

2021-2022

## MEOA Scholarship Recipients

*Xio Alvarado*

*Skylar Underwood*

*Thelma Ortiz*

*Neyi Rio*

*Olohireme (Esther) Famous*

*Max Zbikowski*

### *Congratulations Scholars!*

The MEOA Scholarship was created in 1988 to assist undergraduate students in their pursuit of higher education. Six scholarships of \$750.00 are awarded annually to eligible college students who have demonstrated the ability to overcome great obstacles and strive for educational excellence.

The selection of recipients represents the diversity of students, both traditional and non-traditional, that are served by the programs of MEOA members. This is in keeping with MEOA's long-time commitment to ensure that all individuals have access to an appropriate higher education. Since inception, MEOA has awarded over \$50,000 in scholarship monies to students across Massachusetts.

## MEOA Scholarship Recipients

### Xio Alvarado

#### **Upward Bound Bruce Wells Scholars, YOU Inc.**

I was born a girl. However, I always knew I was a man and identified as a man.

It was weird at first, I would be put in dresses as a kid, I'd be given dolls and makeup and so on, but none of it was me, I was a poser.

At age five I began to question my self-identity. I endlessly wanted things that were considered "for boys". At age six I wanted this remote control car for Christmas. Instead, I was given a Disney Rapunzel doll. Yet, my foster-brother got the *exact* toy I wanted. When I asked my foster parents at the time about it I was told it was because boys get boy toys and girls get girl toys.

In 5th grade, I had a crush on a girl. At the time, being gay was something 5th graders didn't even think of. So, when I was unwillingly outed, everyone thought I was weird.

I was teased and made fun of to the point that I would choose to eat lunch in the bathroom stall alone.

In 6th grade things hadn't really changed except I met a teacher who truly supported me. She, is who introduced me to the term Transgender, "Someone who identifies as the opposite gender from which they were assigned at birth". For the longest time, I thought something was wrong with me. When I found out that others in the world felt the same way I felt a sense of comfort. I was immediately comforted.

That summer, I begged my mom to cut my hair short. I wanted a mid-fade while she thought I meant a bob haircut.

To no surprise, no surprise to me, she said "NO". The next day I took \$40, walked down to a barbershop, and asked them to cut off my ponytail. I placed the ponytail in a Walmart bag still intact and the barber proceeded to shave the sides of my head. When I got home my mom was in disbelief. Jokingly, I handed her the Walmart bag and said "Since you care so much about my hair, here, you can have it". Never had I done such a rebellious & daring act but if it meant I was going to feel comfortable in my own skin then I really did not care about what anyone else had to say. I bluntly told my mom "I am Transgender." and she laughed saying this "phase" would soon go away. 5 years later this "phase" still hasn't "gone away". I'm still me.

That summer, I changed everything, my closet, name, pronouns, and eventually started Hormone Therapy to transition. I went back to school that August and all my old friends were surprised by the changes I had done over the summer. Some friends supported me, others didn't and bonds were broken.

In high school, I continued my journey as a Transman. There were numerous challenges in including fighting to use the bathroom I most identified with, losing some friends, and figuring out myself as I grew. I got a bilateral mastectomy and continued to understand what it truly meant to be transgender along with the prejudice that comes with it.

For a while I wanted to fit in with other guys except I could not truly relate to them. I'd try to dress like them, laugh at jokes that weren't funny, do anything I could to fit in and look as masculine as possible, avoiding any kind of femininity. Not because I was meaning to fall into an environment of toxic masculinity but because I was trying to prove my identity despite being a transman. I began to question, "What does it mean to be masculine". I was tired of being this poser, tired of feeling like a pretender. I realized I was back at square one and the person who I had been perpetuating wasn't really who I was. I decided it was time to stop caring about what others think of me.

