Curiosity about the world made a lifelong explorer of the late Thomas W. Rivers. As a boy, he was already an adventurer, setting out by homemade raft to drift along the Tar River near his Greenville home. He joined the Merchant Marines, Peace Corps, and U.S. Navy’s “Seabees” Construction Battalions, traveling around the world and inviting people from other countries into his home.

Before his death in 1985, the civil engineer established a scholarship at ECU so students could taste the world beyond eastern North Carolina. “He was always interested in people in foreign countries and their cultures,” remembers his daughter, Helen R. McLawhorn of Seagrove, North Carolina. “He enjoyed meeting them and opening the doors of the community to them. It was important for him.”

The Thomas W. Rivers Foreign Exchange Award recognizes three students as proud representatives of the university, community, and nation and supports their study in faraway places. “Any time you go abroad you learn so much,” says Rivers recipient Christi Russell ’07, who used her award to study business and Spanish in Chile as part of her master’s in business administration degree.

The award allowed Alex Hirst ’07 to spend a semester in Belize studying environmental sciences. “It was an awesome experience,” he says. He’s now enrolled in ECU’s international studies master’s degree program and hopes to improve global environmental understanding.

Another recipient is Jessica Cox, who says the award enabled her to study Sweden’s approach to social health needs as a student there. Because of the award, she was able to bring her small daughter, who attended a Swedish kindergarten while her mother studied nursing and health education. “There were many obstacles, but the Rivers Award helped make it possible,” she says.

These kinds of stories probably would have made Rivers smile.

“Getting more people interested in foreign exchange was something he wanted as his legacy,” his daughter says. “That was something he really wanted to leave behind.”