Ad Astra Kansas Newsletter

Volume 25 / Issue 1 Spring 2026

2026 Ad Astra Kansas Foundation Scholarships winners are named

The two exceptional students selected for a $1,000 scholarship each for the 2026-2027 academic years are working in the fields of physics and astronomy. The incoming freshman winner will use his $500 scholarship to study aerospace engineering. Plans are being made for outreach with these winners this fall.

Graduate winner--Kaitlyn Sheriff

University of Kansas

Sheriff is a second-year physics PhD student at the University of Kansas, having earned her Bachelor of Science degree in astrophysics in 2024 from Lycoming College in Williamsport, PA. While there she served two years as president of the Society of Physics and Astronomy Students (SPS) as well as being a delegate for SPS National.

In 2023 she earned a prestigious position in the National Radio Astronomy Observatory's Research Experience for Undergraduates program where she conducted research on a high mass X-ray binary star system.

Last year she earned the Barbara J. Anthony-Twarog Academic Support Award and is currently serving as the department's outreach teaching assistant. She works with Dr. Elisabeth Mills at KU researching the centers of nearby galaxies and will soon publish her first first-author publication. After earning her degree, Sheriff aims to continue reaching nearby galaxies and inspiring the next generation of scientists through outreach. *Courtesy photo*

For more, click **here**

Undergrad winner--Lucciana Caceres Holgado University of Kansas

As a physics and astronomy student with a minor in astrobiology at KU, Holgado is deeply passionate about understanding the universe, especially extreme exoplanets like ultra-hot Jupiters.

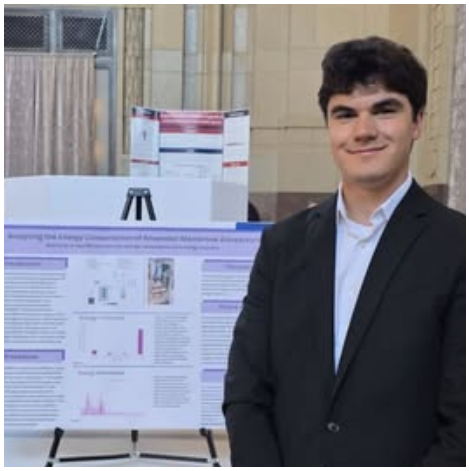
Her interest in astronomy began as a child in Peru, where her youthful curiosity grew into a genuine passion for physics as a whole.

Her hands-on research includes assisting in engineering and testing electronic links to send to the CMS (compact muon solenoid) detector at the high-energy physics research center at CERN. She also has been to the U.S. NSF's National Optical-Infrared Astronomy Research Lab in Chile learning to identify chemical signatures in the atmospheres of exoplanets.

She has been awarded the national Marian H. Rose Research Scholarship which annually grants $15,000 to a female graduate student doing research in the physical sciences. Holgado is still an undergrad.

Beyond academics she is vice president of the Peruvian Student Association and works as an International Orientation Leader. "These roles are meaningful to me because I understand how impactful guidance and community can be," she said. *Photo: KU press release.*

For more, click here.



Incoming freshman winner--Patrick Huser

Wichita State University

Patrick Huser is a senior at USD 383, Manhattan High School, where he co-founded the school's Manhattan Aeronautical and Space Administration (MASA) and has competed in the American Rocketry Challenge.

These leadership, organizational and creative skills learned with the MASA project, plus his Math and Robotics Clubs experiences, will hold him in good stead this fall as he studies Wichita State University Aerospace Engineering. He would like to serve and internship at an aerospace company.

Besides his interest in robotics and the aerodynamics of rocketry Huse would like to work on the Artemis mission to construct a lunar base in prep for a mission to Mars. Huse has applied to the Bill Cohen Honors College, completed his first year of college coursework during high school and because of the global nature of space exploration he has begun learning Mandarin. *Courtesy photo*

Kansas suppliers contribute to Artemis II

NASA has used about 2700 suppliers from all 50 states to build the massive Artemis ll program.

With the successful launching and return of the four astronauts in April, Kansas suppliers need to take a bow also. Here from various sources, including Sen. Jerry Moran’s office, is a list of some of those suppliers:

D-J Engineering—Augusta. Designed, built and tested couplers that attached to the fueling system for the rocket and detached on launch.

