

# Teens who beat the odds

The Optimist Club of St. Paul honors students who excel in school despite life-changing obstacles. This year's young heroes are another inspirational group.

RUBÉN ROSARIO



SCOTT TAKUSHI, Pioneer Press

Susan Vue of St. Paul was recently chosen as one of 15 winners of \$1,500 scholarships awarded by the St. Paul Optimist Club. She's pictured with her son Enzo, 3.

Optimist Club of St. Paul scholarship winners

She was raped at 13, then forced to leave home to give birth to a child with cerebral palsy.

That's more than enough baggage for a whole lifetime. Tack on all this to the demands of high school and a job working nights and weekends. Throw in an indefatigable desire to attend college.

Now say hello to Susan Vue, all of 17 and already a hero in my book.

Vue, a senior at Harding High School on St. Paul's East Side, is among St. Paul-area youths being honored Thursday with \$1,500 college scholarships from the Optimist Club of St. Paul.

The club has awarded nearly \$100,000 in scholarships to hundreds of mostly low-income kids who have excelled in school while overcoming great odds in their young lives.

This year's deserving batch of overachievers all have hard-luck stories that shake as well as inspire the soul. They include kids who survived family murders, escaped civil unrest overseas, weathered domestic dysfunction and tussled with other hardships. When I'm feeling sorry for myself or think I'm having a lousy day or week, I think of these kids.

Five area schools — the College of St. Catherine, Augsburg College, Macalester College, the University of St. Thomas and Hamline University — think so highly of these scholarship recipients that they pledged to match the one-shot scholarship annually if any recipients attend their schools.

"Our kids are usually the first in their family to graduate from high school, let alone think about college," said John Tillotson, a veteran club member and first vice president for wealth management at Smith Barney's St. Paul division.

"We partner with local colleges because we want these incredible young adults to stay here. They are our future leaders, business owners and workers."

Vue, a Green Bay native who is mature and articulate beyond her years, grew up in Marshfield, Wis., one of 12 siblings.

She said she was 13 when she went to a house party one night, thinking a few friends would meet her there. She showed up alone, not knowing anyone. The night ended with a sexual assault she did not disclose to relatives until three months later, when she learned she was pregnant.

Abortion was an option, "but I never considered it because I believe that what happens is meant to be," Vue said. The incident was reported to police. Vue, however, does not know the identity of her assailant. The case remains unsolved.

Vue explained that in the Hmong culture, having a child out of wedlock not only carries a stigma but also is believed to bring bad luck to the family. So she was asked to leave, at least until the birth.

"I had to be out of the home, for the spiritual sake of the family," Vue recalled this week during a break at school.

An aunt in St. Paul agreed to take her in. She enrolled at Harding shortly after her son, Enzo, was born. He was named, at the request of her siblings, after the \$643,000-plus Ferrari super car. The boy's middle name — Koob Moov — means "lucky" in Hmong.

"He has cerebral palsy and we have to carry him from place to place," she said. "But he's a very emotional, lovable child. He is so happy and he hugs and kisses me."

She has a good relationship with her mother and her stepfather. The couple and most of Vue's siblings moved a year ago to Florida. They gave her the option of going with them. She decided to stay here and pursue college after graduation.

She has applied to the University of Minnesota and the College of St. Catherine. She plans a career in business and plans to study business management.

Vue is a teacher's assistant at school. She also works as a Sears cashier to help her aunt — a single mother of six who also cares for Enzo — meet expenses.

She imagines herself in the future as a successful businesswoman, raising Enzo and living in a penthouse suite overlooking a Minneapolis, New York or other major city skyline.

Hey, Trump, need another apprentice?

Gail McMahon, a school nurse who knows Vue's story, thinks it's all within her reach.

"She is a remarkable young woman," McMahon said. "Her teachers know nothing about her challenges. Very few know she has a special-needs child. Susan is warm, funny, caring, with unlimited potential."

Vue, who cannot afford college, plans to apply for every conceivable scholarship. She said she wanted to share her story to help other young victims of crime. She stresses she will not let her experience define who she is or deflate her aspirations.

"You have to have a lot of faith in yourself, believe in yourself, and look past the things that happen to you," Vue said. "You always have to find the strength to do and be your best."

Enzo, you got some mom there.

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Optimist Club of St. Paul scholarship winners

**Arlington High School:** Tanisha Brown and John Koelndorfer

**Central High School:** Mohamed Ali and Yusuf Kalif

**Como High School:** Emily Le and Brittany Siebenaler

**Harding High School:** Jacqueline Bonilla, Susan Vue and Duzong Yang

**Higher Ground Academy:** Mohamud Mohamud

**Highland Park High School:** Pa Nhia Yang

**Johnson High School:** Kalia Her, Hannah Kaup, Jose Rojas and Maikong Vue

# Optimist Club of St. Paul scholarship winners

## Pioneer Press

Here are winners of \$1,500 college scholarships from the Optimist Club of St. Paul's Friend of Youth Foundation. The accounts come from the scholarship applications. Biographical information was not available for winners Mohamed Ali and Duzong Yang.

## ARLINGTON HIGH SCHOOL

### Tanisha Brown

Brown, a victim of childhood abuse, survived a harrowing abduction and violent assault by her assailant, who is now serving 14 years in prison. She is a National Honor Roll student carrying a 3.65 GPA. Brown has participated in community voter registration drives and like other winners participates in Admission Possible, a nonprofit effort that helps such students gain entrance to college.

"Her strength is inspirational," a school counselor wrote.

### John Koelndorfer

Koelndorfer and a sister were abandoned by their father and raised by a mother suffering from a serious mental illness. He was kicked out his home at age 12 and went to live with an older sibling. He lives with a grandparent and holds down a job to help ends meet.

A varsity wrestler, he is ranked 18th out of 398 students in his class and will enlist in the U.S. Navy following graduation.

"I am truly astounded that John was able to maintain his grades and focus amid a storm of negativity and chaos," wrote a school official.

## CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

### Yusuf Kalif

Kalif spent his early childhood years growing up in the midst of the violent civil war that ravaged Mogadishu in Somalia. The family escaped to a refugee camp in Kenya. His family could not afford to pay for secondary education and Kalif missed two years of school before he was able to follow an older sister to Minnesota.

He maintains a 3.94 GPA, and speaks four languages while learning a fifth — Spanish. He plays junior varsity soccer and has volunteered for Habitat for Humanity and other community efforts.

"Although he has lived in the United States for three years, his academic achievements are far beyond those of many who have lived here their entire lives," said a teacher.

### Mohamed Ali

Ali and his family fled worn-torn Somalia with just their clothes and a few possessions. They weathered the constant threat of death, from armed men who stopped them repeatedly through their trip to Kenya, and wild animals that roamed near them throughout the day and night.

Just three years here in America, Ali is posting a 3.957 GPA, and is fluent in Somali, Swahili and English while also learning French. He tutors younger students and has volunteered for Habitat for Humanity.