

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Two Santa Rosa graduates are \$10,000 richer

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By NICOLE R. ZIMMERMAN / Towns Correspondent

Two recent Santa Rosa high school graduates won \$10,000 scholarships this week from the Beach Blanket Babylon “Scholarship for the Arts” program sponsored by the Steve Silver Foundation.

They were among nine Bay Area finalists, selected from hundreds of applicants to perform live at Club Fugazi in San Francisco’s North Beach.

Nicolas Chuba of Santa Rosa High School’s ArtQuest and Jake Brinskele of Sonoma Academy won in the acting and voice categories. Mariko Ishikawa of San Mateo won in the dance category. Each was presented with a check for \$10,000 toward their college education.

Kelsey Tarantino, also from ArtQuest, was a finalist in the voice category.

“As soon as we saw Jake, Nicolas and Kelsey, we knew that they had to be among the finalists. They were fantastic,” says Jo Schuman Silver, who evaluates video entries solely on talent.

Producer of her late husband Steve Silver’s famous musical revue since 1995, she started the foundation in 2002 to continue his philanthropy.

“Steve loved to give back to the community in the arts and education so that young people could go on and pursue their dreams,” she says. “It’s one of our favorite nights of the year.”

It may be remembered as a favorite night for each of these finalists as well.

Brinskele, 18, winner in the voice category, sang “Lonely House” from Kurt Weill’s American opera “Street Scene,” based on a Pulitzer-prize winning play of the same name.

“I wasn’t necessarily expecting to get this far,” says Brinskele, who describes his win as shocking. “The judges were very kind, and their compliments were amazing.”

This is his first scholarship award, which will help cover his tuition at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where he will study musical theater and work toward building “a sustainable career as an entertainer.”

Brinskele has been a member of the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco for the past four years, but began singing and doing musical theater when he was 8. Since then, he has participated in more than 35 productions, a combination of musical theater and plays.

What he especially loves about performing is delving into the characters. One of his favorite roles was playing Melchior in January in the North Bay premier of “Spring Awakening” at Spreckels Performing Arts Center.

“For musical theater, you kind of have to love to do music, acting and dance equally. Otherwise you should probably be doing something else,” he says.

Since he first learned about the competition in the eighth grade, many of his friends have entered. Rachel Davoren, a 2010 winner in voice, was there to congratulate him.

“To be in an environment of such success was very exciting for me, just exhilarating,” he says. “It’s kind of a dream come true.”

Chuba, 18, won in the acting category, performing the role of James Tyrone Jr. in Eugene O’Neill’s Pulitzer-prize winning play “Long Day’s Journey into Night.” It’s a semi-autobiographical story centered on a family of alcoholics and their conflicts.

“One of the most rewarding things about this competition was the kindness, professionalism and support of the staff and artistic team,” says Chuba.

He received his primary training from ArtQuest, which provides students two daily hours of focus in visual or performing arts, including dance, theatre, vocals and instrumental music.

There he participated in a variety of productions including “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” “Scenes from The Big Picture” and “Metamorphosis,” for which he and fellow student Lukas Thompson wrote a scene.

“I enjoy the thrill of being in a play,” says Chuba, who started acting when he was just 6.

His next step is to study acting and earn his bachelor of fine arts degree in theater at Boston University, where he received a \$5,000 performance scholarship based on merit. Students can choose how much acting, directing, play writing or set design they would like to pursue each year.

“I can get a well-rounded education and still get top-notch acting experience as well,” says Chuba.

Beyond college, he sees himself writing and directing, creating musicals or plays. He says the most rewarding efforts are collaborations with other respected artists. But for now, he’s willing to let his future unfold.

“I think there will be a path that makes itself for me if I do the theater I want to do, and not anything but that.”

Kelsey Tarantino, 17, sang “Gimme Gimme.” The song is from the musical “Thoroughly Modern Milly,” which she choreographed last summer for Windsor Performing Arts Academy and has since performed for her school’s chamber singers, choir recitals and several college auditions.

“It’s kind of my good luck song,” she says, since she was accepted into four of the five schools she applied to.

She plans to attend Carnegie Mellon University to study acting in the School of Drama, which is covering her full tuition with grants. In addition, her high school choir offered her a Barclay vocal music scholarship.

Tarantino began performing ballet at 4 and was in her first musical with the Summer Repertory Theater at 6. A competitive tap dancer for several years, she has participated in more than 20 musical productions in Sonoma County.

Competing in voice was “a first time thing. It’s new, but exciting because I love singing more than anything. Just to be able to perform at Club Fugazi, with its scenery and the crazy big wigs and costumes, is what I loved,” she says. “It’s pretty big, and it’s pretty cool.”

This year’s judges included San Francisco symphony music director Michael Tilson Thomas, Berkeley Repertory Theatre’s Tony Taccone and entertainer MC Hammer.