

How to Win a Rhodes

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By Michael Winerip

When Keri Steffes, a senior with a 4.0 average at the University of Arkansas's honors college, is asked exactly when she began the application process for a Rhodes Scholarship, she says: "Freshman year really, that's when they start talking to you about it. They're like, 'You can be a Rhodes, you can be a Marshall Scholar' -- and you've been on campus two months!" Freshmen are warned that for the Rhodes, they will need eight recommendations and if they wait until senior year, they're dead. "They told us we need to make sure we get to know a lot of professors personally, and to start early," Ms. Steffes says.

Freshmen learn that to win one of these postgraduate fellowships, experience abroad is crucial, and so they hit the road early and often. In the last five years, the number from the University of Arkansas studying outside the country has doubled, to 16 percent of all students. Ms. Steffes, of Siloam Springs, Ark., has traveled extensively in Jordan, worked at an orphanage in Honduras and spent her junior year at Cambridge University. By the time they return for senior year, the fellowship push is at full throttle. The fall 2002 semester began with a two-day Marshall/Rhodes/Gates/Truman Retreat at the Crescent Hotel in Eureka Springs, Ark. Candidates listened to lectures on the European Union and bioterrorism and attended workshops on how to write a fellowship essay and how to sit at an interview (hands folded on the table in front of you).

"Going for the Rhodes is way more work than I anticipated," a weary senior, Jeff Sparks, said one day in mid-November, before dragging himself to yet another Rhodes practice interview with faculty members. "I think this is my 10th mock interview. But you hope all the preparation can give you peace of mind. I don't want to walk away and say, 'There was one thing I could have done to prepare and didn't' and regret it."

At 100 years old, the Rhodes is the granddaddy of all fellowships, both the most prestigious and the most arduous. To become one of the lucky 32 scholars selected nationwide each December, candidates must be nominated by their university, approved by their state Rhodes committee, pass muster at a cocktail party, interview on the state level and, finally, survive a second cocktail party and interview on the regional level. By late November, 981 had learned that they made it to the 50 state competitions. In sparsely populated Arkansas, maybe one applicant wins a Rhodes. Some years, none do. As Mr. Sparks said, "It begins with a select group and things happen and it's almost last man standing."

To ready themselves, the four University of Arkansas candidates for the 2003 Rhodes -- Mr. Sparks, Ms. Steffes, Eric Jackson and Rachel Driver -- met for three hours every Sunday afternoon during the fall semester with their fellowship adviser, Suzanne McCray. "It's like taking a course on the Rhodes," Mr. Sparks said. Dr. McCray sent them daily e-mail messages with articles to read from *The Economist*, *The New Yorker*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New York Times* and the *Society for Medical Anthropology*, as well as books, poems and the odd tidbit about Cecil Rhodes. She assembled faculty committees to grill them in mock interviews in numerous campus settings. ("We don't want them getting too comfortable in one place," Dr. McCray says.) She even insisted they do a mock interview sitting on a couch. ("Ben Hood, one of our Marshall winners, had an interview on a couch," Dr. McCray explains.) She had them rewrite their essays. ("I did 25 drafts," Mr. Jackson

says.) She gave them long lists of questions she had culled from candidates at past interviews. "You have one minute to tell the prime minister of India how to end religious violence. What do you say?") And she scheduled a mock cocktail party at Gaylord's in Fayetteville to simulate the Rhodes cocktail parties. ("Megan Ceronsky, our 2001 Marshall winner, got killed at her Rhodes cocktail party," Dr. McCray says. "After that we decided we would help our kids learn how to handle themselves in tough social situations.")

In short, Dr. McCray strained to give them every edge in their quest to study free at Oxford for the next two to three years. And so, it is not surprising that they all saw yet another opportunity to get some priceless insight into the process when, one day last fall, the most famous Rhodes of all, former President Bill Clinton, happened to be on campus for a public appearance. The four were hoping for a few words of wisdom from Mr. Clinton, hoping he would suggest some little-known publication they had not thought to read, that he might clue them in on some secret question that Dr. McCray had not prepped them for. Though the crowds for Mr. Clinton's visit were large, the four Rhodes candidates were determined, and they elbowed and squeezed to the front of the room, until only one obstacle remained. "There was a man holding a baby in front of us," Mr. Jackson recalled. Mr. Sparks, the son of a wholesale food salesman in Fort Smith, Ark., is probably the shyest of the four candidates ("I've been trying to learn to talk about myself more"). But as Cecil Rhodes himself knew from years in the African bush, true leadership emerges under times of duress. "I pushed my way around the guy with the baby," Mr. Sparks said. "The others followed. I didn't knock the baby over or anything. I kind of felt bad but. ..." A lot was at stake. "We explained who we were, and asked if he had any advice," Mr. Jackson recalled. "President Clinton said, 'Just read *Time* and *Newsweek* and get plenty of sleep the night before.'"

