

# Attracting Gates Scholars

By Eileen Wirth, Ph.D.

Creighton has developed a “model program” to help economically disadvantaged high school students compete for the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship. And now many of them are coming to CU.

It was late on Tami Buffalohead-McGill’s 38th birthday, but instead of celebrating, she was spending this mid-January night frantically editing applications for Gates Millennium Scholarships. These annual scholarships — funded by Microsoft’s Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda — pay all college expenses for talented economically disadvantaged minority students. The applications needed to be postmarked by midnight.

Throughout the fall, Buffalohead-McGill, BA’89, Creighton’s director of student support services, and other Creighton employees and students had advised numerous high school seniors about the complex application process. They had aided many of these students in responding to the eight essay questions on leadership, service and academic goals. The final editing of these essays could make the difference between success and failure. Birthday



Creighton student Gertrude Lee, right, helps Miranda Short Bear, a student at Pine Ridge High School, edit her Gates Scholarship essay. Lee was one of several Creighton students who spent spring break on South Dakota’s Pine Ridge Reservation assisting high school juniors with their Gates Scholarship applications.



The Rev. Ray Bucko, S.J., and Tami Buffalohead-McGill, BA'89, are co-chairs of Creighton's innovative Gates Scholarship mentoring program. They got the idea for the program during a nine-hour car ride to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.



Photo by Mike Kleverer

**Donnel Ecoffey**

*Sophomore in social work from Wounded Knee, S.D.*

A graduate of Red Cloud Indian School on the Pine Ridge Reservation, Ecoffey credits Tami Buffalohead-McGill with helping her win the Gates Scholarship.

"I was pretty much back and forth with Tami. She's an awesome lady," said Ecoffey. "If I hadn't filled out the Gates application, I wouldn't have looked at Creighton as an option." Ecoffey's mother works at the Oglala-Lakota College Center and her father is retired. The program introduced her to Creighton. She also received a Diversity Scholarship.

Her Creighton activities include involvement in the Native American and African-American student groups, helping to organize a powwow on campus and working with children at an after-school program at Catholic Charities' Hope Center. She also assisted with the Gates workshop at Red Cloud Indian School and has worked with Buffalohead-McGill and Fr. Bucko in encouraging Native American students to choose Creighton.

Ecoffey said she plans to go on for a master's in social work when she graduates and might even go on further since Gates will pay for graduate work. Eventually she plans to return to the reservation and work with battered women.

festivities could wait.

But then a "party" showed up at Buffalohead-McGill's Markoe Hall office. Creighton students and Native American twins Gertrude and Georgiana Lee and Joshua Marshall, an African-American/Native American English/philosophy major, volunteered to help with the editing.

"They said, 'We should be mentors,'" said Buffalohead-McGill, who co-chairs Creighton's mentoring program for Gates Scholarship applicants. "They were fabulous." By the deadline, the group had edited more than five Gates applications and 40 essays.

Such dedication explains why Dr. Molly Tovar, director of the American Indian Graduate Center (AIGC) Scholars Program in Albuquerque, N.M., hails Creighton's "model program" for helping deserving students win Gates Scholarships. AIGC selects Native American Gates recipients. Other ethnic organizations choose winners of their heritage.

"We wish other institutions would do what Creighton does," said Tovar.

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Creighton medical students Jessica Kaufman and Aaron Konrad help several Pine Ridge High School students with their résumés.

