

# THE ROAD TO THE

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*St. Olaf seniors Nicole Novak and Ishanaa Rambachan will join an elite group of Rhodes Scholars at Oxford University next fall.*

By J. Trout Lowen

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BILL KELLEY

**A**FTER SPENDING A LATE NOVEMBER FRIDAY NIGHT AND MOST OF SATURDAY talking, prepping and angsting with 15 other scholarship finalists, Nicole Novak '08 had begun to let go of her hope of becoming a Rhodes scholar.

"I hadn't really given up, but I had just decided to let go a little bit because all of the other candidates were really impressive and wonderful people," Novak recalls.

As a result, Novak says, she walked into her interview with the Rhodes Trust selection committee feeling relaxed. She was able to "be herself" during the lively 20 minute question-and-answer session and present her views on global health policy issues.

Apparently, Novak's relaxed self was plenty impressive, and, by the end of the afternoon, she had to readjust her expectations again when she was offered a Rhodes scholarship to attend the University of Oxford in Oxford, England, one of the world's oldest and most academically prestigious universities.

"I was just kind of astonished," she admits.

A few hundred miles away in the Twin Cities, Ishanaa Rambachan '08 was beginning to feel the heat. In her second-round interview, a member of the Rhodes selection committee had begun throwing curveballs, asking Rambachan to discuss the works of Trinidadian Nobel Laureate V.S. Naipaul and to name the world's wealthiest person.

"The committee member who asked those two questions said it was really important to him that I knew something about my parents' heritage and that I knew about recent developments in global inequality," Rambachan says. "He said he would not have supported my candidacy if I hadn't been able to answer those questions."

Thanks in part to her Trinidadian grandfather, Rambachan knew the answers, and many more on international development and global economic disparities. Shortly thereafter, she also was named a Rhodes scholar.

Each year, Rhodes scholarships are awarded to 32 U.S. students. Rambachan and Novak were selected from a pool of 764 applicants from 294 colleges and universities. They join an elite group of honorees dating back to 1902 when British diamond miner and colonialist Cecil Rhodes established the scholarship as a bequest to his alma mater, Oxford. Former President Bill Clinton is a Rhodes scholar, as is U.S. Supreme Court Justice David Souter. Novak and Rambachan are the eighth and ninth St. Olaf students to receive the Rhodes, which began accepting women applicants in 1977.

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# RHODES

Ishanaa Rambachan '08 (left) and Nicole Novak '08 will enter Oxford in October 2008. "What the Rhodes committee looks for are people who have extraordinary intellectual accomplishment, but that's not enough," St. Olaf President David R. Anderson '74 recently told the *Star Tribune*. "They are really looking for people who also have a balance of excellence in their lives, and that means a passion for other things than merely intellectual attainment."

Novak is a triple major in environmental studies, Spanish and Hispanic studies, with an additional concentration in statistics. Rambachan is a double major in political science and economics, with a concentration in Middle Eastern studies. Both women also participated in the college's Great Conversation program, which introduces students to the major epochs of Western civilization.

"Nicole, who is interested in global health, cited in her Rhodes interview Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as a principal inspiration. And Ishanaa, who is concerned with political representation and opportunity of women in Asia, appealed, in her Rhodes interview, to the argument of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* as a justification for public deliberation and debate," notes Professor of Religion and Philosophy Edmund Santurri who directs the "Great Con" program.

"Oxford is especially interested in students who combine this kind of humanistic literacy with practical endeavor," Santurri says.

The selection of two St. Olaf students in the same year is nothing short of a remarkable honor, for them and for the college, says Professor of History Gary De Krey, who began overseeing St. Olaf's Rhodes application process just this year. The Rhodes scholarships often go to students from much larger institutions, he said, such as Harvard and Princeton, both of which also boasted two winners this year.

But the honor, De Krey points out, goes entirely to Rambachan and Novak. "Both candidates were superlatively qualified in every respect," De Krey adds. "Both are very compassionate, caring people."

In addition to high academic achievement, the Rhodes selection committee looks for applicants who, as Cecil Rhodes put it, are more than "mere bookworms." They have to demonstrate good character, enthusiasm, "spirit for life," and altruism, De Krey explains.

## TAKING IDEALS TO ACTION

Novak and Rambachan have both used their time at St. Olaf to do more than study. In fact, it's almost surprising that they find time to study at all.

In 2005, Rambachan received a Kloeck-Jensen Peace and Justice scholarship and traveled to south India where she worked with a nongovernmental organization on a project to provide micro financing to — and increase participation in — small businesses owned by women. Interning at Shanti Ashram, she immersed herself in projects that enabled her to understand the challenges of village development and grassroots participation, and volunteered primarily with its women's political empowerment branch. That experience cemented her interest in international development.