A LOT has changed since Mr. Clinton won his Rhodes in 1968. While the Ivy Leagues, elite private colleges and military academies have long dominated, over the last five years aggressive state universities have begun to make some inroads, and it is people like Dr. McCray and her full-court press who are responsible. In 1997, Dr. McCray attended a conference on the Truman, a fellowship for students interested in public service. "That's when I realized there was all this insider information we didn't know," she says. "Truman has a Question 15, 'Tell us something about your personal background.' I didn't understand that was so important. On the other hand, there's a policy statement and it's not critical and not explored at the interview. We were wasting precious time on that one."

That prompted Dr. McCray to organize a national fellowship conference in 1999 called "Breaking the Code," which a year later led to the formation of the National Association of Fellowships Advisers. About 200 colleges now belong, and Dr. McCray is the incoming president. "It's about democratization and access," she says. The upstart organization got a break early on, in December 2000, when for the first time since 1930 Harvard did not win a single Rhodes. And Yale did not win a Marshall, which also provides for study in Britain. (At the time, a Yale Daily News reporter asked Yale's fellowship director, Catherine Hutchison, what went wrong. "We are puzzled," she replied, but then made sure to add: "Harvard must be puzzled too because they got no Rhodes.") That year of puzzlement, the University of Arkansas won a Rhodes and Marshall, while eight other state universities won a Rhodes, including the first for the University of Illinois at Chicago. "State universities everywhere said 'Ha!'" recalls Dr. McCray, who was in the forefront of those ha-ha-ing. "Of course, next year Harvard had five." But if spreading fellowships around is a positive, there is an unfortunate side. As state universities and smaller, less selective colleges grow more aggressive, the elite colleges have responded in kind, with the result being that the whole process is more high-

pressured and cut-throat for everyone. New York University recently hired its first fellowship specialist, from the Fulbright program. "It will help us ratchet up our fellowship program a bit," the associate dean, Richard Kalb, says. Dr. McCray notes that Yale did not join the national fellowships group at first. "But after they didn't win a Marshall, they joined," she says.

For some universities, winning a Rhodes is now part of the whole U.S. News & World Report rank-us-high-to-the-sky syndrome. In 2000, the president of Clemson, James F. Barker, announced a goal of winning two Rhodes Scholarships in the next decade as part of a push to be one of the top 20 public universities in the nation. It is not hard to imagine the pressure this put on his fellowship office. "I'm on pins and needles," Stephen Wainscott, Clemson's director, said in mid-November as he waited to see if Katie Brock, a double major in biochemistry and fine arts, had been chosen by South Carolina's state committee to compete for a Rhodes. "I'm assuming Katie has an e-mail waiting when she gets back to campus. We're getting closer and closer each year. I have a good feeling about this year. I'd bet a week's salary."

Indeed, Harvard may be one of the last places to at least sound nonchalant about the Rhodes. Of course, having such an extraordinary student body that has captured 304 Rhodes Scholarships -- 100 more than second-place Yale -- might have something to do with it. "I don't mean to sound snooty," says Paul Bohlmann, fellowship director at Harvard, "but in a lot of schools it's a big deal if they get one selected for a Rhodes interview." Harvard had 30 selected to compete in November, from 18 states. Over the past 35 years, Mr. Bohlmann says, Harvard has averaged 5.3 Rhodes winners a year, with a single year record of 10. In contrast, the University of Arkansas has had 10 winners in 100 years. "If we have five Rhodes Scholars, it's a footnote here," Mr. Bohlmann says, "whereas if Oberlin has its first in 25 years, it's front page." "Nominating for the Rhodes seems to come more or less naturally here," says Mr. Bohlmann, although that isn't exactly true. It's just the machinery has been in place longer. Harvard has a fulltime fellowship staff of three, and each of the 13 residence houses has one or two graduate students coaching candidates through the process. (At Arkansas, Dr. McCray is one of two fellowship advisers.) Harvard officials may seem blasé about it, but they prep too. Anna Weiss, a senior who was a professional ballet dancer before attending college, felt "mildly uncomfortable" about rehearsing for the Rhodes, but she still joined six other candidates from Harvard at a mock cocktail party at Pforzheimer House the Sunday night before Thanksgiving. During a post-mock-cocktail analysis, Rick Bell, a fellowship adviser, told the students: "Don't fiddle with your wine glass, don't shift your weight. If someone backs away from you, don't follow them -- you're probably too close."

