



Barrett News

[Kathleen Stefanik chosen as 2015 Barrett Honors College Outstanding Graduate](#)

Wed, April 29th, 2015



2015 Barrett Outstanding Graduate Kathleen Stefanik (right) participated in a panel discussion with Chelsea Clinton at the Clinton Global Initiative University at ASU in March 2014.

Kathleen Stefanik always dreamed of earning a university degree, but she put her educational aspirations on hold to work and raise a family. Now, she has fulfilled her dream in ways she never thought possible.

A student in Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in industrial and organizational psychology in December 2014. She has been chosen as the 2015 Barrett Honors College Outstanding Graduate and will carry the college's gonfalon in a convocation ceremony on May 12. Students who graduate in December preceding the May convocation are eligible to be considered for the honor.

"The love of learning and education has always burned inside of me, but affording college was completely out of the question," she said.

So instead, Stefanik made a career in the title and escrow industry and put resources into making sure her three children could attend college. After working for many years and raising a family, it was her turn to go to college.

She enrolled at Mesa Community College, tested into the honors program and started on a path that led her to receive the Leaders of Promise, All-MCC, All-Arizona First Team and Coca Cola Gold Scholarships. She graduated with highest distinction from the MCC honors program with an associate of arts degree and transferred directly into ASU's College of Technology & Innovation and Barrett Honors College.

As an honors student at the ASU Polytechnic campus, she took a class called "Make Your Ideas Happen" taught by Barrett Associate Dean Mark Henderson and began researching ways to alleviate poverty and hunger in rural Peru, where three out of four people live on less than \$1.25 per day and depend on agriculture for their livelihood.

Stefanik and her classmates learned that crop production in Peru had diminished due to soil quality deterioration and that Terra Preta – special soils created through a process of baking organic waste into charcoal called biochar and combining it with nutrient-depleted soils and fertilizer – could be used to regenerate fields and increase crop yields.

The students studied the process of making biochar – called pyrolysis – and then made a prototype of a device called a pyrolizer. That was the beginning of a non-profit organization founded by Stefanik called Growth Alternatives In Action (GAIA) that took teams of students to Peru to teach farmers how to make biochar and work with the Peruvian agriculture agency to make pyrolizers for use in teaching biochar methods at agriculture fairs. Some GAIA team members taught about biochar at the Agronomy University in Cuzco, Peru. The group also acquired a land extension in Peru to conduct biochar experiments.

Stefanik used her presentation skills to compete for and win startup funding for GAIA through the IDEO Innovation Fund and the ASU Innovation Challenge. She participated in the Clinton Global Initiative University in 2014 where she appeared on a Global Development panel with Chelsea Clinton.

She is now working fulltime on GAIA initiatives. In addition to its work in Peru, the organization began a project in Nepal in January and GAIA

members will return in May to continue work in that country. GAIA also is partnering with the Clinton Foundation on an initiative in East Africa where there is an agricultural center serving 40,000 farmers

“As the founder of GAIA, I can tell you that being involved in Barrett not only enhanced my university experience, but it also helped me to find ways to make a difference. GAIA International is well on its way to making a global impact by helping to solve problems of food insecurity in the developing world,” Stefanik said.

Being chosen as the 2015 Barrett Outstanding Graduate topped off a successful university undergraduate career, Stefanik said.

“I was the first in my family to obtain any kind of college degree, and so going to the top honors college in the nation was a really big deal for me. But having that background and then being chosen as the 2015 Barrett Outstanding Graduate is beyond anything I had ever dreamed of. I am beyond ecstatic,” she said.

Stefanik encourages talented students, regardless of their background, age, or financial status, to pursue their educational goals – especially at ASU and Barrett.

“If you want to have the resources, the tools and the support to really change the world and make it a better place, then you belong at ASU and Barrett. It is everyone’s responsibility to find their place in creating change and Barrett Honors College at ASU is an incubator for people who want to make their mark.”

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