

# 'I get to keep this!' 2 students surprised with full rides to Thiel College



Paxton Short, center, is surprised with a scholarship to Thiel College during an event at South Side High School in Hookstown, Beaver County, on Jan. 16.

By Bob Batz Jr.  
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## good scholars

Two Pittsburgh-area high school seniors recently had very good days at school. They each were surprised to be given giant checks worth \$158,080.

That's what it costs to attend four years at Thiel College, a small evangelical Lutheran Church-affiliated private college in Greenville, Mercer County. As has happened each year for almost a decade, hundreds of students were interviewed by faculty and staff as part of its scholarship competitions.

The way the winners were revealed was the surprise. Matthew Britenbaugh went to Shaler Area High School on Jan. 16, just happening to be wearing his giveaway Thiel College shirt with another T-shirt over it because it was so cold.

Around 1 p.m. he was asked to report to the school counselor's office, where he was told his help was needed. He opened the door to find a room full of well-wishers, including his family and Thiel admissions counselor Alice DeBonis, who was holding the oversized check. His mom and sister let out a "Wooo!!!" "Omigod," Matthew said.

DeBonis said a few words about Thiel and opportunity and then capped it off with, "It is my distinct honor to present you with a full-tuition scholarship."

Matthew: "Omigod!" DeBonis continued: "We believe that you that you are destined for great things and you're going to be inspiring many, many people. So congratulations!"

"Omigod — thank you!" As a media crew let the video roll and snapped stills, DeBonis asked him how he was feeling. "Happy," he said.

Interim principal JoAnne Townsend quipped, "I assume you'll forgive Mrs. Miller for lying to you."

They're all truly impressed with Matthew, who just recently turned 18, and whose resume includes serving as a school board senior class representative, participating in the Lutheran Student Movement, performing with the chamber orchestra

and being involved for five years in the marching band. He also is active in theater and is a member of the English Honor Society, Art National Honor Society and Tri-M Music National Honor Society.

On top of all that, he earned the rank of Eagle Scout and also works part time at Burger King. He wants to be a teacher and feels blessed, "nervous and excited" that his college costs are covered.

"I loved that it was a surprise like that," he said, "because one moment I was thinking about my international foods class syllabus, then the next moment, my dream of being a teacher became one step closer."

Thiel director of admission Sonya Lapikas said in a statement: "Matt exemplifies the type of student we seek to support through this scholarship — someone who combines academic excellence, leadership and service with creativity and dedication."

So is Paxton Short, of Georgetown, Beaver County, who went to South Side High School on Jan. 16 without a clue to what was in store.

Namely, Thiel admissions counselor Aaron Wilson holding a giant check for \$158,080, enough to cover tuition, room and board.

The senior has worked with Wilson for months now and thought he was getting a lesser scholarship, but that's because Wilson was totally committed to the bit. He had avoided talking to the 18-year-old about this scholarship and told him about another possible one. Then, on that last day of the semester, a teacher asked Paxton to go to a classroom to help move some tables. Paxton wondered why there was a video camera, and Wilson, and this check.

After an excited handshake and a hug, Paxton said, "I get to keep this!"

Then it dawned on him: "Everyone is here!" His parents and siblings, grandparents and aunts and uncles laughed with him.

"Oh my gosh!" he gushed. "So I did it?"

He's done a lot at high school, where he's actively involved in votech carpentry, football (playing multiple positions including punter), track and field (he throws the javelin and runs the 100-yard sprint), and does SkillsUSA. He also serves as a volunteer firefighter and loves hunting and fishing.

Paxton said he felt "shocked," and yet, "My whole life I feel like I have been in preparation for it."

He plans to major in business administration with a minor in finance, perhaps getting his master's degree, with a goal of eventually owning his own carpentry business.

Said Lapikas, "His commitment to his community and his future goals align well with Thiel's mission, and we are excited to welcome him to campus."

The other surprised full-ride winners, bringing the scholarships total to \$790,400, are:

- Abigail Beightol of Hartstown, Crawford County (Conneaut High School).
- Blake McCowin of Negley, Ohio (Crestview High School).
- Violet Seaman, of Hartville, Ohio (Lake High School).



Matthew Britenbaugh is surrounded by family and a Thiel College admissions counselor after he learned he had won a \$158,000 scholarship.



Senior Matthew Britenbaugh performs the violin with the Shaler Area High School Orchestra.



South Side High School senior Paxton Short helps fight a car fire.