

PhD graduate is first Sun Devil ever to win prestigious Stanford Knight-Hennessy Scholarship

Samantha Harker, who began college at age 14, will specialize in helping people with autism

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

Samantha Harker, who has been taking college classes since the age of 14, graduated with her PhD in neuroscience from Arizona State University this month — but she's not done with college yet.

Harker, 22, has won the prestigious Stanford Knight-Hennessy Scholarship, which covers tuition for a graduate degree at Stanford University. She will pursue a master's degree in genetic counseling — a focus that will propel her in a career that combines research and clinical work with people who have been diagnosed with autism.

She is the first Stanford Knight-Hennessy Scholar from ASU and was among 87 winners nationwide. The scholars were [announced](#) May 12.

As someone who has been diagnosed with autism, her passion comes from personal experience.

Harker, who is from Anaheim, California, is gifted in mathematics. When she was 15, she memorized 1,294 digits of pi and then gave a [TEDx talk](#) about it. She described the bullying she faced in childhood in a [blog post](#) for the Organization for Autism Research.

Last year, when Amazon Prime Video was seeking contestants for its second season of "Beast Games," a "Survivor"-type competition for "the world's smartest people," Harker applied. Her video

application showed her reciting about 150 digits of pi from memory. The [show](#) debuted in January.

Harker started taking community college classes at the age of 14, graduated from high school at 16 and earned two bachelor's degrees simultaneously at age 18 — a [degree in English](#) from ASU Online through the Starbucks College Achievement Plan and a degree in medical humanities from the University of Health Sciences and Pharmacy in St. Louis.

She estimated she has won more than 50 scholarships and fellowships over the years. For the Knight-Hennessy, she received help from the [Lorraine W. Frank Office of National Scholarships Advisement](#).

"They've really supported me through almost every single scholarship I've ever applied for," she said, adding that the office also helped her with grant applications.

"It was really awesome to have their office give me that support as I was going through all the stages of the process."

Harker is excited to specialize her studies at Stanford, where the degree program is individualized.

"They're very supportive of people coming from an untraditional background and using that perspective to guide how they learn," she said.

"They encourage students to take electives and branch out into their passion projects. That was something that really enticed me — that they will allow me to embrace the interest that I'm bringing into the program, which is centered in autism.

"It's this global network of leaders from around the world who all come in with these varying perspectives, and you collaborate together on really big projects and help try to make momentum in areas that you're passionate about."

Harker answered some questions from ASU News about her journey.

Question: Why did you choose ASU and your major?

Answer: I chose to go to ASU because they do really amazing work in the autism and aging area, and specifically with autistic women. And as somebody who was diagnosed when I was younger, I really wanted to pursue research and to help make resources that didn't exist when I was first diagnosed and really bring more attention to autistic women.

The [Autism and Brain Aging Laboratory](#), where I do my PhD work, has one of the largest representations of autistic women in the world, and also one of the largest longitudinal autism and brain aging studies in the world as well.

Q: Were there faculty members who were particularly influential?

A: Yes, [Dr. Blair Braden](#) and [Dr. Candace Lewis](#). Both of them were very influential in me choosing ASU.

In the English department, there were so many great professors, and some of them I still talk to today. [Laura Cruser](#) has been a really big help in writing and integrating writing with science.

Q: What's something you learned at ASU that surprised you or changed your perspective?

A: One of the things that surprised me at ASU and kind of changed my perspective was just how welcoming everyone is. I think everyone at ASU is so open to collaboration and supporting each other, and it's a really helpful environment. And when you have so many people trying to pour those beliefs into you that you can achieve whatever you want to, it breeds success. It's really helpful to feel cared for.

Q: Do you have a favorite spot on campus?

