1998

TWO LAUREATES have been selected in the 17th year of Tau Beta Pi’s annual program. The 1998 Laureates are: Guang-Ien Cheng, Massachusetts Beta ’97, honored for his distinguished contributions to liberal culture in engineering colleges." A committee appointed by the President considered his outstanding achievements in the fields of public service to others, and campus leadership. No more than five Laureates may be named. Guang-Ien Cheng’s distinct diversity of interests was evidenced early by his love for reading, his academic excellence in mathematics, and his participation in Chinese school, where he learned Mandarin, martial arts, and traditional dances and produced a newsletter called the Dragon Journal.

Ien’s contributions to liberal culture at MIT have been equally wide-ranging. He entered the institute in 1993 and graduated four years later with a B.S. in computer science and minors in mathematics and creative writing. He studied algorithms, complexity theory, probability theory, multi-threaded parallelism, A.I., software engineering, signal processing, computer architecture, and digital microprocessor electronics. This past spring he earned a master’s degree in electrical engineering and computer science.

Ien loves to teach; he has tutored, graded, written problem sets for algorithms class, and served as a graduate teaching assistant. He tells his introduction to computer science class students that “you need to know something about poetry before you can write good programs.”

Besides his responsibilities in the EECS department, he has volunteered in several settings, teaching verbal skills for SAT preparation in Boston’s Chinatown and remedial math one summer in an urban Washington, DC, high school. For the past three spring breaks, he has taught science and technology classes in urban schools in the Bronx, NY; Patterson, NJ; and San Juan, PR.

But it is at the nexus of science and the humanities that his talents are illuminated. He is passionate about literature, enjoys writing, and is a bibliophile. The institute’s school of humanities annually selects a group of 25 promising sophomores and juniors to be Burchard scholars; Ien was one. In his senior year he won both Kelly prizes for the best research essays in the humanities — one for his paper on “Experiencing Donne’s An Anatomy of the World” and his essay on “The Catholic Church and Human Evolution.” His personal essay on the delights of writing, “Red Mechanical Pencil,” won the 1995 Alpha Delta Phi library competition in nonfiction. Ien’s paper “On Learning to Read Spanish Poetry” and some of his own poems were published in the campus literary magazine Rune.

Ien has helped edit a book on poverty being written by the director of the Boston Rescue Mission; he volunteered there weekly from 1994-96. For the Tau Beta Pi Massachusetts Beta Chapter, he drafted a declaration of values which each member affirms preceding their initiation, and he created a hymn of praise entitled “The Engineer’s Song.”

Sharing his love for diversity, he cofounded the institute’s 1997-98 Leonardo da Vinci dinner series, which featured fine international cuisine and faculty lecturers who presented topics as wide-ranging as physics, wines, architecture, chess, biotechnology, and poetry. Last spring, he assumed full responsibility for managing the dinners, which reached an attendance of 100.

Ien is among 38 American students chosen as 1998 British Marshall scholars. He will spend his two-year award studying at Cambridge University, earning a B.A. in English literature. Afterward, he may join his love for the humanities and computer engineering in yet another incarnation, such as electronic publishing, higher-education administration, or an occupation involving the history of science and technology.

Guang-Ien Cheng, MA B ’97

THE BENT of Tau Beta Pi