

Elks, I am sorry I couldn't join you in Portland and personally thank you. On behalf of myself and my family, I would like to sincerely thank the Elks National Foundation, as well as Colorado Springs Lodge #309 and the State Leaders, for selecting me for this tremendous honor. I can't find the words to properly express my gratitude, so I hope that for now "thank you" can appropriately summarize how greatly you have impacted my life and how grateful I am. Furthermore, I wouldn't be here today without the guidance and help of Dr. Ray Ross and Debbie Kahler Doles and the support of Kristen Scaletta. Thank you all very much for all you've done.

And of course, I would like to thank my parents for their unwavering love and support and for all the sacrifices they've made to provide me with a brighter future. I wouldn't be the person I am today if it wasn't for my parents, and to them I am forever grateful for the values they've instilled in me. They've guided me through obstacles that have led me to the sweet taste of success as well as the bitterness of adversity, and not once have they ever doubted my abilities. In my household, nothing but the best is expected of my brothers and I. To my parents, however, that doesn't mean bringing home trophies or medals or excellent grades. When my parents expect the best of me, they simply expect that I try my best. It has been these expectations that have motivated me for as long as I can remember to never give anything less than my best to any endeavor. I recently realized that making my parents proud has always been one of the reasons why I constantly challenge myself and strive to reach my potential. I'm proud to say that your sacrifices, mom and dad, have not been in vain. I only hope that as I venture forth, I can continue to prove to you just how much I appreciate all you've done.

And why would anyone ever do anything if they aren't prepared to push their limits and realize all that they are capable of? Why throw away potential by simply settling for something that is "good enough"? These questions have greatly influenced my life over the last four years. Initially, I saw the International Baccalaureate Programme and every club I signed up for in high school as something positive that I could put on my college resume. Pushing myself to achieve honors and awards and good grades was something I dismissed as necessary in order for me to get into a good college. However, when it finally came time for me to put together that college resume, I realized that everything I had been involved in meant so much more to me than just an extra line of text on a piece of paper. Each and every activity had given me a chance to seize a new opportunity and to strive to become a better person. I guess being satisfied with just "good enough" was never really something I even considered a possibility because I knew that with the guidance of those around me, I could push myself and strive for so much more. By doing so, I also learned how much I love helping others and making a difference to those around me, and that is much more precious to me than carrying a special title or a medal.

That being said, receiving this scholarship is undoubtedly a tremendous honor and I promise that it will be more than just a title that I hold. It will be an ongoing motivation to do my best and make not only my parents, but the Elks proud as well. This scholarship will open so many opportunities, and I hope that seizing them will be another small step in showing you just how much this scholarship, and this experience, means to me. My main goal in life is to make a positive impact on the world in some way. I haven't quite figured out exactly what that will be, but this scholarship will allow me to take the first essential steps towards accomplishing that goal. This scholarship will allow me to go beyond my college education and study abroad multiple times and take extra classes during my breaks from school to gain a greater understanding of the people in the world, and more importantly the struggles that many of them face, and how I can help them and motivate others to do the same.

Ten years ago, I immigrated to this country from Bulgaria with my family. The only phrases I could say in English were "I don't understand" and "I don't speak English". My brothers and I were picked on and made fun of by the kids at the apartment complex where we lived because we didn't speak English, and much of the same continued when we started going to school. My family could barely make ends meet and even something as simple as going to the grocery store was a challenge. We were mistreated by the owner of the apartments where we lived because she assumed that since we didn't speak English very well, she could ignore the fact that our apartment was constantly flooded and I had to keep moving the mattress that I called my bed around so it didn't get wet. In the first few months that we lived here, our decision to seek better opportunities in America seemed like it had been a mistake. As time went on, however, we were slowly able to improve our lives. We've faced many challenges along the way, but I think they've only made my family stronger. We've always had each other and we've learned from everything we've overcome. I've come a long way in the last 10 years, and this scholarship will help me go even further.

Thank you again to all the Elks from the bottom of my heart.