

2026 National AREA Scholarship Winners

The National AAFES Retired Employees Association (AREA) Scholarship Program stands as a testament to the organization's commitment to fostering educational opportunities.

Established in 1985 through the philanthropic efforts of its retirees and active associates, the program has provided significant financial assistance, exceeding \$1,070,000, to over 440 graduating seniors. The Scholarship Review Board employs a comprehensive selection process that considers academic distinctions, extracurricular participation, unique talents, letters of recommendation, and applicant essays.

Through this thorough evaluation, we ensure scholarships are awarded to accomplished individuals, reflecting National AREA's commitment to empowering the next generation with financial support and recognition.

Congratulations to all the 2026 scholarship winners of the competitive process.



Juli Sparks, daughter of Robert Sparks, Corporate Electronics Mail Coordinator at HQ AAFES, has been awarded a \$5,000 scholarship. Juli plans to attend the University of Florida to pursue a degree in Biochemistry (pre-med track) with the goal of working in the Ophthalmology arena.

A recent graduate of Collyville Heritage High School, Juli distinguished herself through her academic achievements and extensive extracurricular involvement. She was a National Merit Scholar Commended, served as Vice President of the National Honor Society, member of Chemistry Club/National Science Honor Society, Student Ambassador of CHHS Red Jackets, and Team Captain of CHHS Varsity Tennis.

Beyond academics, Juli participated as an intern in ophthalmology research at UT Southwestern focusing on retinal disease and macular degeneration. Juli is also a student instructor, First Degree Black Belt, and stated the adoption of a service mindset transformed her life: her interest in helping others led to stronger academics, richer relationships, and greater happiness.



Samantha Lee, daughter of Faith Lee (LTC-R), Chief of Inspections, Office of the Inspector General, HQ Dallas, has been awarded a \$5,000 scholarship. She plans to attend the University of Texas at Austin to pursue a degree in Health and Society, on a pre-med track with aspirations in orthopedics.

Samantha's academic achievements include being in the National Honor Society logging more than 100 volunteer hours in community service. She is also the student representative for the PTSA and Team Captain of Varsity Swin Team. She also provided private academic tutoring in math and science and notes that each student improved by at least one letter grade.

Beyond academics Samantha held several roles that include an internship at Baylor Orthopedics and Spine Hospital, as well as performing as a swim coach for the MAC Swim Team guiding 50+ from non-swimmers to completing their first swim meet. Samantha credits her growing up as a military dependent with multiple moves and watching her mother's dedication for teaching her resilience and compassion. She said this is what led her to show up for people who need it most and explore a career in medicine.



Karthik Bhattar, son of Swami Bhattar, Service Portfolio Manager in HQ AAFES, has been awarded a \$3,000 scholarship. He plans to attend University of Texas at Austin to pursue a degree in Computer Science.

Karthik's accomplishments include membership in the USA Olympiad Platinum as well as 1st place in the UTD Battle of the Brains Hackathon. He was a finalist in the Texas Technology Student Association Data Science and Analytics. Karthik was recognized as an AP Scholar with Distinction and is a member of the National Honor Society with more than 50 hours of community service, demonstrating his commitment to service. His leadership roles include Vice President of the Web Development Club.

Karthik held an internship at American Airlines, where he designed and prototyped a social media app from scratch, gaining hands on experience at a Fortune 500 company. He continues to serve as a CS/Programming tutor teaching coding concepts to peers and younger students. He also plays the Violin, Flute and Piano.



Malia Kahloni Chaney Hamilton, daughter of Janet Hamilton, Service Business Manager, Ft. Polk Exchange, has been awarded a \$3,000 scholarship for her exceptional achievements.

A dedicated student, Malia is a member of the National and Spanish Honor Society and is recognized for A/B honor roll status. Beyond academics, she is very involved in several school activities including the Black Heritage Club, the Chess Club, and Thespian Society. She was also part of the Bueno Vista JROTC and HS Flag Team and is actively involved in Ft. Polk middle school Teen Center Student Youth Council.

Demonstrating strong time management skills and a robust work ethic, Malia also balances her studies and extracurriculars with a part-time job at a local restaurant and is currently seeking a Retail Management Certification. She is set to attend Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in pursuit of a bachelor's degree in Aeronautical Engineering, a field she has felt passionate about for many years.



