Moline native Michelle Garrison named 2006 NIU Student Lincoln Laureate

DeKalb — Moline native Michelle Garrison knew she wanted to teach school. She just didn’t know how meaningful her lesson plans could become.

The Northern Illinois University senior toyed with becoming an English teacher when she arrived on the DeKalb campus three years ago but switched to art education in her first semester.

She soon discovered, in one of the nation’s top schools for art education, a discipline that can stir students to examine the politics and culture of their society and to express their thoughts about it.

“You can deal with issues in such a different way,” said Garrison, NIU’s 2006 Student Lincoln Laureate. “Art deals with identity issues. Art is about critical thinking: making images, looking at images. Art is a product of society, open to criticism. Art relates back to society. By creating it, you’re forming your opinions.”

The Student Lincoln Laureate is an annual honor reserved for the top senior from each of the state’s public and private four-year colleges and universities. The award recognizes excellence in both curricular and extracurricular activities.

Garrison and her fellow Lincoln Laureates will gather Saturday, Oct. 22, in Springfield for a recognition ceremony in the House of Representatives of the Old State Capitol.

“It means a lot to me to get recognized. I know there are a lot of other people who are qualified,” said Garrison, 21. “I’m kind of shy when people congratulate me. I get kind of tongue-tied.”

Her professors find words of praise come easy.

“She is conscientious, always organized, prepared and pays attention to detail. In the classroom, she is an active and eager participant, continually leading discussions and asking thought-provoking questions,” wrote Larry Gregory, assistant director of the School of Art, and Loretta Swanson, the school’s undergraduate coordinator.

“Ms. Garrison is well-grounded in the practice of the arts and the discipline of education, as well as being widely experienced in community service activities as a student and effective colleague in professional roles,” they continued. “The same qualities of intelligence, discipline, management, humor and rigor that qualify her for the classroom make her collegial participation effective and vital.”

The daughter of Doug and Lynn Garrison is a 2002 alumna of Moline High School. Her brother, Kirk, is a first-year student at Blackhawk Community College. She hopes to return to her hometown to launch her career, which could encompass K-12 teaching or community-based art education and administration.

Garrison won the NIU University Scholar Award, the most distinguished academic award available to outstanding new freshmen, providing a full scholarship to the university for four years.

Since then, she has earned Dean’s List honors in the NIU College of Visual and Performing Arts every semester, participated in the NIU Honors Program and received the Roger Kornder Visual Arts Memorial Scholarship and the James P. Bates Memorial Scholarship.

Last fall, Garrison became a Sally Stevens Scholar, an annual award given to only one exceptional student in the School of Art.

Her leadership abilities made her a peer adviser, guiding tours of the Art Building, talking with prospective students at open houses, greeting new students and helping fellow students schedule classes. She became the senior peer adviser last year, responsible for training junior peer advisers and managing their office.

Garrison’s extracurricular activities have included writing and receiving an Undergraduate Special Opportunities in Artistry and Research grant through NIU to develop and run a six-session art class for East Moline-area fourth-through seventh-graders. The curriculum’s theme was heroes, and the program was presented free of cost while allowing the students to keep all left-over materials.

She also designed and painted a Habitat for Humanity ReStore storefront mural in Davenport, Iowa, as well as entrance and stairwell murals in the Lincoln Hall residential building on the NIU campus. In 2004, she created a...
series of woodcut prints for the Scott Community College library in Bettendorf, Iowa.

“People ask if I ever sleep or get stressed. If you really like what you're doing, you won't get worn down. My involvement is authentic,” she said. “Do what you want. Do what interests you. Don’t do things or join things for your résumé. When you get out and start interviewing for jobs, people know what you cared about.”

Other finalists for the Lincoln Laureate were:

- **Douglas Reisinger**, political science, Mentor, Ohio (first finalist)
- **Brandie Carwile**, history/secondary teacher certification, Plainfield, Ill.
- **Adam Dye**, mechanical engineering, Brimfield, Ill.
- **Matthew Konfirst**, geology & environmental geosciences, West Chicago, Ill.
- **Christina Majerowicz**, geology, Antioch, Ill.
- **Cassie Reuter**, elementary education, Freeport, Ill.
- **Kara Schuur**, organizational/corporate communications, journalism, Muscatine, Iowa
- **Daniel Sotiroff**, mechanical engineering, Woodstock, Ill.

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