



THE CHAMPION

Rhonda Watkins
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
LOS ANGELES | AGE: 20

“I have always had three goals: to win Olympic gold, to become a doctor and to make my mother happy.”

America's Next Top (Role) Models

For 51 years Glamour's chosen the most impressive female students in America to honor in our annual Top 10 College Women Competition. Let this year's winners inspire you to greatness.

BY ERIN ZAMMETT RUDDY

What changed her life: In 1996, as eight-year-old Watkins watched TV in her family's home in Trinidad, a runner from her country missed Olympic gold by tenths of a second. She told her family, “Don't worry, one day I'll win a gold medal for Trinidad.” **What happened next:** Watkins went to UCLA on a full scholarship—and today she's a world-ranked track-and-field star. In 2007 she won both the indoor and outdoor NCAA long-jump titles, and became the first woman in UCLA history

to earn All-American honors in the long and high jumps at the NCAA national championships. At press time, Watkins was set to go to the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. If she medals there, she'll be the first woman from Trinidad and Tobago ever to do so. The psychobiology major also gives motivational speeches to schoolchildren. “I want to encourage young women to dream big,” she says. **Where she'll be in 10 years:** “Treating other athletes as a sports medicine doctor.”

THE HEALTH CRUSADER

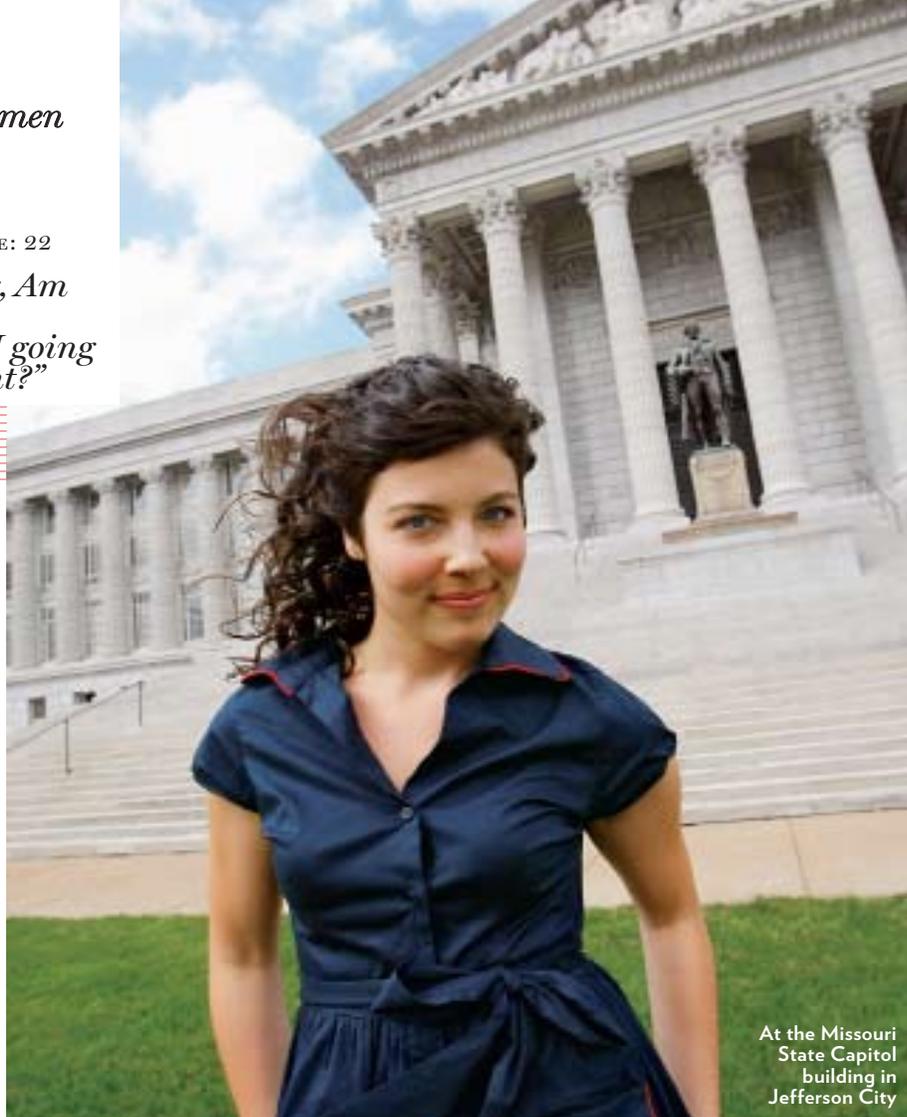
Laura Merritt

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI | AGE: 22

"I remember thinking, Am I going to let this disease beat me, or am I going to stand up and fight?"

