

By Shirley Gilbert

It's hard to imagine a more deserving AAUW Fremont Branch scholarship winner than Phoebe Liang.

Phoebe was awarded a \$1,000 grant in our local scholarship competition. We give the recognition to outstanding female students who are in a community college and who intend to transfer to a four-year university.

In order to accomplish this, our branch has been connected with the Ohlone Foundation for two years. Member Alison Kieft, in charge of local scholarships, and members of her team read all the applications submitted online and evaluate them.

Winning candidate Phoebe Liang transferred from Ohlone College to UC Berkeley this summer and is majoring in business. She is from Guangzhou, China (near Hong Kong) and has been in the U.S. for four years.

“In the deserving category, Phoebe has maintained a 4.0 GPA, and speaks and copes with English extremely well. As president of Ohlone's International Club, she has worked hard at making life easier for international students like herself including arranging for tutoring, helping to get more counseling help for them and planning fundraisers, welcome parties and even a singing competition.

Wrote Phoebe in her application essay for the AAUW scholarship about the plight of the international student: “With no cars, no friends and no parents nearby, international students are homesick and lonely when they first come to the U.S. Every semester, I volunteer to assist the International Office with new student orientations, serve as a welcome ambassador, and recruit my friends to help out as well.”

The pretty Berkeley junior with the delightfully engaging smile studied English in high school in China but didn't have much of a chance to speak it in her native country. “I was so nervous for the first month or so,” said Phoebe with a pained expression, “but I spoke as much as possible and gained more confidence as I went along.”

Phoebe's parents came to Fremont from China with her in 2005 and live in Fremont. She rents a room in Berkeley during the week and comes home to her family on weekends. “My parents,” added Phoebe, “asked me to come and study in America. They feel that education is better here and I think they are right.”

The reason Phoebe feels that education is a notch better in America — at least at Ohlone College and UC Berkeley — is that most of the studying in China is done literally by the book. Students are required to read a text book and are tested on what is in the book.

“In China,” she said, “there is no real-life experience. It’s all by the book. But in my business courses in Berkeley we get together in teams and work together to experience life and write about it.”

Another difference, according to Phoebe, is that in China, young people work very hard to get into university. But once they are accepted they no longer have to study as hard and sail on to graduation.

“At Berkeley,” said Phoebe, “there is no way out -- you have to work hard. It’s very challenging and tough. At first I was overwhelmed and stressed. My fellow students are smart and competitive and if you want good grades you really have to study hard. I started in August and am now more comfortable and less stressed but still working very hard.”

Phoebe learned about the AAUW Fremont Branch scholarship from the Ohlone Foundation, submitted her application online and sent a transcript of her grades along with two letters of recommendations.

“She is so grateful for the help. “I want to thank the people who awarded me this scholarship,” said Phoebe. “\$1,000 is a lot of money for me and it helped pay for so many things in my education including my rent for a room in Berkeley. I don’t know how I would have managed without it.”

I asked Phoebe if she noted any differences between the lives of women in China and the lives of women in the U.S.

Women in China work, said Phoebe, as they do in America. But women bear most of the responsibility for the family in China as opposed to the men. “It’s the women in China,” she said, “who make certain the children are well and take care of the house. Here women seem more independent and don’t have to focus completely on the family. They get help from their husbands.”

Once she graduates, Phoebe hopes to continue her education by earning a Masters Degree. She would then like to obtain a position helping with the environment. The whole issue of becoming green, she feels, is extremely important for society both here and in China.

You just know that, looking at Phoebe’s eager and earnest face, she will accomplish anything she sets out to do.