

Meet the Three Greenwood Grant Awardees, Part I

By James Sprague

In late September, the American Watchmakers-Clockmakers Institute's Education, Library, and Museum Trust (AWCI-ELM Trust) announced the three awardees of the 2024 Greenwood Memorial Fund Grant, a grant offered annually by the ELM Trust for students attending full-time watchmaking or clockmaking schools that participate in the AWCI Research and Education Council (REC).

Three grants of \$2,000 cash were given to those three deserving students who not only demonstrated a passion for horology, but also took long, circuitous journeys to becoming a watchmaking student.

This is the first of three profiles of those students—Boris London and Gabriel Covarrubias of North Seattle College Watch Technology Institute, and Matthew Smith of Paris Junior College—who were awarded the 2024 Greenwood Memorial Fund Grant. Learn about their amazing paths to watchmaking at Paris Junior College and North Seattle College Watch Technology Institute, and the interesting lives they have led up until this point.

Profiles on Covarrubias and Smith will be published in the December 2024 and January 2025 issues of *Horological Times*, respectively.

Boris London, Watchmaking Student, North Seattle College Watch Technology Institute

Boris London, 27, is originally from Boston, Massachusetts, and is a first-generation American, as both of his Russian-Jewish parents immigrated to the US



Boris London, a watchmaking student at North Seattle College Watch Technology Institute, who was one of the three awardees of the AWCI ELM Trust Greenwood Memorial Fund Grant.

from St. Petersburg, Russia. Not only is he a first-generation American, but a veteran of the United States Marines Corps, where he served as an infantryman in the 4th Marine Division beginning in 2016.

According to London, watchmaking was something he longed to do for some time, and after his honorable discharge from the military and a few years working back home in Boston, chose to finally pursue it.

"Watches have been a part of my life since childhood," he wrote. "Like many boys, I had many hobbies that came and went, from toy cars to Legos,

and eventually bicycles and pocketknives. Nothing, however, made as significant of an impression on me as wristwatches. From a very early age, I was fascinated by them.

“All of my role models (including action movie stars) wore watches,” he continued. “I was told that a man must always wear a watch if he is to be taken seriously by the world. My father wears a Cartier Pasha that his wife gave him for his 30th birthday. As a boy who rarely got to see his father, the image of his powerful hand and the dainty little steel watch above it seared itself into my psyche.”

His father wasn’t the only one, according to London, who impacted his love and fascination with watches.

“My grandfather wore his old Soviet Vostok, and I watched him wind it every morning with his leathery, arthritic fingers before going fishing in the Charles River,” London commented. “I have a collection of my own now, a product of many years and countless hours of research, deliberation, and curation.”

London’s love of watches, in fact, can be traced back to World War II, his great-uncle Vladimir Sankin, and a Nazi internment camp.

“In 1939, he was drafted into the Red Army and fought in Finland. After returning from that tour of duty, he volunteered again and was sent to the Eastern Front, where he fought as a mortarman,” London said. “In 1942, he was captured by the German Army. Upon capture, the Soviet POWs were lined up and the Jews among them were ordered to step forward.

“It is hard to imagine the stress of identifying oneself as a Jew before an enemy, not knowing if it will be the last thing he does before being shot down in the street,” he continued. “Vladimir took one step forward and was spared an extrajudicial execution, but the consequences of his proclamation would be as grim as death itself. He was taken to a death camp called Fort IX, located in Kaunas, Lithuania.”

While imprisoned at that camp, London’s great-uncle was forced to operate burn pits until 1943, at which point Sankin and his fellow POWs hatched an escape plan.

“On December 25, 1943, a date specifically chosen because of the diminished guard presence, the 64 men put their bold plan into action and fled the camp,” London stated. “Vladimir and his friend, Shmuel Chananovich, walked east through the woods for four days, receiving assistance from local peasants.”

His great-uncle barely escaped capture by local police, and eventually found his way to a detachment of Lithuanian partisans, who he assimilated with and conducted guerilla combat operations with until the end of WWII. While with that group, he received a pocket watch, which London said would be the one watch he would save—out of the many he possesses—if his house ever caught fire.

“It is a beautiful gold-colored watch, with an exposed crystal and an ornate brass tassel hanging off the bail,” London said. “It features blued trefle hands and 24-hour time running along the minute track. Most interestingly, it has an inscription on the inside of the case back, which reads in Dutch that the watch had been presented to one Y.R. Paulus by the Diocese of Roermond in 1934.