Among hopefuls, Michelle Kuo -- a Harvard senior who has studied women's issues in Kenya and China and spends 30 hours a week running a homeless shelter -- was that rare individual to snub the mock cocktail circuit. "I just couldn't do it," she says. "It felt too phony." Mr. Bohlmann is aware that Harvard's numbers could decline if recent trends hold. Harvard's Rhodes average has dropped almost in half during the last five years, to 2.8 per year. "If Harvard gets two or three instead of four or five, we can live with that," he says, "as long as the winners are deserving." Asked why Harvard has not joined the national fellowships group, Mr. Bohlmann says, "You know, we just haven't got around to it." AS Miles F. Shore and Robert I. Rotberg point out in their 1988 book, "The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power," Rhodes the man was every bit as odd and eccentric as Rhodes the fellowship. He was a rabid colonialist. (The English, he said, "are the finest race in the world," and "the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for the human race.") And he did much harm. He helped establish apartheid in South Africa and made his wealth by cornering the gold and diamond markets there. On the other hand, he was personally generous and a big believer

in education. His scholarship to his alma mater, Oxford University, was not to be for bookworms (no "Latin and Greek swots") but instead for, well, young men like Rhodes -- outgoing fellows of action. The original formula counted academics four-tenths, athletics two-tenths, character two-tenths and manhood two-tenths. Over time, the formula has been modified (women became eligible in 1977) and today, athletics is interpreted to mean personal vigor. (Ms. Driver of Arkansas is an extreme Frisbee player).

Truth is, it takes lots of vigor to survive Rhodes crunch week, the week after Thanksgiving. On Tuesday evening, Dec. 3, all 50 state Rhodes committees -- a mix of academics and professionals, some of whom have been Rhodes Scholars themselves -- hold cocktail parties. On Dec. 4, each committee conducts a daylong series of interviews and, after deliberating, announces the first-round winners on the spot -- "just like Miss America," as Dr. McCray says. The state winners proceed to cocktail parties on Dec. 6 thrown by each of the eight regional committees go through another full day of interviews on Dec. 7, and then -- Miss America all over again. Because it's all done behind closed doors, rumors were rampant as the four University of Arkansas students prepared to head to Little Rock for the state competition. "What I heard," said Mr. Jackson, a pre-med who does triathlons, "is they take all the kids, line us up like a firing squad and tell you in front of everybody whether you made it. You wonder if the whole process isn't meant to mortify you, to see how you hold up." They made the three-hour drive in a car Mr. Sparks borrowed from his parents. Dr. McCray had e-mailed "the ladies" a fashion advisory -- a dress for the cocktail party, pantsuit for the interview. (As Dr. McCray told them, Megan Ceronsky, Arkansas's 2001 Marshall winner, had worn a pantsuit to her interview, and "it worked out great.") She had reminded them to make eye contact with committee members. (Anna Terry, Arkansas's 2001 Rhodes winner, had prepared by setting up a room full of empty chairs and then talking to each chair.) Dr. McCray also told them that it was O.K. to drink at the cocktail party. (The legendary Ms. Terry had a glass of wine at both her parties.) Among the four, the word was, "Go for the merlot."

Dr. McCray had predicted that committee members would seek them out, but at the real cocktail party, in the Cherokee Room of the Capitol Hotel, the seven committee members held back, and as Mr. Jackson said later, "We realized pretty quick we had to go out and work that room." Ms. Steffes thought it was weird how much these strangers knew about her. They would say, "Oh, Keri, I've been fascinated by your work with orphans in Honduras." There were 10 competitors and Mr. Sparks found one particularly annoying: "He seemed to take things I said and try to sway the conversation toward him. He kept making light of what I was saying." At evening's end, a sheet was passed out with their assigned interview times for the next day. "They said they'd generated a random list from a computer program," Ms. Steffes recalled. She was first, a bad omen. "Dr. McCray says the danger of going first is, by the time they get to the end of the interviews, they forget you."

