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ASU student wins Truman Scholarship to pursue public service career

An Arizona State University student who has spent years in service to her Mesa, Arizona, community has been named a Truman Scholar, the nation's most prestigious award for undergraduates who are pursuing careers in public service.

Yudit Nonthe Sanchez, who is pursuing a degree in public service and public policy with an emphasis in law and policy, became ASU's 23rd Truman Scholar since the inception of the program in 1977.

Nonthe, a first-generation college student who plans to graduate from ASU in December, would like to use the prize money to attend the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law and then run for office.

She found out she won the award during a surprise Zoom call on April 5 with ASU President Michael Crow and Provost Nancy Gonzales.

"I think I blacked out," she said. "There's no way that I'm being told this. After that, I just couldn't think."

Nonthe is one of 60 Truman Scholars nationwide, who were selected from 709 candidates. Applicants must demonstrate outstanding leadership potential, a commitment to a career in government or the nonprofit sector, and academic excellence.

Each Truman Scholar receives \$30,000 for graduate studies, plus leadership training, career counseling and special internship and fellowship opportunities within the federal government.

"For students who aspire to careers in public service, the Truman Scholarship is the biggest award there is," said Kyle Mox, associate dean of national scholarship advisement in the Office of National Scholarships Advisement at ASU.

"Not a lot of people appreciate how much hard work goes into winning a Truman Scholarship. Between the numerous drafts of the application, which includes several essays and a policy proposal, and the multiple practices interviews, the entire process of applying for Truman spans several months.

"Yudit is a remarkable young woman who represents many of the best parts of the ASU Charter, including a deep commitment to the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities that we serve."

Nonthe, who graduated from Westwood High School in Mesa, is a transfer student, having earned an associate degree at Mesa Community College. Her path in higher education was a winding one. She took time off to go on a mission to Brazil with her church, where she learned Portuguese, and also stepped back to take care of her health.

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In community college, she started as a nutrition major and had an internship with the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington, D.C.

"I was doing animal nutrition — and working with poop," she said.

"That was very interesting but it wasn't something I wanted to do for the rest of my life."

The following summer, she did an internship at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum.

During her final year at Mesa Community College, in 2020–21, she was student body president, doing most of her service remotely due to the pandemic. The murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the summer of 2020 spurred her reach out to the Mesa Police Department.

"I made a connection with the chief of police and asked to have a young people's forum so they could answer questions," she said.

"They had had forums for the Latino community, for the African American community, for the Asian community, but they've never had one for young people. And it was a very impactful event."

She earned an associate in arts in the Arizona General Education Curriculum in 2021, when she had a drive-through graduation ceremony.

"My family came and it was really fun, and right after I graduated, I applied during the summer for the Next Generation Service Corps (<https://psa.asu.edu/next-generation-service-corps>) at ASU, which has a transfer scholarship, and I had my application fee covered because I'm a TRIO (<https://eoss.asu.edu/trio>) student.

"And thankfully, I got accepted into NGSC a couple weeks after I applied. And then on top of that, I was a Positive Paths Fellow (<https://positivepathsaz.org/>), which is a women's mentorship and scholarship program.

"Because I've been very fortunate to not have to pay for any of my schooling, it was very easy for me to come to ASU."

Nonthe serves on the Mesa Human Relations Advisory Board, where she was appointed by the mayor and was part of the initiative to pass a non-discrimination ordinance in 2021.

"There was a lot of backlash, but it was never about bathrooms. It's really just about basic equality for people," she said.

Nonthe's parents are from two Indigenous communities in Mexico, the Otomi and and Nahua, and the household was a mixture of Indigenous language, Spanish and Portuguese. Her family was always busy and so her parents have been supportive of her many activities.


"My mom always told me, 'You're a little bird who can fly anywhere she wants and can do anything she wants to do,'" she said.

"And they've always been supportive of me despite it taking me such a long time to get my bachelor's degree, because it's been awhile since I graduated high school in 2016. They've been very patient because it's my goal to graduate from my higher education without any debt."

Nonthe wants to attend the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at ASU and then run for Mesa City Council.

"And once I feel like I have a strong ground, I want to run for mayor of Mesa at some point, whenever God wants me to," she said.

"I've been preparing myself for these past years to become the first Latina mayor of Mesa."

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