

## Scholarships honor those who overcome

By Will Higgins -

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Disease, poverty, violence, domestic abuse -- calamities that easily could destroy a young person's life -- all were overcome by four Indianapolis high school seniors whose mettle was lauded Friday.

Each accepted college scholarships, and warm, sustained applause from the Kiwanis Club of Indianapolis.

"Overcome" might not be the right word. "Obliterated" is more accurate, because the students are leading lives of extraordinary achievement -- academically, athletically, and as leaders and mentors among their peers.

At the Kiwanians' annual Abe Lincoln Scholarship Awards lunch, there were two themes: God and parents. Each student attributed their success to one, the other or both.

The Downtown Kiwanis Club began giving scholarships in 1975 to students who had overcome adversity and named the awards for Lincoln, who battled hardships throughout his childhood.

Originally, the scholarship recipients' battles were mostly related to physical disabilities or disease. But these days, half of their troubles are, in Kiwanis parlance, "environmental."

"We've seen a real shift," said Kay Millar, a Kiwanian who has been on the selection committee for two decades.

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Twenty-five students were honored, and scholarships -- of \$15,000, \$10,000, \$7,500 and \$5,000 -- were given to four.

Here are the recipients:

**Luke Peeler**, Tech High School; 4.0 GPA; valedictorian; peer tutor in physics and English; mentor, Indianapolis Public School 56; president, National Honor Society; three-sport varsity athlete: cross-country, track, swimming. His plan: study physics at the University of Chicago.

Peeler's mother, after a divorcing his father, struggled to provide for her son, and the family bounced among relatives' homes and temporary housing. She entered an abusive relationship and, at one point, they were thrown out of the house and were living in their car.

He recalled witnessing his mother being beaten.

Luke said he tried to call the police, but the phone jacks had been ripped out. Wearing only his boxers, he ran to a neighbor's house and got help.

"I recall feeling a rage," he said, "but there wasn't any time for it. I'd get discouraged, but I'd look up to God, and I'd think, 'I am what he made me,' and that life is not about what comes at you, but how you react to it."

**Jordan C. Lee**, Indiana School for the Blind and Visually Impaired; high honors all four years; valedictorian; four-sport athlete (conference champion in shot put); mentor to other students in Braille and other skills. His plan: Butler University in the fall, then law school.

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Lee had suffered from deteriorating vision since he was a child, but by the 10th grade, he underwent surgery and was on his way to being healed. He returned to school in time to take the ISTEP/GQE test. That day, Lee was tackled by a fellow student and knocked to the ground.

It blinded him. Lee had several painful surgeries. But when the bandages were removed, he could see nothing.

His medical options exhausted, Lee immediately set about learning Braille, the Nemeth math code and JAWS, a screen reader computer program. He learned in two months what it takes others a year to learn.

"I have all these difficulties," he said, "so that just means I have more motivation.

"Nothing has hurt me. Everything helps me."

**Doug Sprowl**, George Washington Community High School; valedictorian; president, Student Council; president, National Honor Society; executive officer, junior ROTC; five-sport athlete; volunteer, Christamore House, American Cancer Society. His plan: study public administration at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

Sprowl was born in the nation of Brazil amid poverty and daily beatings. His twin brother died at 12. His mother died in a car crash, and his sister was removed from the house because of sexual abuse. His father tried to kill him.

He and two brothers were adopted by American missionaries, who brought them to Indianapolis.

"I refused to allow my past to determine my future," he said. "I live a beautiful life."

**Madeline Jarrett**, Cathedral High School; 4.42 GPA on 4.0 point scale; National Honor Society; mentors other students. Her plan: study philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, then attend law school.

Jarrett has battled health problems most of her life. Diagnosed with scoliosis at age 5, she underwent spinal fusion surgery during grade school. In high school, she dislocated a knee twice in two

weeks, and later was diagnosed with a neurological disease that causes muscles and nerves to degenerate.

"It's pointless to be fearful," she said. "I was put here to change the world."

Jarrett is drawn to philosophy because "it's a way to understand the world. The world is a puzzle, and I want to solve it."

Asked to name her favorite philosopher, she paused, then said: "I get my inspiration from God, and he's a philosopher."