

ACHIEVE
LEAD
REMEMBER
VISION
DISTINCTION
AWESOME
HONOUR
CELEBRATE
SPIRIT
PERSEVERANCE
REACH
INTEGRITY
ENJOY
MERIT
EXCELLENCE

2021

Michael A. Strembitsky

AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

Honouring Student Excellence

Michael A. Strembitsky Award of Excellence

Honouring Student Excellence

On June 22, 2021, the Edmonton Public Schools Board of Trustees had the honour of recognizing 18 outstanding nominees for the Michael A. Strembitsky Award of Excellence.

A gold (\$2,000), silver (\$1,500) and bronze (\$1,000) medal and cash award was awarded to three Grade 12 students who are completing their schooling and who best exemplify:

- excellence in personal, social and academic endeavours
- keen interest in a broad selection of subjects and activities
- willingness to seek meaningful change
- initiative, courage, confidence and a commitment to excellence
- co-operation with other students, staff and community members
- potential to provide leadership throughout life
- responsible participation in society

Michael A. Strembitsky Award Nominees

Jackson Durocher
Academy at King Edward

Zainab Warsame-Farah
J. Percy Page

Joshua Goonewardene
Millwoods Christian

Penny Gullion
Victoria

Elisabeth Yuen
Centre High Campus

Katey Dambrowitz
Jasper Place

Alexander Cai
Old Scona

Reese Jones
Vimy Ridge Academy

Amelie Lang-Muller
Eastglen

Rayna McFeetors
Lillian Osborne

Medina Qasqas
Queen Elizabeth

Natasha Larson
W.P. Wagner

Athena Xaysana
Edmonton Christian

Johanna Lau
M.E. LaZerte

Eric Au
Ross Sheppard

Hala El-Assadi
Harry Ainlay

Corey Ly
McNally

Victoria Zhou
Strathcona

GOLD Medal



Johanna Lau
M.E. LaZerte

“Johanna has been an undeniable force of caring, compassion and school spirit since stepping foot in M.E. LaZerte in Grade 10,” says Principal Kim Backs. “She is a stand out leader with vision, insight and the ability to encourage participation from others.” Johanna’s student leadership teacher also expressed that, “Johanna’s dedication, determination and selfless care for all people separates her from others, and her unique ability to share her vision and to embrace new challenges has been a blessing for the student leadership program.”

She’s been a top scholar throughout high school and has been an active member of various clubs and initiatives, and despite all of her accomplishments, Johanna has remained humble.

Johanna was appointed as the Student Senator for M.E. LaZerte in 2019, elected as the Student Trustee for 2019–20, and is currently serving as the Senate Chair for 2020–21. This year, she has collaborated with fellow Senators on a Division-wide podcast, magazine and club package to highlight and support the Division’s diverse student body.

Johanna coordinated Jack Talks and Community Helpers (improving mental health awareness in schools), led the school’s Interac Club (raising awareness of local and global issues together with the local community Rotary), and was vice-president of LaZerte’s Students’ Union (creating events and opportunities to keep students connected to school and one another).

She founded Voices of LaZerte which is a student-led and staff-supported anti-racism team, with the goal of promoting and supporting student culture, language and activities. Johanna participated in LaZerte’s Model United Nations and has presented at the University of Alberta. She played a key role in the school’s recycling initiative and writes for LaZerte’s Literary Magazine. Under Johanna’s guidance, the school’s magazine was completely restructured, resulting in increased readership and participation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she even established online tutoring for Chinese and French languages.

Johanna says, “A community is strengthened when there is not one, but many leaders championing their passions while challenging and encouraging one another to improve.” To this end, she used a strategy of “leaders creating leaders” to revitalize groups she was involved in. Rather than relying on one leader, she transitioned to peer mentorship to strengthen the group as a whole.

Johanna also participates competitively in martial arts, and performs and teaches lion dance. She says she lives a Hong Kong lifestyle—busy and fast-paced.

Johanna received a \$20,000 Major Renewable Undergraduate Entrance Scholarship from McGill University. She plans to study in the Faculty of Business and then pursue a law degree.

SILVER Medal



Eric Au
Ross Sheppard

“I am in awe of Eric’s accomplishments. I have been able to get to know Eric over the course of his Grade 12 year. He has done nothing but impress and leave an impact on me for all he has accomplished and what he stands for,” says Principal Rick Stanley.