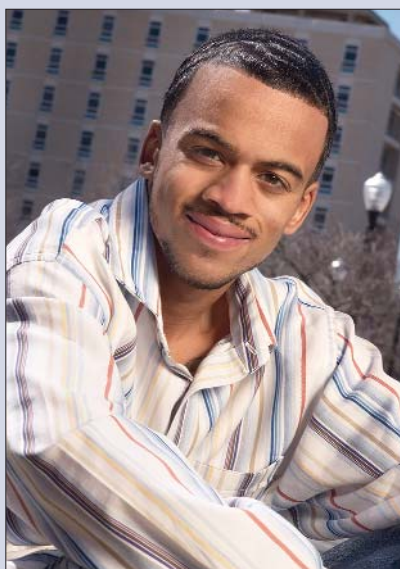


### Jamie Reiss

*Sophomore in journalism/public relations from Papillion-LaVista (Neb.) High School*

In addition to being an excellent student, Reiss plays third base for Creighton's varsity softball team. She said she would have found it "very difficult" to pay for college without the Gates Scholarship. She learned about the scholarship at her high school and attended the Creighton workshop.

"I did get other scholarships but that only equaled about three-fourths of the cost. My mom works as a secretary at EMSI insurance company, and my dad is a professional poker player," she said. "The scholarship program is remarkable. I went to a Gates conference in Los Angeles last fall and got to meet all the other scholars. I feel like the people behind this scholarship genuinely care about the students they represent."



### Blake Tyler

*Freshman in pre-physical therapy from Omaha North High School*

Tyler learned about the Gates program at North High School and attended Creighton's Omaha workshop to learn more about it. Both of his parents have serious health problems, and he could never have enrolled at Creighton without major financial assistance. At North, he was senior class president and spent more than 200 hours doing volunteer work at Clarkson Hospital.

Tyler said that his first semester at Creighton went very well but there is "no way" he could have completed the Gates application without advice.

"The hardest part is the essay portion," he said. "This scholarship helped me realize what my accomplishments were."

Tyler noted that he is using his Gates at Creighton for two reasons: It is close to home and it offers physical therapy.



### Deadre Currie

*Sophomore in biology/pre-medicine from Denver*

As a senior in high school, Currie said she went online and dedicated half of her day to looking for scholarships. Teachers helped her by proofing the essays. She wanted to attend a private college outside Colorado that had a medical school and selected Creighton.

At Creighton, she does office work for the Upward Bound program and is in charge of entertainment for the Soul Food Dinner. She is involved with the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

"The Gates Scholarship program is great," she said. "After my B.A., I'll have no debts. Everyone should go for it." Currie noted that her Gates Scholarship would pay for a doctorate degree but not medical school.

Photos by Mike Kleveter

winners. Currently the University has 15 Gates scholars, mostly Native Americans and African-Americans, said Don Bishop, associate vice president for enrollment management.

Creighton's intensive involvement with the Gates program began three years ago when AIGC chose Buffalohead-McGill as a scholarship reviewer with the goal of increasing applications from Nebraska and South

Dakota, Tovar said. No Native American students from either state had won a Gates grant despite the significant Native American populations in both. That has changed.

The Rev. Ray Bucko, S.J., director of the Native American Studies program and Gates program co-chair, said he and Buffalohead-McGill realized they needed to give students intense individual help with the applications.

"The Gates mentorship was born of the nine-hour car ride each way to Pine Ridge that Tami and I take for board of trustee meetings," said Fr. Bucko. "We were discussing the problem with students keeping up with the application and the cultural gap between how students see the world on Pine Ridge and what the application asks. We came up with the idea of adding a mentorship level to their

Photo by Mike Klever



Creighton chemistry professor Gary Michels is one of several faculty members who have served as mentors.

## Portrait of a Mentor

Gary Michels, Ph.D., associate professor of chemistry, grew up in the Rapid City, S.D., area near the Pine Ridge Reservation but never knew much about Lakota culture until last fall when he accepted an invitation to spend fall break mentoring James Lays Bad, a Gates Scholarship applicant from Jesuit-run Red Cloud School.

Michels said the program appealed to him because “I wouldn’t be a gawking tourist. I had a purpose to go. I would be involved with the people.”

Michels said he faced a challenge because Lays Bad is not only Native American but had been raised in a very traditional Lakota manner. His first language is Lakota. He had even won an award for how well he spoke it. He was not as assimilated as many other students.