Galaxy Technologies—Winfield—Supplied parts for the SLS (Space Launch System)

Globe Engineering—Wichita—Mission support

Mid-State Aerospace—Olathe. Built parts for the powerful rocket SLS system which launched the Orion capsule into space.

MPM Inc.—Wichita

Perfekta, Inc—Wichita

Topeka Foundry and Iron--Topeka

U.S. Bank National Association of Overland Park--Supported Exploration Ground systems, which manages the infrastructure used to launch and recover Artemis missions

Vector Tooling Technologies—Winfield

WESCO Aircraft Hardware Corp.—Wichita

Jerry Moran **press release**

Questions, anyone?

Once the radio operator used the specially provided frequencies to make the connection, Lyon County students spoke to the International Space Station. On Wednesday, April 8, about 20 students from USD 251 N. Lyon Co., USD 252 S. Lyon Co. and USD 253 Emporia had a ten-minute communication window in which to ask questions of French astronaut Sophie Adenot.

This opportunity was provided by the Emporia State University School of Science and Mathematics and STEM Outreach working with the Emporia Amateur Radio Society as partners with the ARISS program (Amateur Radio on the International Space Station), an international education program connecting students with astronauts about the ISS using amateur radio. *Photo of middle school participants: ESU press release*

To read some of the questions asked click here.

Kansas teams to compete in American Rocketry Challenge

Several of Kansas' very own Topeka Center for Advanced Learning & Career (TCALC) students (USD 501)have qualified to compete in the American Rocketry Challenge finals in Washington DC May 16. The American Rocketry Challenge is the world's largest student rocket competition.

Each year this Challenge engages over 100,000 students to design and fly rockets. The top 100 teams are invited to the final competition held near the National's Capitol. TCALC and Blue Valley West High (USD 229) placed in the top 100 teams, with over 1,000 teams from middle and high school competing.

This competition promotes STEM through engineering and technology. To qualify for the finals, teams designed, built, and launched custom rockets engineered to reach 750 feet in altitude and achieve a precise flight duration between 36 and 39 seconds. Teams showcased innovative design, advanced technology, and engineering skills.

At the final competition, teams will face a new set of flight requirements designed to test their engineering adaptability and problem-solving skills. We wish our Kansas teams good luck as they put their teambuilding and problem-solving to the test.

Photo: CTALC students explain their rocketry design at the 2026 Ad Astra Space Celebration. Credit: Karen Camarda.

Aloha to a friend, mentor and motivator

The base for Steve Durst's work with Space Age Publishing Company and astronomy projects was Hawaii's Big Island.

It is my sad task to inform readers of the passing of Ad Astra Kansas Foundation co-founder and mentor, Steve Durst. A space publisher and entrepreneur for almost 50 years, Durst's deep affection for Kansas began in the 1970s with his natural affinity to our inspiring motto Ad Astra per Aspera (to the stars through difficulties.)

In 2001 (in sync with *that* space odyssey movie) Durst and retired WSU human factors engineer / Mercury scientist Dr. Randall Chambers co-founded our initiative as an educational outreach project of his own Space Age Publishing Co.

Hence began the AAK outreach, the 56 quarterly newsletters, 16 annual AAK Space Celebrations, 17 Galaxy Forums, the Interstellar Seminars, a myriad of other activities, and most recently, the Space Scholarship. All indicative of unfailing faith he had in our state and its potential. His biggest project was to be an initiative for an Interstellar University (IU) in Kansas.

The goal was to leverage Kansas' many strong assets, from its infrastructure, educational system, unique motto and central location to form an IU in Kansas. There is no central network in the USA to access deep space studies or research. A hybrid in-person / virtual global learning hub might be appropriate. With the academic skill for this widely distributed throughout Kansas and elsewhere an IU could be headquartered here, possibly at one of our universities, but there is no reason the faculty couldn't be global. A conference on this project had been scheduled for July in Topeka at the capitol, but has since been canceled due to his death.

A New Yorker by birth, a Californian by education (Stanford), a Kansan by adoption, his Space Age Publishing Company covered space research / events across the globe for over

50 years. He traveled constantly, connecting peacefully with researchers and scientists everywhere.

Durst also directed the Hawaii- based International Lunar Observatory Association (ILOA) project which landed its ILO-X precursor dual-optical imaging instruments on the Moon aboard the IM-1 Nova C Lander on Feb. 22, 2024.

Steve was a quiet, brilliant, good-hearted person who always took the long view. And so will we--Ad Astra, Steve. You are already there.

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