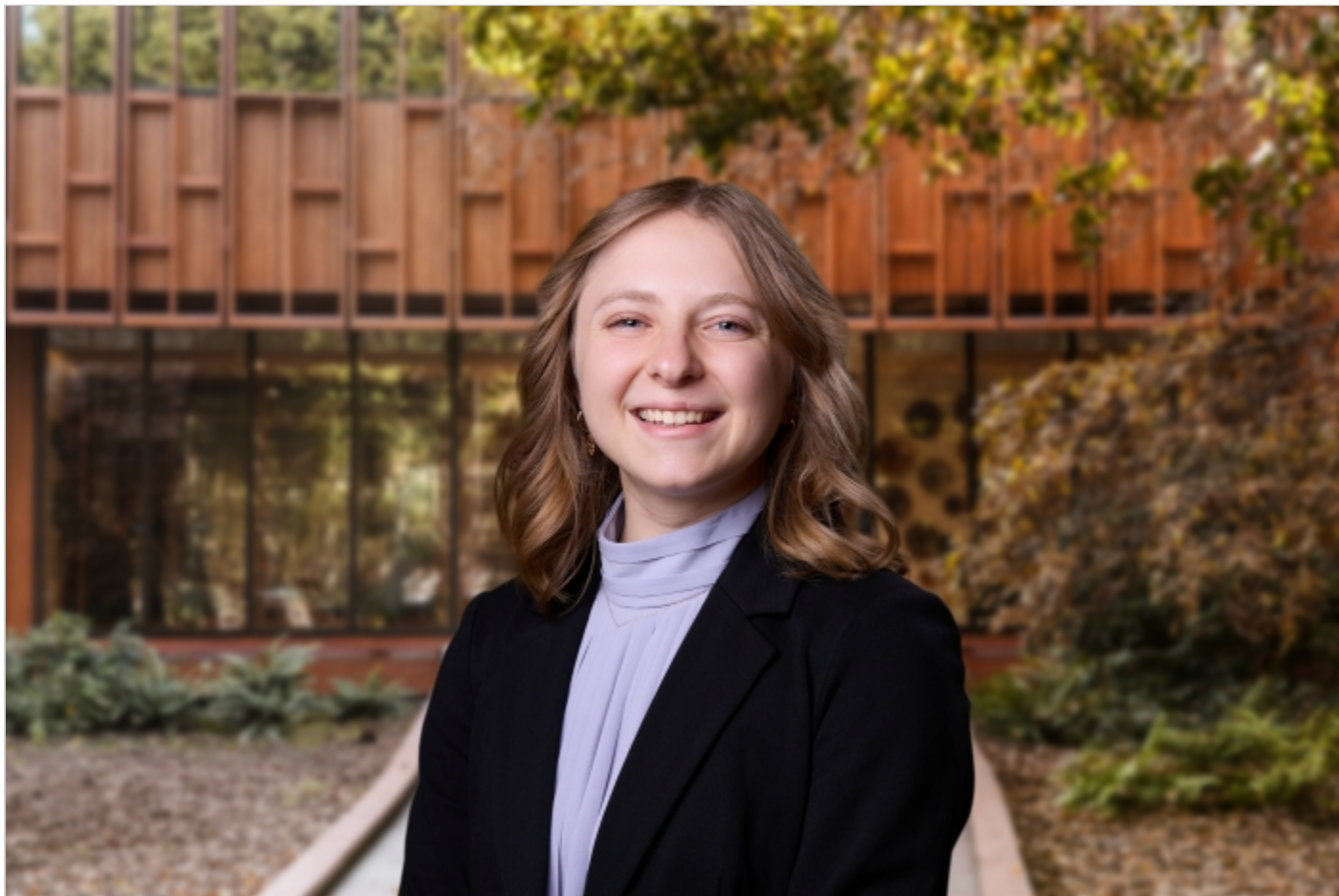
A: I think my favorite spot on the Tempe campus is probably Hayden Library. On the downtown campus it's the former Taylor Place (now Gordon Commons), the road that has a bunch of really pretty trees with flowers on them.

Q: Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

A: I haven't exactly pinned down what I want to do after I finish this next degree, but I know the gist will be between the clinic and research. I hope to be someone that can translate research findings to the clinic faster and make sure that I can communicate on both ends and use the knowledge and both capacities to really serve autistic people.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



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