



LOCAL STUDENT SELECTED FOR \$14,000 GOLDEN LEAF FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIP

ROCKY MOUNT, N.C., (June 8, 2026) - Today, the Golden LEAF Foundation announced that 215 rural North Carolina students were selected to receive up to a \$14,000 Golden LEAF Scholarship, including one in Watauga County.

High school seniors entering college as first year students are eligible for a \$3,500 scholarship each year for up to four years of undergraduate study at a participating four-year North Carolina college or university. Community college transfer students are eligible for \$3,500 a year for up to three years of undergraduate study.

The Golden LEAF Scholarship program prioritizes students who demonstrate clear career goals and a commitment to returning to rural North Carolina communities after graduation. In alignment with the Foundation's mission, the scholarship also honors the state's agricultural heritage by supporting students with personal or family ties to North Carolina's tobacco industry. This focus recognizes the historical and economic significance of tobacco growing, production, and processing to the families and rural communities that Golden LEAF serves.

Scholarship recipients may also participate in the Golden LEAF Rural Internship Initiative, which provides Golden LEAF Scholars with professional work experience related to their career field in a rural North Carolina community. The Golden LEAF Foundation provides funding to pay interns up to \$18 per hour for up to 400 hours of work. Internships take place between May and August.

The Golden LEAF Foundation established the Golden LEAF Scholarship Program to broaden educational opportunities and provide support to students from rural counties with the goal that recipients will return and contribute to rural communities after graduation. Since establishing the scholarship program in 2000, Golden LEAF has provided more than 6,300 scholarships to help North Carolinians attend participating public or private colleges and universities in North Carolina. Currently, there are 645 Golden LEAF Scholars attending a North Carolina four-year college or university. The North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA) administers the program and selects students for awards.

"We are proud to award scholarships to hardworking students with deep roots in their communities," said Scott T. Hamilton, Golden LEAF President, Chief Executive Officer. "Chosen from more than 1,400 applicants, these students represent the future of rural North Carolina. We look forward to their accomplishments as they continue their education and become North Carolina's next generation of leaders."

"Congratulations to this year's Golden LEAF Scholars. These students represent the best of North Carolina—resilient, driven, and deeply rooted in their communities," said Speaker Destin Hall. "The Golden LEAF Foundation continues to make a powerful investment in our state's future by helping

young people pursue higher education and become the next generation of leaders in rural North Carolina. I commend the recipients on their hard work and wish them continued success."

"I commend all of the Golden LEAF Scholarship recipients from my district," said Senator Ralph Hise. "This recognition reflects your hard work and ambition, and I wish you continued success as you pursue your goals."

"It is a privilege to recognize the Golden LEAF Scholarship recipients from my district," said Representative Ray Pickett. "Your commitment to learning and giving back to your communities is inspiring and will play a key role in shaping our state's future."

The newly selected 2026 Golden LEAF Scholarship recipient from Watauga County is as follows:

Name	College/University	High School
Marina Wilson	Lees McRae College	Watauga High School

About Golden LEAF Foundation:

The Golden LEAF Foundation is a nonprofit organization established in 1999 to receive a portion of North Carolina's funding from the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement with cigarette manufacturers. Golden LEAF has worked to increase economic opportunity in North Carolina's rural and tobacco-dependent communities through leadership in grantmaking, collaboration, innovation, and stewardship as an independent and perpetual foundation. For more than 25 years, the Foundation has provided lasting impact to tobacco-dependent, economically distressed, and rural areas of the state. In fiscal year 2025, Golden LEAF helped create 1,665 jobs, more than \$116 million in new payrolls, and more than 4,722 workers trained or retrained for higher wages. For more information about Golden LEAF and our programs, please visit our website at GoldenLEAF.org.

About North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority:

The North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA) administers the Golden LEAF Colleges and Universities Scholarship on behalf of the Golden LEAF Foundation. Established in 1965, NCSEAA is the State agency that promotes access to higher education by administering financial aid and savings programs, informing students and families about paying for college, teaching educators about financial aid administration and advocating for resources to support students.

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