Heart of NIU Student Lincoln Laureate
beats for causes of social justice

DeKalb, IL – At 21 years old, Shay Galto has done more volunteer work on issues related to social justice than most citizen advocates will do in a lifetime.

As a young child, she worked alongside her mother, Nancy, at soup kitchens and homeless shelters. In high school she did volunteer work with senior citizens, on toy drives for needy children and as a Special Olympics coach.

The pattern didn’t end when she went off to college at NIU.

As a freshman, Galto founded “Reading Rocks,” a small group of college students that helps underprivileged children in Aurora sharpen their reading skills. She regularly volunteers at the Hope Haven homeless shelter in DeKalb. And she serves as president and was a founder of the NIU chapter of STAND, a student-led anti-genocide coalition.

Just this past summer, Galto won an NIU grant enabling her to travel to Cambodia, where she conducted research into the terrible legacy of genocide in that country.

For her achievements, both in and out of the classroom, Galto has been named the NIU Student Lincoln Laureate, an honor reserved for the university’s top senior.

On an annual basis, each of the state’s four-year public universities selects one Student Lincoln Laureate, recognizing excellence in both curricular and extracurricular activities. Galto will travel Nov. 7 to Springfield for the Lincoln Laureate ceremony in the House of Representatives of the Old State Capitol.

“Truthfully, I was honored to be even nominated,” Galto says. “The students I was up against were just incredible.”
Galto is no slouch in the incredible category, says NIU History Professor J.D. Bowers, who nominated her for the award.

“Shay is far and away the most outstanding undergraduate student I have encountered in my 10 years of teaching at the university level,” Bowers says. “The Lincoln Laureate and Shay’s many other awards all speak to her compassion, desire to leave the world a better place and her dedication to higher learning.”

It’s a wonder Galto has time for her studies – she also works 20 to 30 hours weekly at Buffalo Wild Wings. Yet the senior from Wheaton is an honors student at NIU, carrying nearly a straight-A average while double majoring in history and psychology.

She has been the recipient of numerous honors and grants, including the Outstanding Student Scholarship from the NIU Department of History and the Undergraduate Special Opportunities in Artistry and Research (USOAR) award, which provided funding for travel to Cambodia. She also serves as vice president for community service in Mortar Board, the senior honor society.

A course taught by Bowers, who specializes in the history of genocide, sparked Galto’s interest in forming the NIU chapter of STAND, the anti-genocide coalition. Bowers is particularly impressed with its work, which has included efforts to raise awareness among lawmakers over current situations in Sudan, Burma and the Congo. The two-year old group already counts some 60 student members.

“Shay is tireless, persistent, compassionate and engaged,” Bowers says. “Through her leadership, the organization is growing, active and making a difference.”

Galto says her mother has been a lifelong role model and inspiration, and helping others simply makes her feel good.

“When I see others suffering, whether abroad in Cambodia or in Chicago, I feel obligated to step up,” she says.

“I would like to think it’s selfless, but at the same time it’s not,” Galto adds. “I always feel good about helping other people. The children especially always make me smile and laugh, and it definitely brightens my day. I still have all the thank-you notes from children I’ve worked with.”

Galto hopes to someday become a professor of clinical psychology, working internationally with victims of trauma. She believes such a job would allow her to combine her love of learning with research and community activism.
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“It’s one thing to be great in academics,” she says, “but it’s another to show you can apply what you’re learning to helping other people.”

In winning NIU’s Student Lincoln Laureate award, Galto was competing against top NIU seniors in a wide variety of disciplines. Other nominees for the award included first finalist Bradley Broughton (geography, political science and translation and business Spanish); finalists Chelsey Newcomb (Spanish language and literature, English/pre-law) and Matthew Venaas (English and political science); and Deanna Bach (Spanish language and literature), Kyle Knotek (business administration), Clare Kron (biology), Lisa Loring (nursing), Michelle Mutch (health sciences-pre physical therapy), Kevin Naglich (computational software/computer science) and Stephanie Pieczynski (music composition).

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