McKinleigh Meeks, daughter of Morgan Meeks, Vice President Logistics at HQ Dallas, has been awarded a \$3,000 scholarship. McKinleigh plans to attend the University of Arkansas and pursue a bachelor's degree in nursing.

McKinleigh's accomplishments include all A Honor Roll as well as Vice President of HOSA. She is a member of the National Honor Society and has been involved with MASH (a Medical based organization). Her activities include cheer, track indoor and outdoor State Championships, as well as High Point Winner, South Arkansas Swim Association, along with Top 10 Junior Olympian in swim. McKinleigh stated she loves to swim and run competitively.

McKinleigh is CPR certified as well as serves her church Vacation Bible School. She balances her extracurricular activities with a part-time job at a local restaurant.



Cooper Buck, daughter of Michelle Buck, Application System Program Manager at HQ Dallas, has been awarded a \$3,000 scholarship.

Cooper plans to attend Texas Tech University and pursue a degree in Nutrition and eventually become a Physician Assistant. Her accomplishments show her commitment to academics and community service. Her involvement in various activities include Captain and Social Media Manager for the FCA Cheerleading Team, tutoring younger students and she also served as an art club teacher in the after-school program. Cooper is also an assistant Equestrian Trainer for Youth Riders and was a national finalist for the coveted Interscholastic Equestrian Association's Sportsmanship Award for the last 2 years.

Cooper is also involved in her church activities and volunteered for Good Friday events, led Bible studies for children and works the VIP booth connecting newcomers to the church community.



Carol Hercules, daughter of Prapaporn Hercules, a Lead Foreman at Subway, Camp Humphreys, South Korea, has been awarded a \$3,000 scholarship. Carol intends to pursue Engineering studies at Purdue University in West Lafayette.

Carol's academic record includes being recognized as an AP Scholar with distinction, National History Club and National History Scholars Society Student of the Year Award. She was also on the Principals Honor Role for maintaining straight A's. Carol participated in the FIRST Tech Challenge Team as a Builder and Coder, Robotics club, was a member on the school Math League, and was a founding member of the school's Science Olympiad club/team.

She stated she learned much from her volunteer opportunities and has more than 50 accumulated volunteer hours. Her leadership experience includes serving as treasurer of the Math League and has earned multiple additional awards such as the Think Award, Excellence in Algebra Award, and the Excellence in Chemistry award.



Landon Banks, son of Brandi Banks, Warehouse Worker at the Wright Patterson AFB Exchange, has been awarded a \$3,000 scholarship. Landon will be pursuing a degree in Business Administration-Accounting.

Landon's academic excellence shines in his membership in the National Honor Society and National Technical Honor Society for Business Administration. He gained practical experience as journeyman-level banking representative.

His leadership and commitment to community involvement are evident through his participation in numerous student organizations such as being a CODE Credit Union Student representative in a student liaison role, his many seasons of Varsity Tennis, his role in competitive Marching Band, and participation in the Symphonic Band. Furthermore, Landon balanced his extracurricular activities with a part-time job at the UPS Store gaining valuable hands-on experience.



Jada Wilson, daughter Jamaal Wilson, Customer Relations Manager I, at HQ Dallas, has been awarded a \$3,000 scholarship! Jada will be attending University of Texas at Austin to pursue a degree in Journalism.

Jada's academic excellence shines through her membership in the National Honor Society, National Society of High School Scholars, and Dallas ISD Scholar, as well as the International Thespian Society.

Beyond her studies, Jada is deeply committed to service as demonstrated by her participation as Student Council President, National Honor Society Parliamentarian, as well as the Broadcast Club Secretary. She is a mission volunteer and student leader at church. Jada is also owner/creator of The Love Bug Blog. She is a Ronald McDonald House Teen Team Member and manages to balance her extracurricular activities with a part-time job as a server at a

local restaurant.



Sophia Ramsey, daughter of Derrick Ramsey, Systems Technology Manager at HQ Dallas, has been awarded a \$3,000 scholarship. Sophia plans to attend Texas Tech University and pursue a bachelor's degree in nursing with a desire to specialize in pediatrics.

