

Drs. James and Wanda Trefil Science Scholarship

In 2015, the “Drs. James and Wanda Trefil Science Scholarship” was created at the Kościuszko Foundation. The donors both come from immigrant backgrounds, (Czech and Polish), and say that they could not have attended college without receiving scholarships. They wanted to “pay it forward.” Dr. James Trefil is Clarence J. Robinson Professor of Physics at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, and an author of over 50 books about various areas of science. Dr. Wanda O’Brien-Trefil spent 42 years teaching Music, Theater, and English in public schools. They had a hard time deciding what kind of scholarship to set up. Should it be a Science Scholarship for a student of Czech background to honor Jim? Or, should it be a Music Scholarship for a student of Polish background to honor Wanda? Thus, the “Drs. James and Wanda Trefil Science Scholarship” is the result of a happy compromise between their ethnic backgrounds and professional interests: a Science Scholarship for a student of Polish-American background.

Upon researching the kinds of scholarships administered by the Kościuszko Foundation, they noticed a gap in undergraduate scholarships in science. What was needed was a scholarship for undergraduates, US citizens of Polish descent, with a minimum GPA of 3.5, who show exceptional promise in the natural sciences: physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, earth science, etc. The scholarship is for studies in the United States, and one \$5,000 scholarship is available each year.

The donors have been delighted by the first two recipients of the scholarship, Caroline Cwalina in 2016 and Caroline Rakus-Wojciechowski in 2017. They have set the bar high, and represent exactly the kind of hard-working, well-rounded, high-achieving students that the Trefils envisioned. Caroline Cwalina of Pittsburgh, PA studies Biochemistry at Duquesne University. Caroline Rakus-Wojciechowski of Lindenhurst, NY studies pre-med and anthropology at Harvard University. In addition to being outstanding science students, both young ladies work to contribute financially to their own education, and are active in the arts and their Polish communities.

Generally, it takes a number of years before a fund accumulates enough interest to make an annual award. We are lucky that, not only have Drs. James and Wanda Trefil made a very generous donation of \$50,000 to endow the scholarship fund, they are also contributing \$5,000 each year so that we can make annual awards now, before the fund matures. In congratulations to each scholarship recipient, Dr. James Trefil sends one of his latest publications. This year there were two: *Exoplanets*, published by Smithsonian, and *The Story of Innovation*, published by National Geographic. Jim’s immigrant Czech grandparents came to Chicago, and Jim started his career at the University of Illinois, later studying at Oxford, and obtaining a Ph.D. from Stanford University. He has held appointments at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, the European Center for Nuclear Research (CERN), the Laboratory for Nuclear Sciences at MIT, and others. Dr. James Trefil is the recipient of numerous lifetime achievement awards, including the American Institute of Physics Science Writing Awards, the AAAS Westinghouse Science Journalism Award, the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Andrew W. Gement Award for linking physics to the arts and humanities.

Dr. Wanda O’Brien-Trefil’s first language was Polish. She was born in England, the daughter of soldiers who escaped Siberia and served in the Polish Second Corps under General Anders. While growing up in Cleveland, there was no TV or car in the family, but there was a piano. Wanda is a pianist who is active in the Polish community around Washington DC. She frequently performs at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland, and at the Kościuszko Foundation in Washington DC. Dr. Wanda O’Brien-Trefil has chaired the ACPC Sembrich Competition for singers of Polish descent. She served as 1st Vice-President of the Polish American Arts Association (PAAA), chairing their scholarship program, and organizing fund raisers at the Polish Embassy to raise scholarship money. For years, she was Secretary of the Polish American Congress, Washington DC chapter. Her music performance degrees are from Case-Western University, and Ph.D. from the University of Maryland. ■