In high school I have tried to always be as active as I possibly could be. Throughout my years I have enjoyed being a part of a variety of clubs, activities, and communities, including Bruce Wells Scholars Upward Bound, National Honor Society, Youth Civics Union, and many more that have all helped shape the person I am today. Upward Bound helped me understand the importance of community building through being present and the importance of showing up to college tours, follow through and leadership on the Scholar Advisory Board, support in building my confidence to represent self-identity and my truth. I have been given so many opportunities to travel, meet new people, and work on conflict resolution with friends, family, and school people. I have been supported in all of my transitions so far and supported as I complete high school and start the transition of college. Upward bound has always had my back.

One of the things this past senior year that has truly contributed to my growth is my volunteering and willingness to help out my community. At my school we have access to a non-profit called Andy's Attic where 100% of donations go back out into the community. This year, I have been fortunate enough to attend Andy's Attic every day and do 5 hours of community service a week through my entire senior year. From Andy's Attic it has been an eye opener to how much one can really help out in the community along with what happens behind the scenes within a nonprofit.

One of my life goals is to own a business and by volunteering at Andy's Attic I was able to get a better insight on what it takes. I learned the importance of having a good team that is working with you, developing a community that can have your back, and the importance of staying organized when it comes down to the numbers/quantities in a business. I don't know exactly what my business will be yet however, I have already brainstormed some ideas but they just haven't felt like "the one". Regardless, I'm glad to have gained some knowledge on what it takes to run something like a nonprofit and the similarities there are in comparison to running a business. I definitely still have a lot more to learn but I will continue learning- especially throughout college and hopefully within a few years fulfill my aspirations of owning a business.

Although it is still hard for me to believe at times, I want to mention that this year I unfortunately lost what I called home on January, 10th, 2022. I lived at 10 West Oberlin St and recall coming home from grocery shopping with my mom. It had only been about 15 minutes before I headed to my room planning to take a nap. Just as I was getting to my room, I heard loud knocking on our door followed by my upstairs neighbor yelling. That is when I knew something was wrong.

I'm thankful that nobody was hurt and since then, my family and I have been able to relocate to a shelter, then family's living room, finally to another apartment of our own. It has created bigger issues, financially, than were even there before. The MEOA scholarship could truly help with covering book costs, school supplies, and other college materials that do not feel as affordable at the moment due to the fire my family and I are still in the process of financially recovering from. I have applied to the Greater Worcester Foundation Scholarships however, decisions have not come out yet so I am not aware of how much financial support I will be given from it at the moment.

## Neyi Rijo

### Student Support Services Rx Visions Program, MWCC

Although there are many opportunities and resources in place to help college students be successful, there are still many challenges that have had to be overcome and be resilience both in and out of school which has contributed to my success in college thus far. One of the main challenges I have had to and will continue to overcome is being a single mother with 2 kids. That alone is a task on its own but combined with school and working to support a family has been something I have had to work hard on. My kids are younger, so they require more time and attention than an older child or teen would need. They are obviously my main priority, and balancing work and school is probably one of the greatest challenges that I have faced during this time. In order to be able to attend classes and dedicate time to do the required work and study, I have had to cut my hours back at work.



Because of this, I have had to construct strict budgets due to working fewer hours than I used to and have to be strategic about when I do take days off or pick up when possible. It is difficult enough being one person, trying to support two kids, but adding in the element of school has definitely made it more difficult to manage everything. Being in school means less time to work, less time to spend with family and friends, and although the benefits of school out way the sacrifices in the long run, it can sometimes be hard to feel those benefits in real-time.

During my collage years I have been able to participate in the RX program. This program has been amazing when it come to supporting students academically. They help you find resources such as tutoring, printing services, and different seminars that can help you with day-to-day life advice, test taking strategies and much more. I have also participated in the nutrition club where we were able to conduct different food drives for thanksgiving and Christmas. During Christmas we were also able to auction reefs for donations. It amazing to be able to take the little time I have and participate in some of the different programs and clubs offered in school.

Going into collage made me feel skeptical at first because I felt like I was to old to go to college. I remember my first day of class I went in feeling that it was going to be a long difficult journey. But little did I know I would be extremely successful. I have accomplished so much during these years of college. One of the biggest accomplishments was passing the TEAS to be able to apply for the nursing program. Then I applied for the License Practical nursing program in September 2021 and received a letter the first week of November saying “you have been accepted to the License Practical nursing program”. I was so happy and felt that all my hard work has not been in vain. While currently in the nursing program I am also taking one last class to be able to get my Associate Degree in Allied Health and Science this summer. Being resilience through these years has helped me to get where I am at so far.

