U. graduate lauded for good works

When she was in middle school, Nicole Nguyen decided she wanted a different life. She's seen her dad, a Vietnamese refugee, work seven days a week at multiple jobs, from assembling products on a factory line to working in a warehouse, rarely having time for his family. She sees how much her older sister, who was first pregnant at 15, struggles as a single mom with three kids. Her parents never graduated from high school, and no one in her family has ever gone to college, forcing many of them to stay in jobs they don't like.

"They can't do what they really want to do - they're too busy working," Nguyen said. "All they can worry about is getting by."

Nguyen studied hard to get scholarships to pay for college. As a University of Utah student, she volunteered thousands of hours working with community and HIV prevention programs, helping people improve their lives.

In recognition of her efforts, Nguyen was awarded the YouthLINC Young Humanitarian Award earlier this month, chosen from among about 70 high school and college students statewide. She won a $5,000 scholarship that she is using partly to pay for a two-week trip this summer with YouthLINC to Kenya, where she'll be volunteering. The rest of the money will go to paying for pharmacy school at University of California in San Francisco, where she starts this fall.

Nguyen, who graduated from the U. earlier this month, said the scholarship was a big relief because she needs help paying for pharmacy school. But, she was also surprised.

"When you do service, you don't focus on being recognized," she said.

Judy Zone, YouthLINC executive director, said the agency started the Young Humanitarian Award four years ago to honor volunteers in Utah and inspire other young people to get involved in community service. YouthLINC, started in 1998, is a nonprofit group based in Salt Lake City that offers high school and college students a chance to participate in service trips to Peru, Kenya, Mexico and Thailand.

Zone said she was not a judge in the competition but she was impressed with Nguyen's perseverance.

"She had everything working against her," Zone said. "She not only lifted herself up, she's lifted other people."

Nguyen, 22, was born in Salt Lake City and raised in the diverse, aging neighborhood of Rose Park. She later moved with her family to the suburbs, where she graduated from West Jordan High School.
Nguyen said none of her three older siblings went to college because of various circumstances, but she was determined to go. She credits her teachers for pushing her.

"They saw potential in me and encouraged me to do well," she said.

Nguyen started volunteering in high school as a pharmacy receptionist at Cottonwood Hospital, where she served more than 300 hours. At the U., she volunteered at various university and Vietnamese community events and was the director of an advocacy program for HIV/AIDS prevention.

She said she's excited about spending time in Kenya this summer educating people about HIV prevention, nutrition and clean water, and she hopes they teach others what they learn.

"It's about helping those communities help themselves," she said.

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* To find out more about YouthLINC go to www.youthlinc.org.

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