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SCHOLAR SPOTLIGHT: MARISSA YEH

ENVIRONMENTALIST SOWS SEEDS FOR GREENER CITIES

Aspire2STEAM.org, which provides educational scholarships, recognition, and mentoring to young women and girls who are working towards careers that require education in science, tech, engineering, the arts, or math (STEAM), has awarded Marissa Yeh an ASPIRER scholarship.


Marissa, who majors in Environmental Studies with a minor in Urban Sustainable Planning at the University of Southern California (USC), prefers the outdoors over indoors, tidepools over offices, and forests over classrooms.



That is not to say the effervescent student dislikes studying — you typically see her with a smile on campus — but it is to say that in the seemingly infinite sprawl of Marissa’s college town, Los Angeles, architectural homogeneity is abundant. Too much asphalt, too much concrete, too much metal. Even too much plastic, yet not enough greenery, nor public spaces, nor means of accessible transportation. Marissa plans to change that, to prune the sprawl and get others to smell the roses.

“California is infamous for its environmental issues,” noted the burgeoning conservationist. “Droughts, earthquakes, coastal erosion, fires, smog — so many problems that demanded solutions decades ago. The best time to plant a tree was yesterday. The second-best time is today.”

In addition to the environmental plagues set about by unsustainable urban development, such development has contributed to horrific socio-economic division. Highways across the City of Angels have demonically segregated communities, separating the underserved from vital resources like clean drinking water. A dense population, gentrification, and skyrocketing costs have consequently caused unopposed homelessness. The Associated Press reports that, “More than 1 in 5 of all homeless people in the U.S. live in [Los Angeles] county.” These challenges are not exclusive to California, however; they can be found in every state, hence Marissa’s passion in promoting sustainability.



One way Marissa makes change is through Water Drop, a nonprofit that provides clean drinking to Skid Row, an area whose homeless population has tragically remained stable since the 1930s. “USC is itself viewed as a gentrified space, a parasite exploiting the poor neighborhood surrounding it. I believe it’s essential we achieve symbiosis. Sustainability is only possible if we help one another. Competition encourages danger.”

When Marissa’s not putting her green thumb to environmental use, she’s using it to play bass. “I’m not professionally trained, but that shouldn’t stop anyone from expressing themselves through song.” Marissa performs with the USC Musician’s Club, which offers a safe space for amateur musicians to play on stage, oftentimes for charity.

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And when she’s not playing bass, she’s probably absorbed in a good book. Marissa loves poetry and believes in diversifying the literary canon. “As a half-Taiwanese, half-Puerto Rican woman, it can be challenging to relate to the literature I’m assigned, written by people who don’t look like me, so I often venture to secondhand bookstores and look for last names that sound familiar to my own. These writers then almost become old friends and relatives.”

Once Marissa attains her bachelor’s degree, she will enter USC’s Master of Urban Planning program with a concentration on Planning for Climate Change & Sustainability. After that, she envisions a “biophilic” Los Angeles where people live harmoniously among community gardens, edible landscapes, vertical farms, pocket parks, and green roofs. To cynics, this might sound like utopic science-fiction — to Marissa, it’s a practical future worth propagating.

“While it’s hard to find beauty in Los Angeles, it’s obvious if you know where to look: down. Our society likes to think that we’ve conquered nature, although one glance at the ground proves otherwise. Plants are always cracking through the sidewalks, surviving where survival seems impossible. That’s beauty, and it’s that determination we must match if we’re going to improve the planet.”

About Aspire2STEAM

Aspire2STEAM is a student-run nonprofit breaking barriers for young people in STEM and the Arts. We offer scholarships for young women in STEAM fields and provide professional development through our Students4Students program. Support the next generation of trailblazers at Aspire2STEAM.org or by visiting us on LinkedIn or Instagram!

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