

West Lafayette grad lands Rhodes scholarship

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Mohit Agrawal discusses ideas at a health care competition at Emory University last March. Agrawal was recently named one of 32 to receive the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship. (Photo provided)

Written by MIKEL LIVINGSTON

A West Lafayette native who is among the latest batch of Rhodes Scholars said Monday the news is still sinking in.

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It was announced Sunday that Mohit Agrawal, a 2007 graduate of West Lafayette High School, is among 32 college students in the nation to be awarded the prestigious scholarship that comes with full financial backing for scholars to pursue degrees at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom.

Although Agrawal, a long-rising academic star, is no stranger to distinguished scholarships, he said the honor is one he's still trying to digest.

"It didn't start to sink in until just yesterday," Agrawal said Monday.

"It's all a blur. It didn't make any sense at that point."

MOHIT AGRAWAL

- Currently working on master's degree in economic policy evaluation and planning, National University of Ireland Galway, 2012.
- Bachelor's in mathematics from Princeton University, 2011
- Study abroad work at National University of Singapore, 2010
- Coursework concurrent with high school at Purdue University, 2006 to 2007

The 32 scholars were chosen from 830 applicants endorsed by 299 colleges and universities.

Less than one day removed from the Sunday announcement, Agrawal, 22, was

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back in Galway, Ireland, where he's spending a year at the National University of Ireland funded by the Mitchell Scholarship, which Agrawal won last year.

It's that same scholarship that forced him to decline a final interview for the Rhodes Scholarship in 2010. The interview times for both scholarships conflicted, and Agrawal decided to pursue the Mitchell instead. This year, when offered the chance to again compete for the Rhodes, he couldn't pass it up.

The 2011 Princeton graduate flew to Indianapolis for a reception for the candidates that took place Friday. Interviews took place Saturday, followed by a second interview and then the big news.

"At 5:30 he called and said, 'Guess what? I won it,' " said Suresh Chand, Agrawal's father. "I said, 'What?' "

After that, it was home to pack and catch the red-eye flight back to Ireland where Agrawal is working on his master's degree in economic policy evaluation.

In the past day, Agrawal has fielded a number of emails and calls from teachers or colleagues and a congratulatory voicemail left for him by U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar, a former Rhodes Scholar, who Agrawal met in 2010.

West Lafayette social studies teacher Brian Fultz recalled Agrawal as a student "thirsting for knowledge" that routinely kept Fultz on his toes in the classroom.

"I had to up my game because he would question, not in a disrespectful way, but ... he wanted to see how things connected to other things, was there a pattern," Fultz said. "He was a brilliant kid who could ace all our tests and do well on everything he was given. It was interesting to see him go from not only learning all this material but learning what to do with it."

Agrawal will start at Oxford in September with his fellow scholars where he'll pursue a doctorate in financial economics.

"A key component of the Rhodes is to allow time for students for deep introspection and contemplation," Agrawal said. "From my perspective, that means giving me time to really understand economic issues and policy."

He said his experience in Ireland has already given him a new insight into his field that he wouldn't have gotten in the United States.

"What happens in the U.S. is economics is broken down into three areas," Agrawal said. "The academic economists are not talking to the policy economists who are not talking to the journalism economists. In Ireland that's not really true because it's a small country. Had it not been for my Irish experience, I would not have thought about economics this way."

Ireland isn't the first stamp on his passport; Agrawal's spent time in Singapore and Ghana to name a few locations.

Chand credits his son's success to a number of factors, including the strength of local schools. And Fultz said he hopes others will learn from Agrawal's experience.

"I was telling my seventh-graders (Monday), that he was sitting right here in your seat and he worked hard and challenged himself," Fultz said. "Hopefully it sends the message out that public education still works."

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