"It was giving women independent income for the first time with tremendous success rates, in both finances and women

serving in local government," says Rambachan.

Her growing perception of "this feminization of poverty" was strengthened by time spent at home. "The reconstruction of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 fell predominantly on single mothers and women, who were identified as the disaster's most afflicted demographic," she says.

Rambachan, vice president of the Student Government Association and the daughter of St. Olaf Religion Professor Anantanand Rambachan, helped organize student relief efforts in New Orleans and Biloxi, Mississippi, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Rambachan and 180 St. Olaf students left for the Gulf Coast where they "engaged in home reconstruction and grief counseling." They returned to the coast in 2007 and will go again in the spring of 2008.

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— EDMUND SANTURRI, PROFESSOR OF RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

"In New Orleans I learned that America is not paradise," she says. "It really awakened me to the tremendous inequality and work that needs to be done there. And as an American it made me realize that it's my duty to do something, to act. It also revealed to me the power of citizen activism."

Last year, Rambachan spent five months in Turkey, Morocco, Egypt and Greece during Term in the Middle East, where she studied the status of women, an experience she describes as "eye opening."

"I lived with a host family in Fez, Morocco, during Ramadan, and my host mother was just a striking example of the untapped potential of women," says Rambachan. "She was educated up through

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university but was unable to find any employer that would hire a woman. She had to work two or three menial jobs and sold bread at four in the morning. It was troublesome to me to see a woman who had the opportunity to be educated, but even with that education her life was stifled.”

A Phi Beta Kappa and a Presidential Academic Scholar, Rambachan is spending her January 2008 Interim in Norway conducting economics research thanks to a Rand Scholar Award. At Oxford, Rambachan — who hopes to one day work for the World Bank, the United Nations or the U.S. Agency for International Development — will pursue a master’s in Philosophy in Development Studies. More specifically, she intends to pursue women’s political and economic empowerment in South Asia.

“Seventy percent of the world’s 1.3 billion poor, and 60 percent of its 1 billion illiterate are women,” she notes. “The current policy environment neglects the working woman, whose absence at the bargaining table deprives her of many legal entitlements and political rights. I envision a more dynamic aid system, and I am interested particularly in increased local accountability.”

Oxford won’t be all work, however. Rambachan is already planning her extra curricular activities; she hopes to join the university’s famed debating society — Churchill was a member, she notes — and take up rowing.

#### AT THE CROSSROADS, HEALTH RESEARCH

Novak has set her sights on Oxford’s global health sciences program. A Buntrock Academic Scholar and Iowa City native, Novak describes her interest in global health issues as a “winding journey,” and her emerging interest in health policy has left her parents, a rural physician and a dietician, somewhat bemused.

“I was interested in global international development and poverty relief issues when I started college, even though I’d never left the country,” she recalls. “In that respect it was kind of naïve. But I thought that’s what I should do, that there are needs out there and maybe I could be useful.”

She began her college career as an environmental and development studies major but soon focused on the idea that at the intersection of environment and development is health. In the fall of 2006 she traveled to Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua through a study abroad

program with the Center for Global Education. It was her first major trip outside the United States. Novak says she was struck by “the way that environmental degradation affects poverty and degrades human health.”

“I find environmental health especially important because people suffer health problems from environmental degradation without their consent,” she explains. “One group benefits from the industry that causes the air pollution or dirties the water, but other groups, and society as a whole, bear the costs.”

She is reluctant to promote her perspective on environmental health in developing countries. “I started to have a lot of concerns about imperialistic approaches to development — worrying that if I go in and impose my environmental values on people I could be interfering with their own self-determination and their assessment of other community needs,” she says.

Health, she feels, is different. “Health is good, no matter where you are in the world. It’s something the people value in one way or another.”

Shortly after returning from Central America, she left with several other St. Olaf students for a study abroad

program in Geneva, Switzerland, to work with researchers at the World Health Organization on a statistical study of food borne diseases. The work was interesting, she says, but it was too far from where her heart lies. Before she had even left Switzerland, she’d applied for summer work in migrant camps in southeastern Iowa, working as an interpreter in a traveling health clinic.

As much as environmental health in developing countries interests her, Novak’s enduring passion lies in providing community-based healthcare for underserved populations in Latin America. “Someday I will come back to my home state of Iowa and work in immigrant healthcare,” says Novak, who will ultimately pursue a career in epidemiology.

Before she can return, however, she’ll have to leave. And leaving, both Novak and Rambachan say, isn’t going to be so easy. Just in the last few days the reality has begun to sink in. “I’ll be leaving America for two years at minimum. That’s a big life change,” says Rambachan. It’s just the beginning. 🍀

J. Trout Lowen is a freelance writer and editor living in Minneapolis.

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