Normally, Mr. Jackson sleeps like the dead, but not that night. "I had two awful dreams," he said. "I woke at 2 and 4. You think it's the day after and you're living your life after you've slept through the Rhodes." Ms. Steffes, an international relations major, was asked a lot of questions about the United Nations, about statistics and the Six Day War and didn't feel like she did her best. Mr. Sparks, a physics whiz, was asked if technology always meant progress, and he talked about the dangers of atomic weapons. "That might not have been the best answer with a military person on the committee," he said. He also said, "They asked Trivial Pursuit questions I didn't know, like the number of the U.N. resolution for the Six Day War."

Most of Mr. Jackson's questions were about medicine, his major, which worked out well for him. While they waited for the committee to finish deliberating, they discovered they had all answered one question the same, about their biggest weakness. They had all confessed they were perfectionist. "You can't say something too bad," Mr. Sparks said. "You don't want to give away too much." At 3:15 they were called back to the Cherokee Room and lined up against the back wall. "They made a speech about how we were all winners," Ms. Steffes said. "I'm thinking, please, just tell us. They gave us some statistic that people who were almost Rhodes Scholars are more successful than ones who get it. I'm not sure I buy it."

Two state winners were announced in alphabetical order. First was John Henderson, a senior at Emory from Little Rock. "I heard my name," Mr. Jackson said. "I'm not a religious person but I said, 'My God.' It's very vindicating. Basically you spent your entire undergrad career pruning yourself for this." He looked at his three classmates. "They were all smiling for me." "Definitely disappointing," Ms. Steffes said. "I mean, it takes a lot of work, all these applications, hours and hours. I'm excited for Eric. It's definitely disappointing." "We could resent Eric," Mr. Sparks said. "But we definitely would not do that."

On the drive back, Ms. Steffes and Ms. Driver were quiet, doing homework until it got dark. Mr. Jackson used a cellphone to make travel arrangements for the finals in Atlanta. That night, Ms. Steffes was up past midnight. She had a final in Spanish, a presentation on the banana trade wars of 1996 and a paper due. "I'm exhausted," she said. "Of course, none of it would seem like a lot if I were going to Atlanta."

The night before her state Rhodes interview, Michelle Kuo was working past midnight at the Cambridge homeless shelter she runs with other Harvard students. Before leaving, she said goodbye to several residents, who were clearly fond of her. "When you're homeless, you get grouped a certain way," a shelter resident, Paul Phaneuf, said. "Michelle always reminds me I'm smart." She is from Kalamazoo and had opted to compete in Michigan. (Candidates have a choice between the state where they attend school and their home state and usually pick the one they feel will give them a better chance.)

The next morning, her parents, immigrants from Taiwan, picked her up at the airport and drove to the University of Michigan, where the cocktail party was to be held. "I wasn't nervous but my parents were making me nervous," Ms. Kuo said. "My mother was trying to make me wear makeup. She kept putting on a lot and I kept wiping it off." "I had a vision people would be aggressive and obnoxious and tooting their own horn," she said. "But the cocktail party was only nice people talking about very innocuous things." To set the order of interviews the next day, they picked numbers from an envelope, and Ms. Kuo drew No. 9. "I could sleep in," she said. "I was glad I didn't get first; they forget the people at the beginning."

They asked her a lot about the homeless shelter. She knew she was doing well, because several times she made them laugh. They questioned why she felt women's studies was relevant, and Ms. Kuo, who has worked for a legal rights group in Kenya and a domestic violence group in China, said: "You sound like my parents. They want me to go to med school." After the deliberations, the committee chairman gave a speech about how they were all winners, then read the two actual winners in alphabetical order. "When I heard my name I was sort of shocked and relieved," Ms. Kuo said. "My parents took off two days of work to drive me around. I was glad I didn't waste their

time." Anna Weiss, the ballet dancer who has twice studied in Russia, also made the finals, from Massachusetts. Of the 30 Harvard students who had state interviews, 11 were finalists.

Katie Brock, of Irmo, S.C., Clemson's top hope for a Rhodes and a shot at the *U.S. News* pantheon of top-20 public universities, hated the entire process. "The cocktail party unnerved me," she said. "I'm not a schmoozer kind of kid. Honestly, we're in this huge room, but we're all crowded into this little area. And people you've never met are saying, 'Hi, Katie, how was your trip to Africa?'" She did not feel her interview the next morning went well, but then she had to sit with the committee and other candidates and make small talk over lunch. "Everyone's pretending to be happy," she said, "and you're wondering what they really think of you."

