

# WHICH PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IS THE ONLY ONE WITH TWO TRUMAN SCHOLARS?

By Terry Skinner



**THAT'S RIGHT. OL' MIZZOU.**

Two Truman Scholars give Mizzou something in common with the likes of Harvard, Dartmouth and Yale. They're the only other universities to have two students' winning the coveted prizes.

Sonja Steptoe, left, of Litcher, La., and Peggy Israel of Ballwin, Mo., received the piece de resistance of undergraduate scholarships for Mizzou. A Harry S Truman Scholarship, offered to at least one student per state and 26 scholars-at-large, covers educational expenses

up to \$5,000 a year for four years as the student prepares for a career in public service. The scholarship foundation was established by Congress in 1977 as the official memorial to the 33rd President.

**"THERE'S NO QUESTION** that this scholarship is the most prestigious undergraduate scholarship," says Ted Tarkow, director of the Honors College. "It's like winning a bowl game."

Having Truman Scholars on Campus doesn't exactly hurt Tarkow's recruitment of National



Merit Scholars, either. "They attract other honor students who in turn do well in national competition. The end result is that the University gains confidence in itself."

Tarkow, an enthusiastic backer of opportunities for gifted students, says Steptoe and Israel are "more gifted in more ways than any student I can recall meeting on this Campus."

John Kuhlman, a popular teacher who has had both students in honors economics classes, agrees. "These women have several things in common that made them good candidates for the Truman Scholarship," he says. "They are both extremely bright, and they have an incredible amount of composure and won't lose their cool in a strange environment. They are active on Campus and don't just sit at meetings, but ask questions and present ideas."

**BOTH STUDENTS EXUDE A CONFIDENCE** that belies their youthful 20 years, but it hasn't always been that way. "I took speech and drama in high school to try to get over being so shy," says Israel, an economics and mathematics major. "If you put conscious effort into it, you can overcome it."

Steptoe's sense of humor blossomed in college. "In high school I was known as a 'stone face' because I never smiled. Here at Mizzou I've sort of let my hair down, even though I just got it cut recently," she says, grinning at the obvious pun.

That confidence was a necessary ingredient for passing the tough interviews required of scholarship candidates.

Israel, nominated for the scholarship by her advisor, Walter Johnson, was in the driver's seat for her interview with eight Kansas City civic, business and academic leaders. "I decided I would control it," says the Parkway West High School graduate. "I kept it light, answered the questions straight and made some jokes."

Israel, a merit scholar and Arts and Science student government president, is using her scholarship to prepare for a career in the Justice Department.

**STEPTOE'S INTERVIEW** wasn't quite as enjoyable as Israel's. "Intense" is how she describes it. "Sometimes the panel challenged the answers to my questions. I had to show all sides of an argument and then support my side."

Steptoe, nominated for the scholarship by Kuhlman, will study business and public administration

at the graduate level with plans to work for a regulatory agency or cabinet-level department. "A big problem in government is communication with business. There needs to be effective communication between these two branches so the adversary relationship that often exists can be eliminated."

"I would like to function as a liaison or press secretary," Steptoe, a journalism and economics major, continues. "I told the Truman committee I would take Hodding Carter's job. I really admire him."

Steptoe, who came to Mizzou because of the School of Journalism's reputation, feels the Truman Scholarship has opened doors, like those of the *Wall Street Journal* where she worked as an intern this summer. "I would have been content with being a reporter," she notes, "but my parents always said try if the opportunity is there. One thing I got from my family was the inspiration to achieve."

In addition to tough interviews, the students wrote 600-word essays. Steptoe explored the profits tax on the oil industry while Israel's essay was called "Developing Guidelines for Conglomerate Mergers."

Although an enviable position, sitting in the "best student" chair isn't always a slice of heaven. But Israel and Steptoe both have found ways to release the tensions and anxieties that accompany sustained mental exercise.

Religion, something that "sort of eroded away in college," again has become a priority in Israel's life. "I go on hikes to separate myself from everything else I've been doing," she says. "It makes me feel closer to God."

**WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH** for Steptoe, she heads for the tennis courts. "My game has improved a lot since I came here, and when I popped a string recently, I knew I had arrived," she laughs.

It's just a matter of time now for Mizzou's two Truman Scholars to climb the ladder of success, possibly symbolized by the Jesse Hall fire escape they climbed to get photographed for this story.

It was Israel who suggested the location, actually. "I've always wanted to get on top of Jesse Hall," she says.

Steptoe found the ordeal "petrifying. The roof is at an angle — I thought we were going to slide off the side."

Nobody said success comes easy. □