Sophia's accomplishments show her commitment to academics in various activities including National Honor Society, A Honor Roll, as well as taking dual credit college courses and graduating with both her high school diploma and an associate's degree in May 2026. She also participated in Maypearl High School Marching Band, Class I Solo Auditioner, Student Council, One Act Theater, and received the Daughter of the Revolution Good Citizen award. Sophia performed

volunteer hours through the National Honor Society and Manna House Angel Tree Gift Wrapping.

Sophia balanced her extracurricular activities with a part-time job at Maypearl Events where she learned to pay attention to detail. She also stated her experience volunteering and as an intern for a first-grade class have been valuable learning experiences which helped her to develop patience, empathy, and personal skills she will use in her desired profession.



Logan LaRose, son of Todd LaRose, Pricing Analyst at HQ Dallas, has been awarded a \$3,000 scholarship. Logan will be attending the University of North Texas to pursue a degree in Finance.

Logan's academic excellence is displayed through his membership in the National Technical Honor Society, Outstanding Ensemble Award, Royal Award for Character/Compassion and perfect attendance award.

His leadership and commitment to community involvement are evident through his achievement of Eagle Scout and participation in Marching Band, Clarinet Choir, and Symphony Orchestra. Logan likes working on cars and building LEGO's while balancing a part time job as a Cinemark Team Member. He stated he gained valuable

insight while attending school, working, and earning his Eagle Scout on how important responsibility and time management really are.



Malakai Musashi Morel, son of Kikana Morel, Store Manager JBLE-Langley Eustis Exchange has been awarded a \$2,000 scholarship.

This scholarship is a testament to Malakai's dedication and hard work, and it will support his academic journey at the Virginia Military Institute, where he plans to study Computer Science-Cyber Security.

Malakai's achievements include involvement in the National Society of High School Scholars, National Honor Society, Cadet Officer Leadership Program as well as Cadet Officer Leadership Program Training Instructor. He has participated in the Verizon Skill Forward program and has obtained a EverFI Financial Literacy Certificate. Malakai is

actively involved in JROTC where he has held multiple roles to include Administrative and Personnel Officer, Logistics officer and participated in Honor and Color Guard.

Malakai states JROTC has taught him leadership, responsibility, and teamwork. He learned leadership is not just giving orders---it is helping others and setting a good example.



Paola Otero-Acevedo, is a Customer Experience Associate at the Malmstrom AFB Exchange and daughter of Beatriz Acevedo-Rodriguez, MCSS Store Manager at Malmstrom AFB that has been awarded a \$2,000 scholarship! Paola will be attending Montana State University to pursue a degree in Bachelor of Business-Accounting.

Paola's academic quality is demonstrated through her membership in the National Honor Society, maintaining her status on Honor Roll, and receipt of the Heisey Award. She also took multiple college level courses while maintaining her GPA.

Beyond her studies, Paola is deeply committed to service as demonstrated by her participation in assisting teachers at the elementary school summer camp. She has also volunteered her time at the Rustler Roost Concessions and even took on the Rustler Roost bookkeeping. She is a member of the Business Professionals of America here she was the secretary and treasury for the past 2 years. She was also DECA-International Career Development Conference qualifier for accounting applications and credits this for learning time management and presentation skills. She is currently an AAFES Customer Experience Associate and manages to balance her extracurricular activities with this part-time job.



Tristen Geddie, son of LaSonga Thomas, HR Programs Support Manager at HQ Dallas, has been awarded a \$2,000 scholarship. Tristen plans to attend Auburn University and pursue a degree in Pre-Business-Accounting.

Tristen's accomplishments show his commitment to academics in various activities including A/B Honor Roll, as well as taking dual credit college courses. He also participated in the Future Business Leaders of America and held the position of treasurer for their chapter. He is a member of Future Teachers of Alabama where he assisted in creating lesson plans, providing tours for younger students and visiting local elementary schools to read to students.

Tristen was able to balance his extracurricular activities with being a part of the Chic-Fil-A Leader Academy, where he planned local events with elementary schools, delivered books, and developed plans to help disadvantaged students.