My educational goal and how MEOA scholarship could help me with continuing my career in nursing. The next step for me after the License practical nursing is to get an Associated degree in Registered Nurse and then a BSN. Which I find it amazing that scholarships are offered to student that are working towards success. Right now, my financial situation is not the best I am currently living in food stamp and applying for housing. I am currently working part-time I am barely able to pay for gas, I have limited myself to certain places and that include the clinicals, and labs for the nursing program. I am currently living paycheck to paycheck. Having this scholarship can help me pay for this current summer semester which I owe a balance of \$639.00 that I have to pay by the end of the semester. No matter what obstacles I am presented with through my journey, I always keep my head up and maintain my faith in God, I also grateful for these opportunities that are offered to students to apply for scholarship especially now in the time that we are living in.

## Max Zbikowski

### Student Support Services Rx Visions Program, MWCC

I have never let anything keep me from seeking to prove that with grit and determination I can and will accomplish my dreams. I entered this world facing significant medical issues which I continue to live with today. Being medically fragile has kept me from living what most people would consider a “normal” life. I was born with a cleft palate and diagnosed with Pierre Robin syndrome and spent most of the first year of my life in Boston Children’s Hospital undergoing numerous procedures and surgeries to deal with the myriad of medical diagnoses that continue to seem as if they have no end. I ended up with a feeding tube when it became clear I not only had feeding issues but also digestive, regulatory, and allergy issues. I continue to live with my feeding tube as it is still my main source of nutrition and will be for the rest of my life. I carry two backpacks; one carries my lifeline of nutrition to feed my body, and the other carries my computer and books to feed my quest for knowledge. I live with dysautonomia which leaves several of my basic body functions unable to regulate themselves. As a result, among other interventions and adaptations, I take medications to control functions such as blood pressure and must maintain awareness of climate to keep my body temperature regulated. I also have mast cell activation syndrome which causes significant issues including random allergic and sometimes anaphylactic reactions.



These severe issues force me always to be aware of my body, where I am, and what I am doing. These medical issues are life-limiting and are just a few of the many that I have to navigate. My job has been to accept my reality and keep on living my best life while dealing with the unending appointments that come with seeing eleven medical specialists. This is where being resilient and always working at overcoming obstacles is paramount to my health, happiness, and future success.

My Visions advisor shared the 2022 MEOA Scholarship opportunity with me. Based on what she has seen of me as a student and what she has learned about my life and its many challenges, she felt that I would be a strong candidate, and I am humbled by the nomination. I just finished my freshman year at Mount Wachusett Community College and earned a 3.92 GPA and a 4.0 GPA for the fall and spring semesters respectively, which feels especially notable given that I am also autistic. While focusing on my academics, I also have been fortunate to have two jobs at the Mount. I work 12-20 hours per week as both a Student Ambassador in the Admissions office and as a lifeguard at MWCC's Fitness Center. I also joined activities offered by the college and participated in the Visions Leadership program. During this time, I have learned to be more open about sharing my disabilities knowing that they do not define me.

I am looking forward to more involvement overall this fall now that I have experience thriving in a college setting. I am on track to earn a degree in History/Political Science with plans to transfer to pursue my bachelor's degree in History and Education. The MEOA scholarship would help make these goals more attainable by helping to offset some of the costs of my education as I do not qualify for anything but unsubsidized loans. My parents are supportive of my educational journey, and I am the sole person responsible for covering the costs of my education as my parents encourage me to develop a sense of independence and responsibility. I also applied for a scholarship from my father's union that ranges from \$250-\$2500. My family and I are brutally aware that I will always have significant medical bills—even with the best insurance—which will always cause some level of financial hardship. I am determined not to let my diagnoses stop me from attaining my dreams. Twenty years ago my parents were told that I might not be able to do many everyday things, yet here I am living my best life with my disabilities.