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UIS student addresses dignitaries at academic awards ceremony

By **JOHN REYNOLDS**

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Priyanka Deo, a 21-year-old student at the University of Illinois Springfield who is studying pre-law and sociology, knows the importance of hard work.

And on Saturday, she got reinforcement of the payback for such work.

She was one of 50 Illinois college students who received a Lincoln Academy Student Laureate Award for their outstanding curricular and extracurricular work. The award is given to only one student at each of Illinois' four-year, degree-granting colleges and universities, and Deo got the extra honor of addressing the crowd of dignitaries and students during the ceremony at the Old State Capitol.

"To be able to speak in front of everybody and share my story, it's a very meaningful experience," Deo said in an interview beforehand. "We told my entire family back in India, and they are really proud. I'm absolutely honored to be the speaker."

Also among the 50 honored was Brett Allen of Staunton, who received the award for Blackburn College.

Deo moved to Chicago with her family around the time she entered eighth grade. She has attended UIS since her freshman year and joined the school's Downstate Innocence Project as an intern.

The position didn't come with a salary, but that didn't deter Deo.

"This was actually the only internship that wasn't paid," she said. "But I took it anyway because I felt it would give me more of a real-life representation of what the law is really like."

Deo's work with the Innocence Project, which strives to free people who may have been improperly convicted of crimes, has focused on the 1989 murder of Melissa Koontz, 18, who was stabbed to death and then dumped in a cornfield west of Springfield.

One of the people convicted of Koontz's murder was Thomas McMillen, who is serving a life prison sentence. The Innocence Project is investigating the possibility that one of the other men involved in the case gave a false confession, she said.

According to the Downstate Innocence Project's Web site, the group has a two-part mission: to help attorneys representing downstate inmates convicted of crimes they did not commit and to prevent convictions of innocent people in the future.

While working on the McMillen case, Deo saw firsthand that success sometimes includes a measure of luck as well.

She was in Carlinville with another intern, and they wanted to interview a witness about the case. The McMillen family didn't know where to find the witness.

"The other intern said she needed to go to the bathroom, so we stopped at the liquor store/gas station, and he was right there, about to get drunk," Deo said. "We got to interview him properly before he got drunk. He actually gave us a lot of information. It showed me that things happen by chance, and you just have to take the risk."

Deo said her long-term plans include working at the United Nations as a tribunal lawyer.

"(As a tribunal lawyer), you are fighting for human rights and what is right," she said.

The Lincoln Academy's Student Laureate Awards have been around for 35 years.

"This award means you have to make a positive outreach in your community as well as exceed in the classroom. All of the winners, I'm pretty sure, have a 4.0 grade point average," Deo said.

Since starting classes at UIS as a freshman, Deo also has been involved in extracurricular activities including forensics team and women's varsity tennis. She serves as a peer tutor and mentor for UIS' Capital Scholars Honor Program and as chairwoman of the Housing Residence Council.

John Reynolds can be reached at 788-1524.

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