

Lisa Nelson Memorial Scholarship-2026

Background

Good evening. My name is Paul Nelson, and this is my daughter Whitney, my niece Hannah and my sister Kristine. We are here tonight to acknowledge the recipients of the fourteenth annual Lisa Nelson Memorial Scholarship here on "Lisa Nelson Court." Each recipient will receive a \$5,000 college scholarship in honor and memory of Coach Nelson.

For those who are not familiar with her story — Lisa was a P.E. teacher and the head volleyball coach here at Ralston Valley from 2000-2013. She genuinely and deeply cared for her students, her athletes, and her colleagues. On March 3, 2013, she passed away after a courageous battle with cervical cancer. She was 43. She never let cancer compromise her way. She battled with

dignity, strength, and courage, and she touched countless lives during her 13 years here at RV.

To commemorate her life, the Lisa Nelson Memorial Scholarship was established. Since 2013, Ralston Valley students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding community have come together to ensure the stability and longevity of the fund. A special thank you to Mrs. Braketa and the members of Student Government who organize and run the Lisa Nelson Mustang Stampede 5K each year, and to everyone who has participated and donated. Together we are fulfilling the mission of the scholarship board, which reads...

We want to remember and honor Lisa's legacy and Pay It Forward... through college scholarships for Ralston Valley High School Student Athletes.

Selecting two recipients is never easy — the quality of the applications this year was a true reflection of the amazing student athletes in this building. Both of tonight's recipients are

tremendous students who have demonstrated athletic achievement, leadership, good character, citizenship, sportsmanship, and community involvement. Thank you to all who applied and to the teachers and staff who assisted them.

Hi my name is Whitney Nelson, and I am proud to present this year's female recipient.

DON'T SAY-Kara Sundbye

Academics

Our female recipient will be attending Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota in the fall where she will compete in Acro-Tumbling and plans to pursue a career as a school psychologist, therapist, or counselor. She is carrying a 3.71 weighted GPA and has earned First Team Academic All-State honors in all three of her

sports during her junior and senior years. Beyond the classroom and athletics, she participated in French Club, Theater as both an actor and set builder, Band, and Skills Trades Construction — reflecting a student who engaged fully and fearlessly in everything Ralston Valley had to offer.

Athletics

Athletically our female recipient is a three-sport athlete who has competed in gymnastics, diving, and track & field throughout her high school career. She is a four-year varsity gymnast, a 1st Team All-Conference and 2nd Team All-State recipient who competed at state all four years and helped her team finish runner-up twice. In swim and dive she was a Team Captain who competed at state three years. In track she competed in hurdles, pole vault, triple jump, long jump, sprints, and relays. She writes, "Being a three-sport student-athlete was not just a commitment; it was a lifestyle." Her gymnastics

coach, Alicia Willis, describes her legacy in three words: inspirational, motivational, and encouraging. Her accomplishments are impressive, but her character is what makes her extraordinary. At the state gymnastics meet, she fell during her floor routine. Rather than turning inward, she looked up and saw her teammate Ava waiting nervously for her turn and said, "Go, Ava — you've got this." She writes, "I realized being an athlete is not defined by what happens when everything goes right. It is defined by what you do when things go wrong, especially when someone else is looking to you for courage." In yet another example of her compassion and character, her twin sister is autistic, and there were moments on shared teams when teammates did not know how to include her. She was always the one who made sure she never felt alone. She writes, "Sports taught me that being part of a team is about more than winning. It is about making people feel valued, accepted, and included for exactly who they are."

