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The Melanie Foundation Announces 2017 Scholarship Recipients

SARATOGA SPRINGS, NY, September 5, 2017 – The Melanie Foundation is proud to announce that Sarah Levant of Silver Springs, MD, Sarajane Rodgers of Broad Run, VA, Beth Waterman of Somerville, MA, and Andrea Wierzchowski of Dallas, TX, are the 2017 recipients of the foundation's annual scholarship, honoring the life and work of Melanie Merola O'Donnell. The scholarship is awarded to graduate-level students in the mental health field that demonstrate commitment to helping others through the exercise of empathy and wisdom. Recipients are awarded based on who best exhibits their devotion to their fields of study. The recipients convey their commitment to their studies both inside and outside the classroom through research, volunteering, and work experience. Those awarded are recognized for serving communities in a manner consistent with Melanie Merola O'Donnell's values of compassion, generosity, respect and commitment to others. George O'Donnell, president of The Melanie Foundation, states, "We're always honored to support those who, like Melanie, are committed to providing mental health services as part of their personal missions. This year is no different, and it's incredibly exciting to us to provide this modest measure of encouragement to Sarah, Beth, Andrea and Sarajane."

Sarah Levant is pursuing her Masters of Social Work, focusing on clinical therapy and trauma, from Boston University, and earned her Bachelor of Arts in Geography and Urban Studies from Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. Ms. Levant currently works at HER Resiliency Center in Washington, DC focusing on integrated, holistic and trauma-informed care for young women.

Ms. Levant reflects on the honor of her award, "I am humbled to be named a Melanie Foundation Scholarship recipient and honored to help keep Melanie's legacy alive. Melanie dedicated herself to supporting individuals in crisis and those experiencing trauma. Melanie's passion is reflected through the Melanie Foundation community and its mission to continue to spread her impact. It is a distinguished honor to receive this scholarship and be able to continue in Melanie's footsteps and pursue our common vision that healing is possible in the aftermath of trauma."

The Saratoga Palio: Melanie Merola O'Donnell Memorial Race
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Sarajane Rodgers is currently enrolled in the Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology at Antioch University New England. Additionally, she holds a Masters of Science Degree in Psychological Science from the University of Limerick, Ireland. Ms. Rodgers most recently participated in a Neuropsychological Assessment Practicum at Butler Hospital in Rhode Island

Upon receiving notification of the award, Ms. Rodgers said, “I’m so honored to be a recipient of this scholarship! Melanie had been going to my school before she passed away, so I’ve been hearing her name ever since I started going to Antioch. After having informed a few of my professors about being selected for the scholarship, I was really touched by the additional stories that I heard about her. One of the professors that had not previously mentioned Melanie admitted to me that this was because it was difficult to talk about how profoundly Melanie had affected her international trauma work. I had the opportunity to go on a life-changing trip to Haiti last month with this professor where we did neuropsychological assessment with sickle cell patients in addition to providing individual therapy, group therapy, and psychoeducation at a small clinic. I was able to do this in part because of the influence of Melanie.

I had a great time last year running in the Saratoga Palio half marathon with a few of my professors and their families. It wasn’t my fastest time, but it was the first race that I’ve run in where I felt a sense of community. With most races, you run and you really know nothing about the history of the race. I never met Melanie, but I think the race and the scholarship program are both wonderful tributes to someone who was and still is clearly loved and valued by many people.”

Beth Waterman is a Clinical Mental Health Counseling and Trauma Master’s student at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA. Before pursuing graduate school, Ms. Waterman spent eight years as the Social Welfare Director of Sari Bari in Kolkata, India, addressing abuse, addiction and trauma of women exploited by the sex industry.

Ms. Waterman said, “It is an honor to be selected as a recipient of the Melanie Foundation Scholarship. I am deeply encouraged to be chosen as a representative for her foundation, honoring future mental health practitioners. The generosity of the Melanie Foundation Scholarship will allow me to continue working towards my dreams of offering vulnerable populations opportunities for health, justice, and empowerment.”



Andrea Wierzchowski is a third year Doctoral Student in School Psychology at Texas Women's University in Denton, TX and holds a Masters in Psychology with Clinical Concentration from the University of Dallas, Irving, TX. Ms. Wierzchowski's most recent practicum focused on providing group therapeutic services to children and families through experiential, play-based modalities.

Ms. Wierzchowski said, "The Melanie Foundation has played a significant part in bridging the gap between the increasing cost of tuition and time being spent on facilitating the basic needs to continue my education. Moments like this foster recognition, which provides additional motivation to persevere. This scholarship lifted a burden and has afforded me the ability to devote more of my energy to work with children and their families in community agencies and correctional facilities. The goals and traditions of The Melanie Foundation confirm that when we honor this commitment to promote kindness and good health, it brings harmony to the community. I have been blessed with this gift and will continue to pay it forward."

About Melanie Merola O'Donnell

Melanie Merola O'Donnell lived an inspirational life, and though it was cut short, it was extremely full. Throughout her life, Melanie worked to help people in need. She volunteered with, and later became a staff member of, the National Organization for Victim Assistance, and she was a board member of the Capital Area Crisis Response Team for 8 years. She trained crisis responders for both organizations until 2004. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Melanie coordinated and managed 28 crisis response teams in New York City and 8 teams in Washington. She also aided crisis responders in Somerset County, PA, following the attacks. She spent several weeks in New York City, helping grieving families who were visiting the site of the attacks and coping with the aftermath. She provided care to individuals affected by natural disasters, plane crashes, school violence, the civil war in Sierra Leone, workplace violence, and homicide. In June 2004, she was honored by CACRT as the first recipient of the Melanie Merola O'Donnell Award for Excellence. At the time of her death, she was enrolled in a doctoral program in clinical psychology at Antioch University New England, in Keene, NH. Amidst Melanie's professional responsibilities and accomplishments, her devotion to her husband, son, mother, father, sister, family, and friends was never compromised.

About The Melanie Foundation

The Melanie Foundation was created with the principal purpose of extending Melanie Merola O'Donnell's legacy of helping others through caring and compassionate mental healthcare, with a particular focus on enhancing a



sense of community. O'Donnell's family and friends have joined together to celebrate her life with this cause, hoping to identify others who share O'Donnell's commitment to helping those in need, and providing those individuals financial assistance for the pursuit of graduate degrees in a mental health field. The Melanie Foundation's mission is to foster support for mental health. The Foundation contributes to this mission in two ways – scholarships to students pursuing graduate education in a mental health field, and direct contributions to local organizations that address mental health concerns.

For more information about The Melanie Foundation or to register for The Saratoga Palio: Melanie Merola O'Donnell Memorial Race on September 17, visit www.themelaniefoundation.com.