This meant that Lays Bad was “excessively humble” and very quiet, Michels said. Filling out an extensive application that demanded that he boast about his accomplishments and service to others was alien to his culture and values.

By talking to other people, Michels learned that Lays Bad had to chop

wood for his family, drive his mother everywhere and generally take care of her. Prepared with this background, Michels helped Lays Bad outline his responses to the essay questions.

“We went through all eight essays,” said Michels. “I was exhausted.”

After returning to Creighton, Michels kept in touch with Lays Bad via e-mail but had received only one response as the deadline approached. When Lays Bad came to visit Creighton on a college recruiting trip, the two had lunch and talked about the Gates application.

“I built a fire under him. I told him he had to get more done,” said Michels. Lays Bad sent several responses to Buffalohead-McGill before Christmas. Right after Christmas break, he finished the application.

“He got it all done and his answers were wonderful,” said Michels.

Michels noted that when Lays Bad had started the application process, the University of Kansas was his first choice.

“When I looked at his final application, it said Creighton.”

experience to help them close the gap and finish successfully.” They recruited volunteer faculty, staff and students as mentors.

Completing the 62-page Gates application would daunt the child of a college professor let alone students who are often the first college applicants in their families, said Buffalohead-McGill. Recipients also must provide a college acceptance letter and completed federal financial aid forms, both additional intimidating bureaucratic processes.

To take the mystery and fear out of applying for the Gates Scholarship, Creighton organized workshops attended by 101 eligible seniors in Omaha, Sioux City, the Santee Sioux and Winnebago Reservations and the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, she said. The workshops are open to students regardless of what university they hope to attend, but many eventually choose Creighton.

“We help them identify their service, leadership and work experiences,” said Buffalohead-McGill.

Last fall break, Buffalohead-McGill and Fr. Bucko tested an even more in-depth mentoring approach by taking 13 faculty and staff mentors to the Pine Ridge Reservation for an “immersion experience.” Native American Creighton students led the mentors on tours of the reservation. They stayed with the Jesuit community and spent several days working with students and visiting with families.

Buffalohead-McGill said that because Native American culture rejects boasting, mentors often must draw students out about their service and leadership. Students who have cared for elderly relatives or driven neighbors to doctors’ appointments view such things as an expected part of life rather than service. Mentors teach them how to explain their accomplishments in a way that will impress judges.

Mentors and workshop volunteers come from numerous Creighton colleges and departments. For example, last fall three pharmacy students drove to a workshop at Little Priest Tribal College at the Winnebago Reservation in northeast Nebraska, Buffalohead-McGill said. The School of Pharmacy

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Creighton student Christina Tun, foreground, helps several Pine Ridge High School students work on their scholarship essays and résumés.

and Health Professions has a Native American health initiative and encourages students to volunteer for related projects such as this, said Victoria Roche, Ph.D., senior associate dean.

Creighton's Cardoner Program, which promotes understanding of the meaning of vocation and involvement in service, will play a more active role in the Gates program next year, said Kristina DeNeve, Ph.D., director. "We

are hoping to support this work and expand what they did last year," she said. Cardoner might recruit students as mentors and possibly take them to a different reservation for an immersion experience.

Buffalohead-McGill said the Gates mentorship program is an example of "Creighton at its best." Fr. Bucko agreed.

"Ignatius says love shows itself more fully in action than in words. This allows the faculty to apply the gold standard and excellence in their service and commitment to their profession. Our program is amazing in that it shows the HEART of Creighton — willing to love in action rather than in words," he said. ☺

*About the author: Dr. Wirth is chair of Creighton's Department of Journalism and Mass Communication.*



Creighton student Joshua Marshall, right, assists Gary Richards, a Red Cloud Indian School junior, with the Gates application essay and résumé development. Marshall is serving as Richards' mentor during the scholarship process.