The Virgin Islands Consortium

National Science Foundation Awards UVI Alumni Graduate Research Fellowships

Education / **Published On May 27, 2015 10:57 AM /**

Staff May 27, 2015

The National Science Foundation (NSF) has awarded two University of the Virgin Islands alumni Graduate Research Fellowships (GRF) to complete advanced degrees in marine biology and chemistry, according to a press release UVI issued on Tuesday.

Stephan Bitterwolf and Marisha Perkins, both who graduated UVI in 2013, are among 2,000 individuals that have been selected from the 16,500 applicants in 2015, the release stated. Awardees represent a diverse group of scientific disciplines and come from all states, as well as the District of Columbia, and commonwealths and territories of the United States.

The Graduate Research Fellowships Program (GRFP) awards three years of annual support totaling $34,000 of annual stipend and $12,000 in cost-of-education allowance for graduate study that leads to a research-based master's or doctoral degree in science or engineering.

Bitterwolf, whose long-time goal has been to become a professor and engage the public in science that pertains to them, including fisheries, environment and health, is studying marine biology at California State University at Monterey Bay.

“Before I received the NSF GRF, I had given up on becoming a professor due to the issues of funding and was planning on settling for the master’s degree I am working towards now,” he said. “This fellowship has been a godsend, because I now have the funding necessary to enroll in Ph.D. programs this fall.”

She added: "UVI and its science faculty were without a doubt an integral part of the NSF reviewer’s comments. The research I had the opportunity to conduct at UVI and abroad through UVI’s Maximizing Access to Research Careers Fellowship Program demonstrated my abilities to the NSF reviewers and was one of the main reasons for receiving this fellowship."

Bitterwolf’s research at UVI and abroad has focused on coral reef ecosystems, fisheries science, and biological oceanography. His proposal for the program was based on the continuation of a project he conducted at UVI under the guidance of Dr. Marilyn Brandt, UVI research assistant professor of marine and environmental science, and Dr. Teresa Turner, UVI professor of marine biology.

“The outstanding letters of recommendation I received from Dr. Turner, Dr. Brandt, and Dr. Greta Aeby, my previous advisor at the University of Hawaii, also were a tremendous factor in my receiving of this fellowship,” Bitterwolf said. “I am eternally grateful for the opportunities, I have had the privilege to, benefit from at UVI. The science faculty and my mentors have made a tremendous difference in my life and have inspired me to follow suit with my aspirations of becoming a professor.”

Perkins is pursuing a doctoral degree in chemistry from Duke University. In May, she earned Master’s of Arts degrees in Teaching and Chemistry at Duke University. Perkins has a Bachelor of Science degree in Chemistry and an Associate of Science degree in Physics from UVI. She has earned summa cum laude honors.

“When I read the email that I had received the fellowship I was in shock,” said Perkins, who was skeptical that she would achieve a very competitive nationally recognized award. She was equally shocked to learn that her best friend, Bitterwolf, had received the fellowship award as well.

“Being able to share this experience with my best friend, even though we are on opposite sides of the country, is what makes receiving the NSF fellowship even more special for me,” added Perkins, who met Bitterwolf while studying at UVI.

“With this funding I am able to work toward a Ph.D. in the Derbyshire Lab at Duke,” she said. “My current research focuses on identifying inhibitors of Plasmodium, the causal parasitic agent of the malaria disease. Once I obtain a Ph.D. in chemistry and a Master’s of Arts degree in Teaching, I would like to return to the Virgin Islands and focus on

improving STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education in the public schools.”

Perkins then thanked UVI professors for their aid in her receiving the award: “I would have never received this award if it wasn’t for the recommendation letters and encouragement from professors of the Chemistry Department at UVI,” she said.

The NSF GRFP is a critical program in NSF's overall strategy to develop the globally-engaged workforce necessary to ensure the nation's leadership in advancing science and engineering research and innovation.

A high priority for NSF and GRFP is increasing the diversity of the science and engineering workforce, including geographic distribution and the participation of women, underrepresented minorities, persons with disabilities, and veterans. With its emphasis on support of individuals, GRFP offers fellowship awards directly to graduate students selected through a national competition.

Feature Image: From left, Marisha Perkins and Stephan Bitterwolf.

Image Credit: University of the Virgin Islands