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Generation Next: Young scholar embraces new opportunities

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Special to Western News

Kyra Moura, a Birchmount Park Collegiate Institute graduate, arrives at Western in September to study Medical Sciences as one of Western's two Schulich Leader Scholarship winners.

Looking back, Kyra Moura knows it was a change for the better.

After almost a decade of competing nationally and internationally as a synchronized swimmer, Moura could no longer make it to practice, after her program relocated to the Toronto Pan Am Games Sports Centre earlier this year.

The new facility was too far from her house, and Moura, finishing high school in Toronto at the time, was already juggling homework, extra curricular activities and a part-time job as a waitress at a golf course.

But instead of freeing up her already busy schedule and quitting synchronized swimming – or 'synchro' – Moura opted to coach at the club where she started, Variety Village, a facility that offers membership to people with and without disabilities and promotes inclusion through integrated programs and services in Scarborough.

“At first, I was heart-broken because I wasn’t swimming anymore. And it was really hard to take that in. But I think coaching was better – almost,” she said.

The Birchmount Park Collegiate Institute graduate arrives at Western in September to study Medical Sciences as [one of Western’s two Schulich Leader Scholarship winners](#). [Niagara-on-the-Lake’s Dane Sisinni will enter Engineering this fall as Western’s other Schulich Leader Scholar](#).

Launched in 2012, this \$100 million scholarship fund provides 50 undergraduate scholarships each year, across top Canadian universities. The most promising students can pursue their dreams and become the next global pioneers in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). A similar program is conducted in Israel, where an additional 50 scholarships are awarded annually.

Twenty-five scholarships, valued at \$80,000 each, are designated for students pursuing an engineering degree, and the other 25, valued at \$60,000 each, are designated for students studying science, technology or math.

By shifting to coaching, Moura learned about herself and what she wanted to do after graduating from high school. At Variety Village, Moura started coaching young girls, one-on-one. She was eventually paired with a young girl who was autistic.

“She had been doing synchro for a couple of years, with a different coach, but that coach left and they needed someone new. I stepped in. She has severe autism, a strict schedule, doesn’t have many verbal skills. It took a long time to develop a routine with her,” Moura explained.

The club is a big facility and sounds would trigger attacks for the young girl. But through everything, it was rewarding to see the ‘little wins,’ day to day.

“We finally got something. It was perfect, she knew the routine, she was happy to see me when she came in, and then she had a seizure. And it shook everything up. It was terrible for the family and everything they’d been working towards. She was 16 and was set back 10 years.”

Almost five months later, Moura is starting to get back into routine with the girl. She’s now especially looking forward to her studies and being part of the Scholar’s Electives program on campus in the fall.

“I want to be able to help with that. It was tough for them (the family), and it was tough for me,” she said. “I would really like in the end to go to medical school and do some research in autism – I made a really special connection with this girl.”

Moura’s dedication to sport, both as an athlete and a coach, didn’t escape those around her. In her scholarship nomination letter, Variety Village synchro head coach Tory Colby wrote:

“This year, Kyra was matched with a young girl with Down’s syndrome who was new to swimming. Kyra continues to work closely with the athlete’s parents to find the best ways to help her improve and succeed. This young swimmer has already improved tremendously in a short period of time, and I attribute most of that success to Kyra’s kindness, consideration and especially her creativity in teaching.”

In school, Moura was part of BEAP (Birchmount Exceptional Athletes Program) and participated in a number of sports. She enjoyed all classes and excelled in everything, even earning a 100 per cent grade in four math classes, said Vasile, Radu, a teacher who likewise wrote a nomination letter on her behalf.

“Although Kyra is a very gifted student, I know she is also a hard worker as evident in her other high school achievements. She was able to maintain an exceptional academic record, while missing classes for competitive synchronized swimming. She always made arrangements for tests and assignments far in advance before she left for competitions, demonstrating a high level of accountability to both her academics and sports,” Radu wrote.

But Moura said she’s not sure how she managed to handle everything and still succeed.

"It took a lot of scheduling and prioritizing. I think I'm better for it now," she said. "I'm very excited to come to Western."

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