

UNCA student wins national scholarship to study abroad

By Caitlin Byrd

STAFF WRITER
MCBYRD@UNCA.EDU

After dropping out of college and living in New Orleans for six months, UNC Asheville student Emily O'Brien said she never thought studying abroad was an option. But after becoming one of four national winners of the 2009-10 Joseph Yedlicka Scholarship, Paris for the summer is a reality for the 22-year-old French and art student.

"I thought I would end up in a French-speaking country, but I didn't think Paris. Paris is like Paris. It's unlike any other city. I wasn't planning on moving to Paris anytime soon, but to have a summer there is a dream come true," O'Brien said.

The Joseph Yedlicka Scholarship is a national scholarship given through the national French honor society, Pi Delta Phi.

The scholarship gives college students and Pi Delta Phi members, like O'Brien, an opportunity to study abroad despite financial or personal constraints.

When O'Brien first heard about the scholarship opportunity from her French professors, O'Brien said she was skeptical and frustrated.

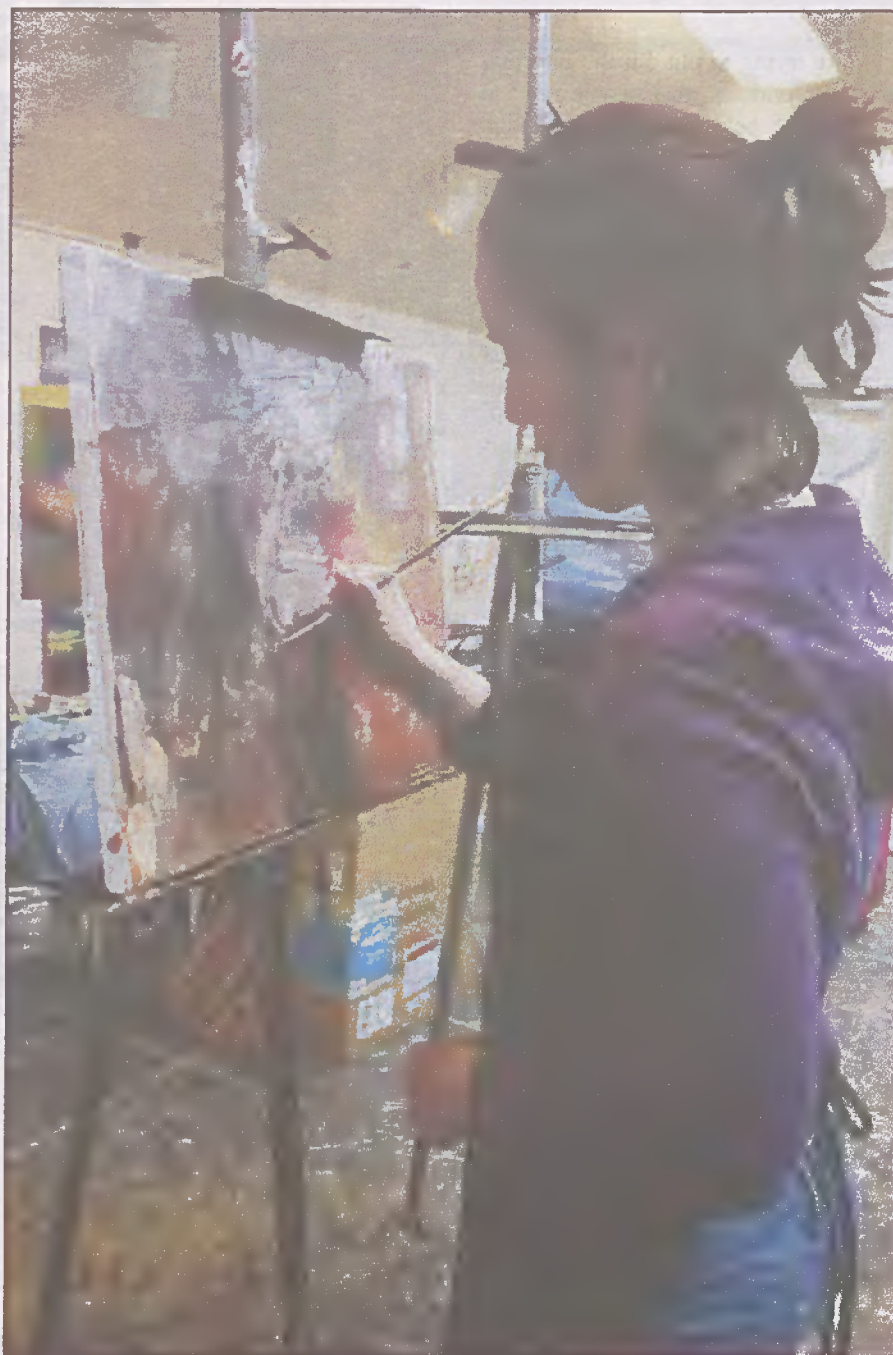
"When they showed it to me, at first I was annoyed. I was like, 'I can't study abroad. I told you already this isn't a possibility for me,'" she said.