“I received this watch from my uncle when I was still a young boy and used to open the case back and wind the watch to see it run, marveling at the spinning balance,” he continued. “I also inherited Vladimir’s gold Moskva wristwatch, which I wear on Christmas

to commemorate his actions. These timepieces not only served to introduce me to the world of horology but are artifacts connecting me to generations of Jewish ancestry, of which I am proud of now more than ever.”

After his service in the military, London found himself back at home in Boston, working road construction and doing volunteer work with the homeless community in nearby Lowell, Massachusetts, before deciding in 2023 to truly pursue his horological passion. He applied to North Seattle College’s Watch Technology Institute and proceeded to spend some time with Boston watchmaker Yuri Yudzinsky, owner of Yuri’s Watches in Boston, to learn the fundamentals of watch repair.

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~ Boris London

Once accepted to North Seattle College WTI, London and his wife picked up their belongings, hopped in their vehicle, and began the cross-country drive—including a pit stop at AWCI headquarters to visit the facility and the Orville R. Hagans History of Time Museum—before arriving in Seattle to formally begin his watchmaking career.

While London might exude drive and confidence, he admits he underestimated the financial element, and that a financial award such as the Greenwood Memorial Fund Grant will help make a huge difference.

“As excited as I am to embark on my watchmaking journey, I am certainly intimidated by its challenges,” he said. “I am confident that I will excel in my coursework and am looking forward with optimism towards the employment opportunities after graduation. The element I find most daunting is, of course, financial. My wonderful wife and I moved from Boston to Seattle, which is in itself a substantial burden. In addition to the cost of living and watchmaking tools, WTI is one of the only programs that is not free.

“Out-of-state tuition at North Seattle College is upward of \$20,000 a year, which will present a serious difficulty for us,” London continued.

Upon learning of his being named one of the three Greenwood grant awardees for 2024, London was, of course, ecstatic.

“This is absolutely incredible news! Thank you so very much for this honor,” he said. “We are very grateful to AWCI for offering these grants.”

It doesn't surprise Eric Wissemann, a longtime friend of London's who he first met in high school at the New York Military Academy, that London was one of the Greenwood recipients and would be pursuing a career in horology. In fact, London introduced Wissemann to the world of watches while in high school with him, and in turn made Wissemann a watch collector himself.

“This was not some fleeting pursuit of temporary entertainment that would be gone in a few months or years,” Wissemann wrote. “This was something I could tell he would become a lifelong enthusiast of. I had never been introduced to the culture of watches, and Boris showed me some of the pieces that he had collected over the years.

“The stories behind them, as well as the engineering and attention to detail they were made with, all fascinated me. The more he showed me, the more he drew me in until I finally bought my first entry-level watch in 2017,” Wissemann continued. “He has become my mentor in many aspects of collecting, and we frequently spend hours discussing what we want to add to our collections next, new releases, or introducing each other to unfamiliar brands.”

Now a decade later, Wissemann said no one can doubt London's love of horology and, specifically, watchmaking.

“I cannot only fully attest to Boris's love for watches, watchmaking, and the culture that surrounds it, but to his character as it had an incredible impact on my life,” he said. “His resiliency, amidst all other attributes, is what stands out most to me. Through the years, I have learned of and witnessed asperities that he has had to navigate through his life; many of which I'm not sure that I could have come out the other side with my chin held high. Yet, time and time again in the face of adversity, he finds his will to carry on . . . his willingness to go above and beyond without faltering is something I can only admire.

“I cannot think of anyone more deserving of this [grant] than this young man,” Wissemann concluded.

So far in his first semester at North Seattle College WTI, it appears London is pursuing it with the same reverence, appreciation, and zest that he has in all his previous endeavors.

“School is going well and I'm really enjoying myself,” London said. “It is everything I thought it would be and more, and I am running for [vice president] of our local AWCI Affiliate Chapter.”

That sounds just like London, said Seth Corliss, a former co-worker of London's back in Boston.

“His ability to set and accomplish ambitious goals has not only benefited himself but has also been a motivating factor and inspiration to those around him,” Corliss said.

Given those qualities, something says that AWCI, and the watchmaking world, has not seen the last of this young, driven watchmaker-in-waiting.