During deliberations, the 10 hopefuls waited in a suite. "I got so tired of all these people trying to impress each other," Ms. Brock said. "Two of them were called back for one-question interviews. Bizarre." "At 5:30 they called us in. They gave this speech that we were all winners. I'm like, just tell us, I want to go home." Asked if she was upset, she said, "No. I'm a Christian. I'm at peace. God's in control."

THE final round for the Southeast region was in Atlanta, on the 42nd floor at Alston & Bird, the downtown law firm of a committee member. "The most opulent place I've ever been," Mr. Jackson said, "aside from the Louvre." At the cocktail party, they picked numbers from a bowl, and he pulled nine, "a good sign." But the interview played like an anxiety dream. "I just couldn't get close up enough to the topics I needed to be talking about," he said. "I tried, but it seemed we spent the whole time on random current events."

The conference room had floor-to-ceiling windows, and he kept noticing a TV news helicopter flying back and forth outside. The committee deliberated three hours. "We were pretty tense waiting," Mr. Jackson said. Once again they were all winners, although the four actual winners were named alphabetically: Adam Cureton, University of Georgia; Tyler Fisher, University of Central Florida; John Henderson, Emory. When Mr. Jackson's alphabetical moment arrived, instead the winner was Devi Shridhar, an 18-year-old University of Miami senior who speaks five languages, is a ranked tennis player, has written a book on Indian myths and founded an organization for autistic children.

"Everyone's acting really happy," Mr. Jackson said. "Well, I was crushed. It was such an emotionally draining experience, this unbelievable high on Wednesday chased by an unbelievable low on Saturday." "It's not scientific," he said. "A week later they could have asked some question, and the way they phrased it, it would have set me off to say something that made the whole interview go differently. Dr. McCray said, 'Eric, don't spend time thinking about what you could have said,' but of course, I do."

Ms. Kuo did not make it either. At the regional finals in Chicago, she drew the first interview. "I'm the least morning person in the world," she said, "and I had to get up at 6. I didn't have very good energy. At one point they asked, 'Do you really think homeless people are your friends?' I was offended, but I just said, 'That's a good question.' I didn't fight enough. I should have said, 'Come to the shelter and see for yourself.'" This time, when she tried being funny, no one laughed.

Afterward, her parents picked her up. "They were so nice and supportive, which made me feel nice, but I felt I let them down." Ming-Shang and Hwa-Mei Kuo drove their Michelle to the airport for her flight back to Boston. By the time they got home to Kalamazoo, it was midnight.

'We had been warned that the district would be less pleasant," Anna Weiss of Harvard said. "But it wasn't true. All the committee members were wonderful, fun to talk to." Her final interview was at the St. Botolph Club in Boston, which Ms. Weiss said reminded her of the Harvard Club. "They immediately put me at ease by their demeanor," she said. "We talked a lot about my interest in Russia, why I thought Russia was such an important player on the world stage, what I thought I could do to contribute to Russia's development. Everything we discussed was something I was interested in." They asked if, based on her years in ballet, she believed suffering was necessary for great art. "I said, 'Not per se. An internal emotional life is required, but it needn't be suffering. It could be joy.'" Ms. Weiss was at the end of the alphabet and the last of the winners announced, but, she said, "it went so quickly, nothing went through my mind really. Afterward, we all stood and hugged. It was very collegial, very nice."

In a century, 2,982 Americans have won a Rhodes: Bill Bradley and Richard G. Lugar, the senators; Byron R. White, the Supreme Court justice; Reynolds Price, the writer; George Stephanopoulos, the television commentator. And now, Anna Weiss, the ballet dancer and Russian major. The National Association of Fellowships Advisers emphasizes that whether students win or lose, the truly important part is the process, which encourages them to study abroad and exposes them to new ideas. And so, even though Dr. McCray has no Rhodes Scholars this time, she is throwing several parties and dinners throughout the year for each and every student who applies for a fellowship. "Whether they win or not, we want them to feel just being involved in the process is something to celebrate," she said.

Winning may not be the important thing, but just for the record, Harvard once again had the most Rhodes winners, four. At Harvard, Mr. Bohlmann said he planned nothing special for his winners. "I believe the dean sends them a congratulatory e-mail," he said, "and the president writes a letter."

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