

## Bigger Opportunities Ahead: Community Foundation Expands 2026 Student Bursaries

As the cost of education continues to rise, financial resources can make a significant difference for students pursuing post-secondary studies. Through the Thunder Bay Community Foundation's 2026 Student Awards, the organization is once again helping local students take the next step in their academic journeys.

Each year, the Foundation offers a range of scholarships and bursaries to graduating high school students and continuing learners across Thunder Bay and the District areas. While scholarships are awarded based on academic achievement, bursaries focus primarily on financial need, ensuring that students with the determination to pursue higher education are not held back by financial barriers.

For the 2026 cycle, 15 bursaries are available, including the Justice Ronald B. Lester Memorial Bursary, one of the Foundation's long-standing student awards.

Originally established in the early 2000s as the Harbour Youth Services Bursary, the award was created to honour the legacy of the late Justice Ronald B. Lester, a respected advocate for youth justice. During the first decade of the program, the bursary was administered by his wife, Susan Lester, alongside Justice Lester's close friends and colleagues. In 2013, the Fund was formally entrusted to the Thunder Bay Community Foundation to ensure its long-term sustainability.

Since then, the Foundation has managed the administration and financial oversight of the bursary, while the Lester family continues to

play an active role in selecting recipients. Unlike many other awards administered by the Foundation, the Lester Memorial Bursary includes an online interview component, allowing the family to connect directly with applicants.

"It was the best decision that I made for our bursary," said Susan Lester. "Not only did the Thunder Bay Community Foundation take over the day-to-day administration and financial aspects, but the Foundation also gave our family the flexibility to shortlist applicants, conduct interviews, and make the final selection. This has allowed us to be much more personally involved in supporting the students."

Since its inception, 60 graduating high school students have received support through the Justice Ronald B. Lester Memorial Bursary Fund. One of the most recent recipients is Layla Anness of St. Patrick High School, who was awarded \$7,500 in 2025.

The bursary arrived for Layla at a time when many graduating students face uncertainty about the cost of post-secondary education. "At the time I received the bursary, I was feeling completely overwhelmed - something many graduating students can relate to," she said. "Being the recipient of this bursary made many opportunities possible that otherwise may not have been available to me."

She explained that the funding allowed her to take two online spring courses in 2026, helping reduce her academic workload for the

upcoming school year. "The transition from high school to the first year of university can definitely take time to get used to, and the course load can especially be demanding. It is for this reason that I decided it would be best to take two spring courses to save myself some academic stress next year, and it surely would not be possible without the bursary that I received and the work of the generous donors!"

Over the years, Susan Lester has received many letters of gratitude from recipients and their families, something she says continues to inspire her involvement in the program, "I cannot fully express the delight it is for me to see and hear the joy in all of our recipients when they discover they will be receiving one of our bursaries." She added, "The impact on our city and region is profound knowing that we have participated in making a start to these outstanding young people to pursue their educational and eventual career goals in the areas of medicine, law, science and education and return to our area to make it a better place to live for all."

"Having our family bursary with the Thunder Bay Community Foundation has comforted me in the fact that knowing when I no longer am able to participate in its activities that I know it is in very capable hands for its future administration and financial oversight," Susan also shared as she express her confidence in the future of the Fund under the Foundation's stewardship.

Aside from the Lester Memorial Bursary, the Foundation continues to support students



Layla Anness, 2025 Student Award Recipient (Bursary), with Susan Lester, fundholder of Justice Ronald B. Lester Memorial Fund

through a wide range of awards created to meet different educational goals and circumstances. There are over \$200,000 available in scholarships and bursaries this year, with each award having its own eligibility criteria.

Graduating High School students are encouraged to review the available opportunities and apply before the March 31<sup>st</sup> deadline. For more information, visit [www.tbcf.org/scholarships-bursaries](http://www.tbcf.org/scholarships-bursaries).

  
**\$200,000+**

AVAILABLE IN STUDENT AWARDS

Student Award applications are now OPEN! Apply by March 31, 2026 and take the next step toward educational support.

Visit [www.tbcf.org/scholarships-bursaries](http://www.tbcf.org/scholarships-bursaries) for more information.