



Photos by Konrad Witkowski

Four Hendrix students nominated for the Watson Fellowship

By Greer Veon

What if you could spend a year on an independent journey exploring the research project of your dreams?

The students who desire that kind of opportunity are part of the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship. Each year, the Watson awards graduating seniors with a one-year grant for independent research outside of the United States from an applicant pool of nominees from 40 partner colleges. This year, seniors Ali Bair, Shelby Morrow, Michelle Stockwell and Jessa Thurman are the four Hendrix nominees that will compete in that pool.

"I propose to investigate what makes us love, hate, or simply ignore insects and how this perception has inhibited both our study and appreciation of these creatures in our modern world," Thurman said.

While Thurman is interested in living insects, Bair is more interested in artificial flies.

"I will be cued by the weather as I follow fly fishing peak-seasons," Bair said. "I aim to craft a modern and inclusive documentary on fly fishing culture, visiting communities in Norway, Russia, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Argentina, and Belize."

Morrow's project also looks to tie together cultures, but through the commonalities of artifacts that are left behind.

"My project is about cross-cultural knitting communities and how they affect identity," Morrow said. "Knitting is important to me personally, but I'm also really interested in how physical objects work as cultural artifacts, and what they communicate."

Stockwell hopes to communicate a different message.

"I will explore the power of storytelling to engage people in the complex narratives of migrants," Stockwell said. "Through street portrait photography, podcast interviews and written pieces, I will share the stories of people who leave home for opportunity or refuge, the loved ones they leave behind, and the stories of people who lack the agency or resources to choose

where they make a home."

The ideas of each of the nominees began to develop long before their senior year.

"I heard about an informational meeting about the Watson as a freshman," Bair said. "The openness of the 'research' project was what really attracted me. I decided that day that I would apply when I became a senior. I was already overflowing with ideas."

The Watson allows for applicants to take total control on researching and studying a topic that they choose to design in places best suited for gaining their information.

"It was impossible to not be interested," Thurman said. "I have always known that I wanted to apply and would never forgive myself for passing up this opportunity."

To be nominated by Hendrix is an intense process. The proposals must be submitted by the end of September or beginning of October. Then, there is a 15-minute interview with the Hendrix Honors Committee.

"At first, it's a panic of what you're going to do a project on and how valid that project topic is," Thurman said.

It may sound easy, but after choosing the perfect topic, the rigorous application must be completed.

"You brainstorm ideas as far in advance as possible," Stockwell said. "Then you write a project proposal, personal statement, find people in your Watson sites that are interested in your project, and create a budget."

Bair notes that her drafts were rewritten numerous times, and that professors, peers, and even family members helped to critique her work.

"I had the task of taking all that feedback and using it to transform my idea into a clear and fundable project," Bair said. "The task of saying, 'Hey, you can trust me with \$30,000 next year because my idea is *that good*.'"

The fact that all four nominees are women is also noteworthy. Recent nominees and recipients show that the women who are nominated

alongside men on campus seem to excel in the competition. So how are these ladies so successful?

"I think that women in the fields that we are interested in entering are used to always showing up prepared and working extra hard in order to be taken seriously," Stockwell said. Bair also shares the same belief.

"In nearly every aspect of life, [women] must be thorough, well-thought out, and even over-prepared should we expect to be taken seriously or even heard at all," Bair said. "In situations like the Watson, I am very glad I have this ability to thoughtfully communicate my passions."

Morrow, however, not only emphasizes the hard work and character of the individual, but the strength of the projects themselves.

"The people that have been chosen in the last few years, including the other ladies who are applying this year, are some of the most passionate and intelligent people I've ever met," Morrow said. "I would say they've been chosen to apply for this opportunity because they were somehow able to communicate that investigating their project is vital to their humanity."

Thurman believes that this kind of vitality is rooted in the personal connection to the study.

"The success of the project depends on your emotional connection to it, and if you haven't gone through the necessary personal exploration, then you are unable to make that connection, or at least convey it in your proposal," Thurman said. "That genuine emotional connection is what Ali, Michelle, Shelby, and I have."

Whether or not the nominees ultimately win the title of Watson Fellow, the overall experience has definitely been positive for each student's individual growth.

"Even if I don't get the Watson in the spring," Morrow said, "I've learned a lot about myself already."

The nominees are finishing the final application process and will later hear the Watson's final choices in March.