What changed her life: At 15, Merritt's rheumatoid arthritis was so bad, she couldn't move even to lift a pencil, eat or speak.

What happened next: Merritt regained mobility. She now manages her symptoms with medication, and is determined to help find a cure. As a freshman, she founded I Am, a nonprofit that promotes stem cell research, which is restricted in many states. "I got so mad when I read that tens of millions of people could benefit from this research but aren't," says Merritt, a devout Christian who often must defend her beliefs against those who say research on embryonic cells is immoral. In 2006 Merritt's group launched a public relations campaign to help pass a state amendment enabling stem cell research. Now the Truman Scholar is taking I Am to campuses nationwide. **Where she'll be in 10 years:** Leading a national health coalition.



At the Missouri State Capitol building in Jefferson City

In New York City, where she interned this summer



THE HEAD OF THE CLASS

Danielle Allen

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL | AGE: 21

"I am proof that hard work pays off and that you can overcome circumstance."

What changed her life: Getting a standing ovation at her high school graduation for receiving \$1.1 million in scholarship offers, a rarity in her school, where it was common for students to drop out before senior year. "I watched my class dwindle from 330 students to 120 by graduation," she says. **What happened next:** Allen, who grew up poor in a high-crime area in Monroe, North Carolina, focused on creating more success stories like hers. As a freshman, she helped research families' attitudes on public education for the Council on African American Affairs. Allen has also taught English to low-income, college-bound students in Texas. "There was nothing better than to see them have 'aha!' moments when they realized that hard work reaps reward," says the Truman Scholar. **Words she lives by:** "Love where you've been, where you're going and, most important, who you are."

THE DAREDEVIL

Lindsey Robinson

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY | AGE: 21

"I have learned that every second of free fall is a lifetime of discovery."

What changed her life: Looking down from an airplane at 4,500 feet, preparing for her very first skydiving jump, "I was so nervous," she recalls, "but as I stepped out into the wind, my nerves gave way to excitement." **What happened next:** Robinson, an electrical engineering major, has since completed 280 jumps and is on the Academy's parachuting team, Wings of Blue (they recently set a collegiate record for a 41-person free fall skydiving formation!). The Ohio native, who was homeschooled, is making a difference on campus, too: She helped start the Academy's Engineers Without Borders chapter, tutors African refugees and runs a homeless outreach program. "I want to empower others to reach their potential," she says. **Words she lives by:** "You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough."



After a skydive in Arizona last spring

THE NATURALIST

Gabby Salazar

BROWN UNIVERSITY | AGE: 21

"Pictures really are worth a thousand words—they have the power to effect change."

What changed her life: One day when she was 11, Salazar's father handed her his camera and pointed her toward birds in a neighbor's yard. "In just a few seconds, I became a photographer," she says. **What happened next:** Salazar has won more than a dozen nature-photography competitions and founded a national magazine, *Nature's Best Photography for Kids*, which she edits from her dorm room. Her goal: to promote environmentalism by showcasing the beauty of the natural world. "To care about protecting the environment, you have to love it first," she says. The straight-A science and society major spent last summer teaching and photographing wildlife in the Smoky Mountains and the Badlands and has donated her images to help preserve those areas. **Words she lives by:** "Well-behaved women seldom make history."

Near the Smoky Mountains in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, photographing wildflowers