Eric is a full International Baccalaureate (IB) student with a grade average of 98 per cent this year. In fact, he received an impressive mark of 100 per cent in Chemistry IB and Theory of Knowledge. However, his success is not based solely on a measurement of marks but rather the leadership he shows amongst his peers and teachers.

He is described as kind, generous and humorous, and driven to improve everything around him. Eric says, “Excellence in leadership, service and academics is my core, and contributing to the community is my lifestyle.” He believes in the importance of creating a sense of legacy for the school—training other leaders and setting future leaders up for success

As the Community Director of Shep’s Interact Club, he coordinates volunteer events with Edmonton’s Food Bank and Root for Trees, and organized fundraisers for partner schools in Belize. Eric founded the Debate Club and is well known for making significant contributions to the high school Model United Nations as a two-time winner of the Best Diplomat award in 2019 and 2020. He is also part of the Ross Shep Connect Crew Executive Committee where he plans activities and tours, and provides information to welcome Shep’s new Grade 10 students. Eric has been the team captain for the Ross Sheppard Lion Dance Club since 2018, helping to book and coordinate public performances for Chinese New Year and other events. He trains other members of the club in traditional Chinese lion dance and supports them by choreographing different routines.

Eric is passionate about the environment and is part of the school’s Project Green. He organized students to help Division staff plant trees and bushes, transforming a once-empty courtyard into a beautiful, welcoming gathering space. For the second courtyard, they are partnering with Shep’s Indigenous Coordinator to create a space recognizing Treaty 6 heritage. He also helped organize an Earth Day cleanup of Coronation Park.

Eric has volunteered for Edmonton community festivals: Heritage Days since Grade 2, Kaleidofest and Deep Freeze since Grade 5, and Folk Music Festival since Grade 6. He has also volunteered several hours to support Edmonton’s Food Bank since 2018. Most recently, Eric promoted and led Ross Sheppard’s efforts to collect and donate 538 kilograms of non-perishable food items.

Eric plans to pursue a career in science.

BRONZE Medal



Penny Gullion
Victoria

Principal Brad Burns says, “Penny exemplifies what it means to be a true learner and leader through her talent, compassion, and humanitarian perspectives that positively contribute to society. She has a kind heart, incredible artistic drive, and is an excellent ambassador for our school, Division and province.”

Penny’s great grandfather was the second chief of her community, Bigstone Cree Nation. His values of empathy and leadership synchronized. “From an early age I identified as a leader. I grew up learning about leadership and its importance from my family,” says Penny. “As a leader there is a responsibility to affect change through advocacy. I lead my life and the work I do with the values of teamwork and kindness.”

She has demonstrated leadership in Indigenous ways of knowing and has shared her artistic gifts and talents with the local and greater community through a variety of artforms to address social justice issues and seek meaningful change. She consistently thinks about how she can use and express the Cree teachings she has learned. Penny joined the Cultural Hearts Club at Victoria School, with a focus on building community, planning events and furthering our understanding of culture and tradition. She co-hosted the Indigenous family night, applying her skills by filming and editing the Indigenous resources open house video, and taking initiative to plan various events such as an awareness project for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), Orange Shirt Day and Indigenous Peoples Day.

Penny is a talented director. “I love the art of storytelling and I was always drawn to film,” says Penny. In cooperation with Victoria School and Red Deer’s Remembering the Children Society, she is currently directing a special documentary about a forgotten residential school. She also created her own short film called Parallels, which speaks to the different experiences between Indigenous youth living on a reserve and in the city. She is currently collaborating on a documentary featuring the paintings of City of Edmonton Councillor Aaron Paquette for a touring show called Bear Witness. This documentary, along with Aaron’s paintings depicting residential schools, treaty signing, mass consumerism, addiction, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, will be made available to Division schools to host the exhibit and learn from the teachings portrayed in this collaboration.

Penny shares her love for her culture through her involvement with the ReconciliAction Youth Group, powwow dancing at school and community events, and writing and presenting recognitions for Indigenous soldiers at Remembrance Day ceremonies. Penny has been a true leader to the Cultural Hearts student organization—an Indigenous organization with the founding principles of inclusivity and acceptance for all people, cultures and traditions. She also manages the @indigen_usyouth social media account to create awareness of events and support for Indigenous students.

Penny has consistently achieved honours throughout high school and next year, she will attend the University of British Columbia in the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Film Production.