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Andrea Appleton Wins Goldwater Scholarship

April 15, 2020



Flowers, for many, may simply be a nice gift for a loved one or something to stop and smell along the way, but to Honors Program biology student Andrea Appleton, they are a window into the intricacies of daily life.

“Plants are incredibly diverse and everywhere, and I feel that we have a lot to learn from them and their life history,” Appleton said. “Flowers are a remarkable evolutionary advancement for plants; and understanding their uniqueness is important to understanding the complexities of life.”

Appleton’s research in botany and floral evolution were recognized this year when she was named a Goldwater Scholar, the highest national award for undergraduate students in the STEM majors.

“A career in science, especially research, was not always the obvious path for me to take, so to pursue it and have that pursuit validated is very meaningful,” said Appleton. “This recognition, to me, means that I am trusted and expected to conduct innovative research throughout my career. I feel very fortunate for the support and for the reassurance in my career choice.”

This is the second year in a row that a Georgia Southern student has been honored with this prestigious scholarship, which is awarded to undergraduates who show exceptional promise of becoming the nation’s next generation of research leaders in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

“Having a recipient of this high honor from Georgia Southern University speaks volumes about our commitment to student research, the quality of our undergraduates, and the talent of our faculty,” said Georgia Southern President Kyle Marrero. “I would like to congratulate Andrea Appleton, and the professors who worked with her, for this outstanding achievement.”

In addition to her award-winning research, Appleton directs the Georgia Southern Herbarium, a collection of 40,000 plant specimens from around the world. While sorting through a backlog of specimens, she realized just how unique flowers can be.

“I opened a newsprint and was stunned by the most striking flowers I had ever seen,” Appleton said. “Those flowers were pressed in intricate clumps and retained the most surreal blue color, even though the newsprint was dated to the 1960s.”

The Georgia Southern junior later learned they were flowers of *Delphinium*, commonly known as larkspurs. Intrigued by the immense biodiversity and charm of plants, Appleton began to conduct floral evolution research with her advisor, former Georgia Southern Professor John Schenk. She studies the evolution and development of staminodes, which are stamens (the pollen-producing parts of flowers) that have lost the ability to produce pollen. His departure from Georgia Southern left the Herbarium curator position open, and Appleton was selected to take on that role, an opportunity that is extremely rare for an undergraduate student. William Irby, Ph.D., a professor of biology, taught Appleton in his Honors Principles of Biology class. He said Appleton was an obvious choice for the position of acting curator.

“She readily took to the responsibilities of her job,” Irby said. “She began work on her honors research early, and by the end of her sophomore year had achieved as much as most honors students do, by the time they finish their projects as seniors.”

The College of Science and Mathematics and the biology department have supported Appleton’s studies with travel grants that have enabled her to present her research at regional and national conferences.

“As faculty have worked to enhance the undergraduate research experience, we see this huge benefit for our students – they are competitive at a national level and they are poised to become the future of scientific research,” said Delana Gajdosik-Nivens, dean of the College of Science and Mathematics.

The Honors scholar plans to attend graduate school after she leaves Georgia Southern and pursue a career in evolutionary botany.

“I am eager to expand our understanding of the patterns and processes of floral evolution,” Appleton said. “I want to explore the power of plants to uncover the secrets of evolution and push the boundaries of our understanding of the natural world and its complexity.”

The rising senior expressed gratitude for the faculty mentors who guided her through the process to winning the Goldwater Scholarship. She said guidance from her advisor and mentors have been invaluable.

“I am a first-generation student and would not be in college at all without the support of the Honors Program and the Department of Biology,” she said. “The opportunities I have been granted and the people I have met have all been incredibly influential in my professional and personal life.”

Appleton was one of only 396 college students across the United States to earn the scholarship of up to \$7,500 a year. The scholarship honors the lifetime work of the late Sen. Barry Goldwater, who served his country for 56 years as a soldier and statesman, including 30 years in the U.S. Senate.

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