

## Michael Chan Prize in Asian Studies goes to religious studies major

Jessica Knoop-Lentz (BA '19) was inspired to write about Buddhist ecology and her efforts netted her this year's Michael Chan Prize in Asian Studies worth \$1,000.

"I was very excited and incredibly grateful. Since I've been on maternity leave, it was a very welcome gift," says Knoop-Lentz, who is mother to a six-month-old baby boy. "This was by no means the result of my efforts alone. I was several months pregnant, planning my wedding and doing my honours thesis all at the same time. I had amazing support from friends and family, so me winning this prize is also a celebration of them."

Knoop-Lentz majored in religious studies and minored in Asian studies and anthropology, subject areas that were far from her original starting point.

"When I was at Lethbridge College, I took Introduction to World Religions and Buddhism," she says. "When I was writing my papers and going to class, it came so naturally. Originally, I wanted to be a vet and now I want to teach religious studies."

Originally from the Crowsnest Pass, Knoop-Lentz moved to Lethbridge about a decade ago. When she enrolled at the U of L, Knoop-Lentz started taking classes with Dr. John Harding, a professor in the Department of Religious Studies.

"Eventually, it just solidified my interest in religious studies," she says. "I was working really hard to do OK in biology, but religious studies felt effortless. I switched majors and went with what I was passionate about."

Her paper, titled *Shades of Green: A Consideration of the Multiple Perspectives on Buddhist Ecology*, was written for Harding's class on Buddhism and science. While Knoop-Lentz didn't need the course credit, she signed up purely because she was interested.

"Buddhism is often seen as the most scientifically compatible religion. Some people would even say the Buddha was a scientist because he sought to understand the world and how it works," she says. "Buddhists view all things as interconnected. There's also the concept of karma, which is the idea that by doing good in this life, you're planting seeds for your future lives or later in this life."

But everyone has a different idea about what is good. Would a Buddhist agree to killing off a diseased population of animals if it saves the greater forest or should the lives of individual animals be considered?

“The answers to those questions depend on who you ask,” says Knoop-Lentz. “No Buddhist is ever just a Buddhist. They could be farmers or mothers and that will factor into their decision making.”

Prize adjudicators, Drs. Trevor Harrison and Richard Mueller, commended Knoop-Lentz on a well-written paper that explores the compatibility of Buddhist teachings with modern western-based approaches to ecology. While traditional Buddhism often emphasized the inward search for enlightenment, Knoop-Lentz shows that ecological elements were already present. She demonstrates that variations of Buddhist teachings were connected with local ecological circumstances and economies.

The Michael Chan Prize in Asian Studies was established by Dr. Bonnie Lee, a professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences, to honour the memory of her husband. Michael Chan was a Chinese-Canadian scientist and humanitarian.