ROBINSON: BROOKS CRANE. SALAZAR: COURTESY OF GABBY SALAZAR AND BILL CAMPBELL

THE PERFORMER

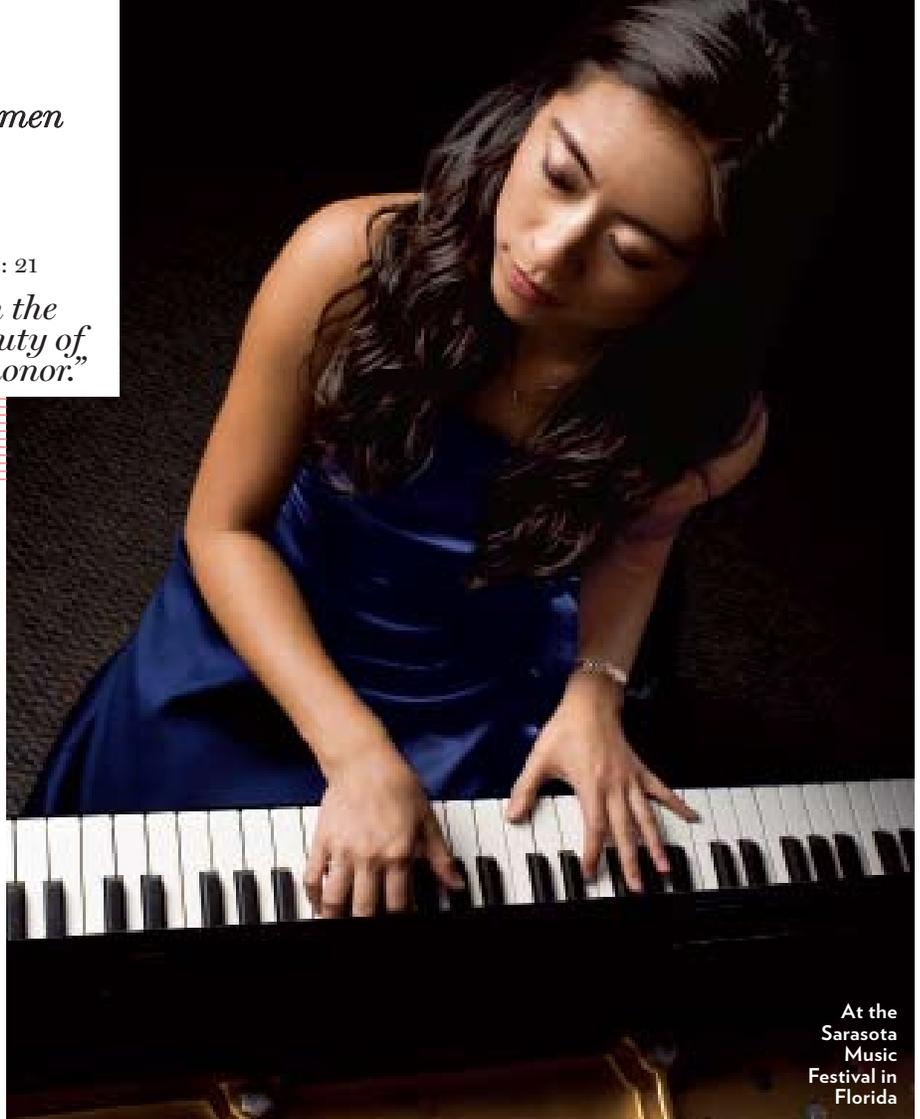
Pauline Yang

UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA | AGE: 21

“Exposing children in the Middle East to the beauty of music is an incredible honor.”

What changed her life: As a high school junior, Yang, an accomplished pianist who soloed at Carnegie Hall at 11, had to make a tough decision: lead her school’s award-winning model U.N. program, or prepare for the National Chopin Piano Competition (“the Olympic trials for piano”). Yang postponed the competition until 2010.

What happened next: She realized she could pursue both politics and music: The New Jersey native has interned for Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and is an ambassador for Music in Me, a nonprofit that brings music to kids in the Middle East—all while practicing piano up to six hours a day. This summer, she went to Taiwan, her parents’ homeland, to work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on using classical music to bridge cultural divides. **True confession:** “My roommate pelts me with pillows to wake me up!”



At the
Sarasota
Music
Festival in
Florida

THE COMEBACK

Lalita Booth

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL
FLORIDA | AGE: 27

“I know it’s dorky, but every day I walk on campus I want to cry—I’m so grateful to be there.”

What changed her life: Six years ago, Booth was a 21-year-old high school dropout and single mom who’d spent nearly a year homeless. Unable to support her two-year-old son, she sent him to live with his grandparents. “Watching his tiny hand wave goodbye was the most painful thing I’ve ever experienced,” says the North Carolina native. **What happened next:** She convinced a financial planner to work with her for free. Armed with a get-ahead strategy, Booth soon landed a job as a tax advocate, making enough to bring her son home. Then she enrolled in community college, where she became debate team captain. In 2006 Booth started Lighthouse for Dreams, a nonprofit that teaches financial literacy to students. Now the Truman Scholar is aiming for her next degree at Harvard University. **Words she lives by:** “You can have either a great excuse or a great story.”



On the UCF
campus in
Orlando, Florida

THE CAMPAIGNER

Rebecca Buckwalter-Poza

HARVARD UNIVERSITY | AGE: 22

“Some people become the doctors that cure cancer—for me, it’s about finding solutions through policy.”

