Introducing the AWG-PNW Chapter’s 2024 Tanaka Scholarship Recipient

Leigh Tucker

This year’s $2000 Tanaka Scholarship has been awarded to Leigh Tucker, a senior at the University of Washington in the departmental undergraduate honors program. This scholarship is awarded in memory of PNW Chapter founder Janet Cullen Tanaka.

Leigh got a degree in accounting 20 years ago but soon discovered that geology was her passion. Eventually, she began taking courses at North Seattle College before transferring to UW. The Scholarship Committee is thrilled to help Leigh pursue a geoscience career. We’ll let Leigh introduce herself:

I am so honored to be this year’s recipient of the Janet Cullen Tanaka Undergraduate Scholarship. As a non-traditional undergraduate student, receiving this award has helped to validate my recent life decisions. When I first went to college, I was advised to study something I showed a propensity for rather than finding something that truly interested me. Four years after receiving a BA in Accounting, a flight over the red rocks of the southwest and the Grand Canyon reminded me of my fascination with geology. It took another 15 years to convince myself it was okay to return to college. Despite a welcoming community of students and professors, a part of me felt like an imposter. I had a sense that I was “taking away the opportunity” for younger students. This year has been a year of confirmation, starting with simply applying for this scholarship. I applied because I wanted to attend a field camp focused on volcanology, which stretched our family’s finances beyond what it could handle. Receiving this scholarship was the first of many events that moved me past the imposter syndrome and showed me that I am where – and when – I belong.

Not only was I able to attend that field camp, but I have also been able to conduct an independent research project as part of the Earth and Space Sciences Honors Program at the University of Washington, comparing the inclusions in Puget Sound sand garnets with those found on the Washington coast, ultimately using the inclusions as a tracer for detrital provenance. I am thrilled to have the opportunity to present my research and findings at several events this spring. This summer I will be working as an intern for the USGS’ Earthquake Science Center in Pasadena combining geologic mapping and machine learning techniques to create interactive fault system maps. Incidentally, I believe the field camp experience I had, thanks to this scholarship, was instrumental in obtaining that internship.

I am having the time of my life and am very excited about the prospect of graduate school and fulfilling a dream of working in the realm of volcanology. My ultimate job would be working at a
Volcanic Observatory, though a recent experience with a new-to-me professor has introduced the possibility of a profession in academia. Wherever I land, my hope is that it involves lava, magma movement, and/or the formation of cinder cones. Finding ways to incorporate machine/deep learning with volcanic processes research would be a huge plus, as well.

Leigh by a hornito (rootless lava spatter cone) on Hawaii in 2024

Leigh at Petrified Forest in 2023

We’ve been successful in raising funds for our scholarship through a share of the profits from our 2022 and 2023 chapter field trips, but we won’t be able to do that every year, so member donations to the AWG Foundation earmarked for the PNW Tanaka Scholarship remain important. You can make tax-deductible (if you itemize) donations online here. Select “AWG Foundation Donation” in the drop down menu but be sure to say that it’s for the PNW Tanaka Scholarship in the Donor Comments box. If you wish to mail a
check, make it out to “AWG Foundation” (be sure to say “PNW Tanaka Scholarship” in the memo line) and send it to:

Kate Johnson, AWGF Treasurer
652 Glimmerglen Road
Cooperstown, NY 13326

Thank you for supporting our scholarship and helping women in the Pacific Northwest achieve their dreams!

Finally, many thanks to our Scholarship Committee Chair, Emily Cahoon! Emily will be moving to the east coast this fall so our committee will need a new chair. If you’d like to help with awarding this scholarship, please contact Marcia Knadle. Emily has written up standard operating procedures, and the previous committee chair, Shari Silverman, is still on the committee, so you’d have lots of help getting up to speed.