

# 2025 Pounamu Taonga Award Recipient-GR

## Laura Mueller

Prince George, B.C. – When Laura Mueller began her Master of Business Administration (MBA) at UNBC, she was focused on a single goal: to create the kinds of supports she never had.

At 16, Mueller became her own legal guardian. She finished high school while living on social assistance, navigating systems that offered no budgeting help, no counselling and no life-skills training. The challenges she faced weren’t isolated—they revealed deeper systemic issues she’s now committed to addressing.

“Those supports still don’t exist the way they need to,” she said. “Indigenous youth are still overrepresented in both care and recovery systems. That’s what pushed me to pursue this degree.”

Now graduated with her MBA, Mueller has received the 2025 Pounamu Taonga (Greenstone Treasure) Award, which honours an Indigenous student each year for academic excellence, leadership and community engagement. For Mueller, the recognition is both affirming and deeply personal.

“Both of my parents attended residential day school. My mom has a grade six education,” she said. “Throughout my studies, I heard again and again how much it means for people to see Indigenous students succeeding. I’ve never seen myself as a leader, but I realized that leadership is really about making space for others to walk the path too.”

During her time at UNBC, Mueller worked on several applied research projects that deepened her interest in social systems and community transformation. She also discovered a new academic focus: systems thinking, particularly in relation to financial structures, equity and Indigenous governance.

Alongside her coursework, Mueller became a key member of the First Nations Centre, serving as a Graduate Student Assistant and supporting the Campus Cousins mentorship program. What began as an opportunity to learn about peer mentorship quickly became something more.

“The Centre became my second home on campus. A place I could go when the weight of academia felt heavy,” she said. “Within that community, I found the freedom to be fully myself. I wouldn’t be where I am—or ready for what’s next—without the mentorship I received from the leaders in that space.”

That next step is already in motion. In Fall 2025, Mueller will begin her PhD in Natural Resources and Environmental Studies at UNBC. Her research will explore ways to interrupt generational poverty through financial systems while reclaiming traditional Indigenous governance models to inform policy and planning.

“There’s no other university in the world that would have given me this kind of opportunity,” she said. “The program took a chance on me, and the support I received—from faculty, from the Centre, from peers—made all the difference.”

Mueller acknowledges that the path hasn’t been easy. Living with complex trauma shaped many aspects of her life and academic experience. But it also taught her how to use her voice—and how to help others find theirs.

“I’ve spent more than 15 years on my healing journey,” she said. “I’ve learned how to advocate for myself, and in doing that, I’ve learned how to advocate for others. I’ve come to understand that my voice is my superpower.”