What changed her life: In 2004 Buckwalter-Poza visited Honduras on an aid mission. She was shocked at the devastation still evident from Hurricane Mitch, which had struck six years earlier. “To me, there were so many examples of how government could have responded more effectively to this disaster,” she says. **What happened next:** The government major interned in the office of former Clinton adviser James Carville, helping to teach public policy classes and facilitate foreign elections. Now the Durham, North Carolina, native is taking a semester off to work for the Progressive Accountability Office, a research organization. **Where she’ll be in 10 years:** “Hopefully on my way to becoming White House chief of staff!” **True confession:** “When I was seven I was Murphy Brown for Halloween—total geek.”

At the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C.

THE CANCER RESEARCHER

Ritika Samant

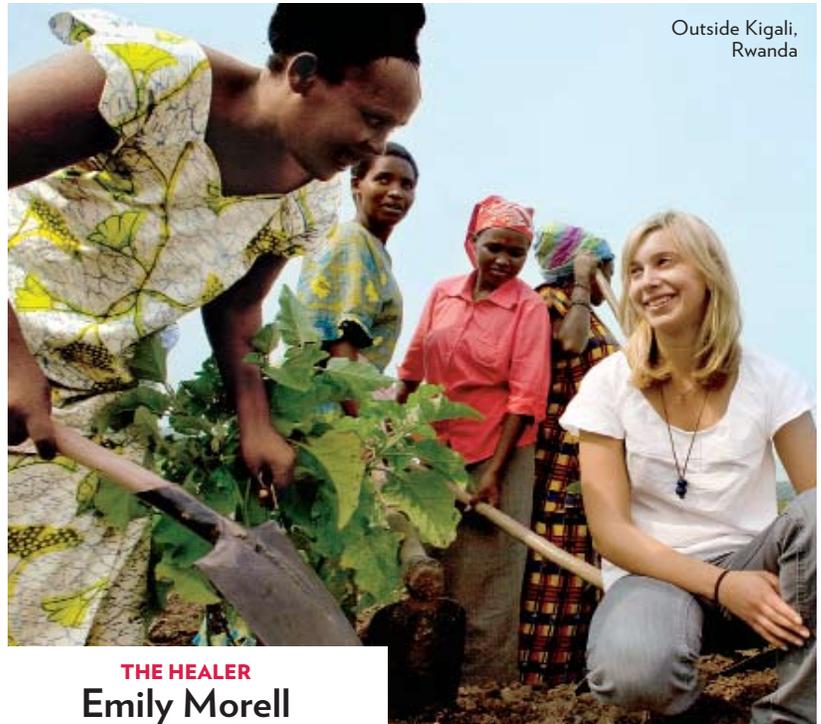
UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE | AGE: 21

“As a medical researcher, I can help someone in New York City and in a remote village in India.”

What changed her life: Volunteering in a hospital in her parents’ homeland of India last year inspired Samant to devote her career to cancer research. “I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount and complexity of the suffering there and wanted to help,” she says. **What happened next:** Back at school, the biological sciences major hit the lab and devoted 20 hours a week to studying cancer metastasis. In 2007 the Beckman and Goldwater Scholar winner took first prize at a national symposium for her work on cancer proteins. Samant is also passionate about Indian fusion dance, which combines traditional and hip-hop styles—the campus team she founded even won first place at a national competition. **True confession:** “Sometimes when I’m alone in the lab, I put on my iPod and come up with new moves while I work.”



In the lab on the University of Delaware campus



Outside Kigali,
Rwanda

THE HEALER

Emily Morell

YALE UNIVERSITY | AGE: 21

“It hit me that the problem we had to deal with first in treating HIV/AIDS patients was lack of food.”

What changed her life: In 2006, while studying HIV/AIDS treatment in Rwanda, Morell, a neurobiology major, noticed a fundamental flaw in the system: Because so many Rwandans suffer from malnutrition, potentially lifesaving antiretroviral drugs were often ineffective in slowing the disease. **What happened next:** The Oakland, California, native cofounded Gardens for Health International, a nonprofit that enables impoverished, HIV positive Rwandans to raise higher nutrient crops and provides nutritional education. So far, GHI is working with a few thousand

Rwandans and has acquired 30 acres of farmland for growing kale, carrots, cabbage and mangoes, among other crops. Morell’s project has even received support from the William J. Clinton Foundation. The Truman Scholar, who plans to go to medical school, credits her family—especially her three international activist grandmothers—for inspiring her to travel the globe in the service of others. **True confession:** “I’m afraid of flying, like hands-gripping-the-person-next-to-me scared!”

HONORABLE MENTION: Rosanna Myers
DUKE UNIVERSITY | AGE: 22

In 2007 this political science–French–European studies major started The Green Cooling Group, a company that provides technology to make water coolers more efficient. ■

EVLYN HOCKSTEIN/POLARIS

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