Bui credits his teachers and counselors for helping him turn that passion into a plan for his future.

That includes the last-minute application for the Gates Millennium Scholarship.

Counselor Pam Piatz nagged Bui into applying.

The pair have some things in common, she said. They both have grown up in north Everett, her father was an immigrant from Norway, and she, too, was the first in her family to go to college.

Children who are the first in their family to go on to higher education often struggle to navigate the system and don't recognize the need for scholarships, she said.

"He's done all the hard work. And it's all paid off," Piatz said. "We're really proud of him."

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