Community

Our female recipient has been very active in community service. Through the Hope Chest Foundation she has helped raise over \$10,000 to purchase specialized sweatshirts for women recovering from mastectomies (MA-SECT-TA-MEES), going table-to-table at events collecting donations — something that made her nervous every single time, but she did it because it mattered. She has written letters to patients at Lily Care Hospice, inspired by the letters she wrote daily to her own grandmother during hospice care, because she believes the greatest gift you can give someone is making sure they do not feel forgotten. She has volunteered as a bell ringer for the Salvation Army and served as an intern gymnastics coach through TA-DA Gymnastics, mentoring the next generation of athletes. She also participated in Skills Trades Construction at Ralston Valley — an uncommon choice that reflects her willingness to step outside her comfort zone and try something new. She explains that through her experiences she

has cultivated a desire to give back to the community and to contribute to the well-being of others.

In a letter of recommendation to the scholarship board, Coach Alicia Willis testifies to the type of person she is. She writes, "This young lady embodies everything you hope to see in a student-athlete: resilience, kindness, determination, and a genuine desire to make those around her better."

For outstanding academic achievement, for being a tremendous athlete and leader, and for selfless service to the community, I am proud to introduce **Kara Sundbye** as the female recipient of the Lisa Nelson Memorial Scholarship.

Kara's Mom and Sister Riley will be accepting on her behalf.

Hello my name is Hannah Wynne, and I am proud to present this year's male recipient.

Don't Say-Ethan Shirazi

Academics

Our male recipient will be attending the University of Alabama in the fall — not on a football scholarship, but by choice. As his high school career came to a close, he received multiple Division I and II football offers and ultimately chose to make academics his primary focus — a decision that reflects the maturity and character he has developed as a student athlete. He is a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Young Life, carrying a 3.8 GPA. He is a tremendous student who has challenged

himself throughout his high school career and has been recognized for his strong work ethic both in the classroom and beyond. He also completed a Recruiting Operations Internship with Adam James International in Denver, where he supported executive-level hiring operations — a real-world professional experience that speaks to his initiative and drive.

Athletics

Athletically our male recipient is a Varsity 5A Team Captain and 2025 All-Colorado honoree in football who helped lead Ralston Valley to the 5A State Championship his senior year. He also competed in track. What makes his athletic story especially compelling is the journey he took to get there. His junior year he tore his quad and his groin around the same time — and he played through it. He writes, "Adversity forced me to grow not only as a player, but as a person." Before his senior season, he and his twin brother made the difficult decision to step away from

baseball and join the track team for the first time as upperclassmen, purely to improve their speed and conditioning for football. That sacrifice paid off. One of the highlights of his career came against Erie High School, when he and his brother both scored in the same game. He writes, "It reminded me that football is not just about individual achievement, but about shared memories and connection." In his essay he writes, "Football taught me that success is not just about talent. It is about consistency, effort, and doing the right thing even when you are tired." Our male recipient has been described as a leader to those around him. He writes, "Being a team captain taught me that leadership is not about recognition but about responsibility. It means setting a standard, supporting teammates, and putting the group ahead of personal achievement."

Community

Our male recipient has been very active in community service. At Storyline Community Church in Arvada, he has been a Youth Group Leader since 2020 and has led the Annual Church Camp Retreat from 2023 to 2025. He volunteers in elementary school classes on Sunday mornings and has led children through drills at the Ralston Valley Youth Football Camp, emphasizing teamwork and sportsmanship. Through the Mustang Mentor Program, he helped freshmen transition into high school by leading weekly meetings throughout the year. He is a member of Young Life and serves as Co-President of the Ralston Valley Fellowship of Christian Athletes. He is currently a head flag football coach for a youth program — responsible for practice and game plans for boys and girls who look up to him. Coach Yannacito noted that it is a huge role and that Ethan is doing an amazing job with it. He explains that through these experiences he has learned the importance of leading by example and making a meaningful impact in his community.

In a letter of recommendation to the scholarship board, Coach Jared Yannacito testifies to the type of person he is. He writes, "he represents the very best of what it means to be a student athlete. His work ethic, resilience, and character set the standard for our program."

For academic achievement, for being a tremendous athlete and leader, and for selfless service to the community, I am proud to introduce **Ethan Shirazi** as the male recipient of the Lisa Nelson Memorial Scholarship.