

Grad wins prestigious McCall MacBain Scholarship to study neuroscience at McGill



U of T Scarborough grad Abigail Ralph is off to McGill University to pursue a master's degree in neuroscience (Submitted photo)

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Emily Dontosos with files from Janet Rowe

When she heads to McGill University this fall to pursue her master's degree in neuroscience, **Abigail Ralph (BSc 2023 UTSC)** says she hopes it'll be the first step toward ensuring rare neurological diseases get more research attention.

"When I was younger, I was caring for a family member who had neurological issues," she says. "Hearing that the doctors didn't really know what the problem was made me upset. But then I realized that researchers actually generate that knowledge. From then I was interested in neuroscience."

Newly graduated from the University of Toronto Scarborough with a degree in neuroscience and health policy, Ralph is one of just 20 Canadian recipients of the McCall MacBain Scholarships—prestigious awards that enable exceptional student leaders to maximize their potential through a fully funded master's or professional degree at McGill, plus mentorship and coaching. Admitted into the Integrated Program in Neuroscience, Ralph will complete a thesis researching progressive disease.

The [scholarship program](#) was established in 2019 through a landmark \$200-million gift to McGill University from **John McCall MacBain and Dr. Marcy McCall MacBain**. At the time, it was the largest philanthropic gift in Canadian history. This year, the program expanded to welcome international students.

Ralph found her footing as a researcher at UTSC

As she prepares to embark on the next phase of her academic journey, Ralph says her UTSC education played a crucial role in setting her up for success.

"UTSC is a hidden gem," she says. "It's a real community. You get to know people on campus, the faculty members get to know you by name. My professors truly cared about me and wanted me to do well."

Inspired by the potential of research to create change for people and communities, Ralph has already completed significant projects.

She was one of four co-investigators on UTSC's award-winning [Vaccine Equity Project](#)—recommending improvements for pop-up clinics in Toronto's COVID-19 hotspots. She was a research program co-ordinator for "Don't Count Us Out!", showing how health disparities faced by Black Nova Scotians were exacerbated by COVID-19. As an intern at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Sweden, she learned about neural engineering: growing stem cells in an artificial environment and differentiating them to make neurons. And her undergrad thesis examined how brain and gut cell systems interact during a stroke.

In recognition of her academic excellence and community involvement, which also included serving on a women's health peer advisory research board and directing research for the UTSC chapter of Amnesty International, in 2022 Ralph was the inaugural recipient of U of T's [Black Excellence Award](#).

Ralph relates the breadth of her activities and abilities—she also models, paints and plays volleyball—to her success in science and leadership.

"It definitely wasn't easy to be so interested in so many things," she says, "but I found that pursuing them all anyway is honestly great. In neuroscience and health policy, people are moulded to think a certain way, but when you have a lot of experiences and learn how to deal with many different personalities, you can really add a lot of nuance. I know now that the more interdisciplinary a person is, the easier it becomes to problem-solve."

A scholarship program designed to develop the leaders of tomorrow

Designed to encourage purposeful leadership, the McCall MacBain Scholarships provide opportunities for recipients to participate in mentorship, coaching and an interdisciplinary leadership program.

"I'm excited about this aspect of the award, because I really believe that leadership is cyclical," says Ralph. "You learn from people and they learn from you, and then you all go on to impact other people positively."

In addition to Ralph, who received a full scholarship, nine other U of T students have received entrance awards from the scholarship program, which has a goal to bring together the brightest minds to advance positive change. **Andrea Caceres Almendrades (BA 2023 WDW)**, **Mostafa El Sharkawy (BA 2023 TRIN)**, **Levon Karakoyun (BA 2023 UC)**, **Matthew Kieffer (BA 2023 VIC)**, **Lucas Penny (BSc 2022 TRIN)** and **Sara Sutherland (BSc 2023 KPE)** won Finalist Awards to attend McGill. **Yao Yan Huang (BSc 2023 UTSC)**, **Omer Malikyar (BA 2023 WDW)** and **Adib Syed (BSc 2023 UTSC)** won Regional Awards for use at any public university in Canada.

Ralph says she's still processing the fact that she's been named a McCall MacBain Scholar.

"I haven't fully taken in how life-changing it is. Just to see how everything's coming together is humbling and exciting. I'm really grateful," she says.

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