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# 'There is hope:' Catholic Central student scholarship



T A M A R H A R R I S

[More from Tamar Harris](#)

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Jomanah Chahrour has already moved halfway around the world, and now her studies are quite literally taking her to the stars.

Chahrour and her family lived in Syria until 2011, when they were forced to flee the civil war ravaging the country. When Chahrour came to Canada, she could not speak English fluently, she missed her home and she was terrified for

her loved ones still living in the midst of a brutal civil war.

Today, the 19-year-old is weeks away from graduating from Catholic Central High School, and plans to attend McMaster University in the fall.

And Chahrour was recently one of 25 students in Canada to be awarded a \$80,000 Schulich Leader Scholarship.

The scholarship is awarded annually: 25 engineering students receive a \$100,000 award and 25 science, technology and math students are awarded \$80,000. Students are nominated by their high schools, and select candidates are awarded the scholarship by partner universities.

Chahrour was nominated by Christena Slivocka from Catholic Central's guidance department. She's the first Catholic Central student to receive the award.

"For like two weeks, every morning, I'd wake up and check the email just in case I was dreaming," Chahrour said. "I was still worried the whole time. What if it's actually not happening?"

But it is happening — and Chahrour's friends and teachers say there is no one more deserving.



Academic excellence is one of the scholarship's requirements, which Chahrour easily meets with a 94 per cent in chemistry, 98 per cent in physics, 92 per cent in calculus and an 82 in functions.

But the scholarship is also a measure of perseverance.

"You have to really work hard toward your dreams," Chahrour said. "I think nobody would have thought I would go to McMaster (or) get this scholarship, when I first came."

Chahrour's family initially arrived in Edmonton, where they lived for a year and a half.

It was a hard time for Chahrour. She learned English grammar in Syria but couldn't speak fluently, which made making friends in her new home difficult.

Watching the devastation in Syria from afar also took a toll.

"Over the summer, I literally knew the name and the number of every person who died in a day," Chahrour said.

"That's how much I was into it. And I wanted to know, because I was hoping that it would end soon. But it never did.

"So I was like, oh my god, I have to stop watching the news. And since I stopped, I've been feeling better. Because it's depressing to see your friends, your family, people you've seen in the streets, just be tortured and die."

Chahrour's family lived in Damascus, Syria's capital. She said some parts of the city were untouched by the war.

"But other areas, like where I lived, the protestors used to walk just in front of my house," she said. "And the police

and soldiers would come with guns, and they would chase them. It was violent.

“They would even threaten you if they see you on the window. If they see you in the street — they just take you.”

Chahrour’s mother stopped letting her attend school in Damascus because the five-minute walk was too dangerous. Chahrour called that time in her life “really terrifying.”

Still, leaving Syria was difficult, and Chahrour didn’t want to go.

“Of course, I didn’t know the risks of staying. My parents sort of had to drag me to the airplane. But now I appreciate being here — I really, really appreciate it.”

The family arrived in Canada on a visitor’s visa then applied for refugee status. Today, they’re permanent residents.

Chahrour’s immediate family settled in Windsor, except for her older brother who is currently studying in Barrie. Chahrour’s father owns Greek Town Pita on Ouellette Avenue, and her mother studies at triOS College. She also has two little siblings.

When Chahrour told her family about the scholarship, she said they were over the moon.

“They were so happy,” she said. “They were telling the whole universe about it.”

Chahrour’s passion for physics and space has remained a steady presence since her childhood, from Damascus to Edmonton, from Edmonton to Windsor, and from Kennedy High School to Catholic Central.

“In astronomy, you’re not touching anything,” she said. “When you’re doing simple physics like measuring speed, distance, stuff like that — you can just see it, time it, find out.

“But when you’re talking about space, it’s all observation and then thinking and coming up with theories. That is just amazing. It gives you the opportunity to be creative, because there is no impossible in physics. Anything can happen.”

Chahrour tutored her peers in math and sciences daily, during an after-school Youth First program at Catholic Central.

“I was telling Jomanah that she’s actually going to be viewed as a leader, someone who we will look to as Canadians, for the next generation of scientists,” said Heather Dupuis, the Youth First program co-ordinator.

“And how exciting is that? It’s amazing to think about. This is a win not only for her as a person — this is a scholarship for our entire community.”

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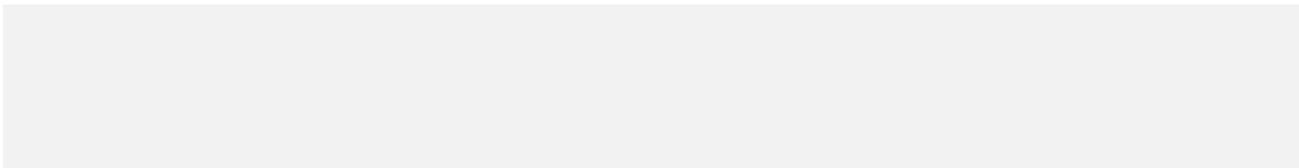


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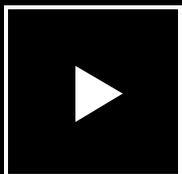
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