

Environmental, volunteer work nets Roncalli student scholarship

By GARY KEAN
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PORT SAUNDERS

One student from this Northern Peninsula town has turned her environmental work and extensive community involvement into a valuable scholarship.

Sheri O'Keefe, a Level 3 student at Roncalli Central High School, has been named one of two Atlantic Canadian winners of \$5,000 Toyota Earth Day scholarships.

The scholarship program, established by Toyota Canada Inc. and Earth Day Canada, is designed to reward young Canadians who demonstrate their passion for the environment every day through important work they accomplish in their communities. In all, 15 of tomorrow's environmental leaders have been awarded \$5,000 scholarships to be applied directly towards tuition, books, room and board, or other educational expenses in the first year of post-secondary full-time studies in Canada.

One of those 15 students was also chosen as a national winner and awarded a new laptop computer.

To be considered for the honour, O'Keefe had to fill out an application form, compose an essay about her involvement in environmental work and also outline her volunteer work.

O'Keefe is certainly an environmental leader in terms of both her summer work experience and her volunteer efforts in the community and at school. Last summer, she worked with the Conservation Corps of Newfoundland Labrador as a member of the Limestone Barrens Habitat Stewardship Green Team in the Port au Choix area. That job entailed working with a Parks Canada biologist and learning about some rare plants that exist in that area of the Northern Peninsula.

"He taught us a lot about the local limestone barrens habitat and the rare plant species *Fernalds braya*," said O'Keefe. "I wrote a lot about the work I've done with that. When I learned about it, I made a pamphlet with my Green Team and we did door-to-door surveying to try and educate the public on the limestone barrens and the rare flora found there."

In addition, O'Keefe is also a youth representative on Parks Canada's management plan team for



Submitted Photo

Port Saunders teenager Sheri O'Keefe was presented Wednesday with a \$5,000 Toyota Earth Day scholarship during a special ceremony at her school, Roncalli Central High. The scholarship program is designed to reward young Canadians who demonstrate their passion for the environment every day through important work they accomplish in their communities.

the Port au Choix area. In fact, she is the youngest and first high school student on the committee

"With that, I talk to people in the town, especially the youth, and get their opinion on what issues they have in the Port aux Choix area — like if they want to use ATVs within Parks Canada's boundaries," she said. "We work with the group to try and resolve these issues."

O'Keefe will be involved in organizing public consultations about Parks Canada issues at the end of May.

She also volunteers at the Rufus Guinard Health Centre, where she entertains and socializes with the elderly residents, reading to them and even doing their hair.

In her school, O'Keefe is a student tutor who is well known for enthusiastically helping to organize activities to raise school spirit. She plays clarinet in the school band, has represented Roncalli Central High at the regional science fair several times and, last year, even developed and produced a video encouraging young people to vote.

O'Keefe actually plays several

musical instruments and also has a green belt with two stripes in karate. She hopes to get her black belt while attending university.

Despite her impressive résumé, which was bolstered by letters of reference from English teacher Bonnie Bussey and Port au Choix town manager Morris Kelly, O'Keefe was amazed to find out she had been chosen as one of the lucky scholarship winners.

"When the lady called to tell me I had won a scholarship, I was in a state of shock," she said. "I was very surprised and very excited."

She said there are a lot of people she'd like to thank for helping her be so active in her community, especially her parents Lucille and Kieran O'Keefe.

"I'd also like to thank Earth Day Canada for such an opportunity," she added.

O'Keefe plans to attend Memorial University in St. John's this fall. She's planning to major in biology and minor in chemistry and her long-term goal is to get into medical school and study to become a neurosurgeon.