But O'Brien's professors were persistent, and encouraging and nominated her for the scholarship. After the nomination, O'Brien decided to go through with the application process, which included writing a letter explaining why she was a strong candidate for this scholarship.

For O'Brien, this letter meant telling what she considers a long story that began when she started as a freshman at Bennington College, in Bennington, Vt.

"It's like a microscopic school. It's only got about 600 people. It's tiny and they have a program where you have to do an internship every winter, so I decided to go one winter to New Orleans. It's called a field-work term and I was only supposed to stay there for a couple months, but I ended up dropping out of school and staying for six months on and off," O'Brien said.

While in New Orleans, O'Brien had many jobs. She worked as a self-pro-



Katie Saylor - Staff Photographer

Emily O'Brien is one of the four national winners of the 2009-10 Joseph Yedlicka Scholarship, a national award given to students through the French honor society to help study abroad.

claimed office minion first.

She then helped college students plan trips to visit and help in New Orleans. The art student also worked in construction. The work that made the largest impact in her life, she said, was when she volunteered with the Louisiana Children's Museum.

"That was just the best thing ever. We just got to play with the kids all day and make their day brighter," she said.

O'Brien said she knew that she could not stay in New Orleans forever.

"After that it was 'Okay, New Orleans is wonderful, but I need a degree. I thought I could stay down here for years and rebuild houses, but it's not going to do that much. The levees are going to be the same height,'" she said.

Even though her original plans of studying abroad while at Bennington College could no longer occur without

her enrollment, O'Brien used her time in New Orleans to figure out her purpose.

"There was this transitory period in my life where I just didn't know exactly what I was doing and I just traveled a whole lot and I loved it, but finally I had to settle down and finish school," she said.

When she decided it was time to finish school, she chose to transfer to UNCA. While in New Orleans, O'Brien heard of UNCA through a group of students that had visited and painted a mural by one of the school cafeterias that O'Brien visited frequently.

"They got prime location and I just walked past it everyday and thought, 'Let me think about that.' I remembered it, and it's just funny the things in life that just stick with you," O'Brien said.

For O'Brien, she stuck with UNCA even though she said it was not always easy as a transfer student.

"Basically, I wanted to do a double major with art and French, so study abroad was like out of the question. I made sacrifices on both sides, but ultimately I really wanted to do art and I really wanted to do French," she said. "When I got to UNCA, I remember at my old school at Bennington, I tried hard but I wasn't really searching where I was going and I didn't care about grades too much. I mean, I made good grades, but here I was, just all the sudden."

Her education in French proved to be more than powerful as it lead her to earn a national scholarship to study at the American University in Paris.

"Every time I learn a new language, I just love it. It opens doors. I went to El Salvador once and I don't speak any Spanish and it was awful. I just wanted to communicate with people. Languages just open doors to all kinds of things and people," O'Brien said.

For O'Brien, thanks to language, her door is now open to an unanticipated study abroad program in Paris.

"I'm kind of intimidated by it still, but I think it will be wonderful once I embrace it. It's Paris. There's no other city like it. I just want to soak it up and wander around and try and learn as much French as humanly possible as I can while I'm there," O'Brien said. "I just want to be very adventurous and try to not be intimidated by anything."