Honoring Rutgers’ ‘Very, Very Best’

President and his wife host commencement day breakfast for first inductees into the Matthew Leydt Society

By Dory Devlin | Sunday, May 17, 2015

After Julia Xia graduates from Rutgers University-New Brunswick today, she heads to Indonesia as a Fulbright teaching assistant for a year and then to Emory University School of Medicine. Hours before the 249th commencement, Xia was one of 160 graduates honored as the first inductees into the Matthew Leydt Society, which recognizes graduating seniors for exceptional academic performance at Rutgers University-New Brunswick.

President Robert Barchi and his wife, Francis, an assistant professor in the School of Social Work, invited the high-achieving students to a commencement morning breakfast. Barchi told the students and family members gathered under a big tent on the lawn of the president’s house that the new society was his wife’s idea as a way to spotlight the top students in a graduating class.

“We realized we don’t spend enough time recognizing the very, very best and brightest of our students,” President Barchi said. “We talk about the Big Ten and we talk about winning football games. We talk about the grants and prizes our faculty win. We talk about university rankings. But we don’t talk enough about the very best students who make this place what it is.”

The new honor society lauds students who have excelled in the classroom, in research labs and in the arts during their undergraduate years. The 160 students honored, including nine Fulbright scholars, hail from schools throughout Rutgers University-New Brunswick. They were selected from nearly 8,000 undergraduates who earned degrees this academic year.

“We congratulate you for being in that very top 1 to 2 percent of the class,” Barchi said. “We hope that you will be as proud of that as we are proud of you.”
The Matthew Leydt Society is named for the first and only 1774 graduate of Queen's College, New Brunswick. At that first commencement, Leydt delivered orations in Latin, Dutch and English, and after graduation earned his license to enter the ministry of the Dutch Reformed Church. At Queen's College, he studied under Frederick Frelinghuysen, the college's first tutor, and Reverend Jacob Rutsen Hardenbergh, who would later become the college's first president in 1786.

In 1825 Queen's College was renamed Rutgers College in honor of Colonel Henry Rutgers, a trustee and Revolutionary War veteran.

Xia, a cell biology and neuroscience honors student from Edison, was an Aresty research assistant to Zhiping Pang, an assistant professor at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, studying energy balance and metabolism in mice by examining neurons related to feeding behavior. With an eye toward childhood obesity, she researched what neuronal mechanisms make people feel that they have eaten enough.

Also a member of the Bioethics Society, Xia led student discussion groups and debate team sessions on bioethical issues. Her goal is to become a surgeon, though she remains open to what kind.

“It’s a beautiful day so far,” Xia said at the breakfast, which preceded the midday commencement ceremony. “I’m so honored.”

Among other honored students were two graduates of the 15-month Accelerated BS in Nursing Program, Stacey Golden of Highland Park, and Jacqueline Bundock of South Orange. Both said they will be studying for their nursing boards after graduation, and taking a bit of a breather. “We were very busy,” Bundock said of the intensive program.

Jeffrey Niesz of Neptune, an Eagleton Institute of Politics undergraduate associate who double-majored in political science and history, will be attending the Moritz School of Law at Ohio State University in the fall. After working at the New Jersey Attorney General’s Office and on research of William Penn’s education for a biography by political science Associate Professor Andrew Murphy, Niesz is looking forward to a career in politics and public policy. But on commencement day, he was
enjoying being feted for his achievements.

“It’s so nice to get a little luxury treatment,” Niesz said.

**Campbell Sode**, a scholar-athlete from Texas, joked that he and his Rutgers Lacrosse teammates have hit lots of balls from the neighboring practice field onto the president’s lawn. “It’s pretty cool to be here today,” said Sode, who will attend the University of Virginia Law School in the fall.

Click [here](#) to meet some of the outstanding members of the Class of 2015 and read about the May 17 commencement ceremonies [here](#).

For media inquiries, contact Greg Trevor at [gtrevor@ucm.rutgers.edu](mailto:gtrevor@ucm.rutgers.edu) or 848-932-0558.

**Tags:** Matthew Leydt Society  Commencement 2015  President Robert Barchi  Francis Barchi  Commencement