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Jomanah Chahrour

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BY MICHAEL SWAN, THE CATHOLIC REGISTER

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Peace, order, good government — that’s all Jomanah Chahrour’s family needed to succeed when they arrived in Edmonton almost six years ago, fleeing Syria’s chaotic, brutalizing civil war.

Headed for McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont., with an \$80,000 Schulich Leader Scholarship and her high school diploma from Windsor’s Catholic Central High School in her back pocket, Chahrour doesn’t count her success as merely personal. For the 19-year-old future astrophysicist, success is a family affair.

“We’ve come a long way from when we first came here,” Chahrour told The Catholic Register. “I think my family could be a role model to all newcomers who come here.”

Chahrour's mother, Nahlah Alablouj, is studying to become a paralegal. Her father owns a downtown Windsor pita restaurant. Her older brother Osamah is in the denturism program at Georgian College in Barrie, Ont. Her 11-year-old sister Shahed and four-year-old brother Daniel have yet to make career choices.

The 19-year-old Chahrour is one of just 25 students across Canada to receive the Schulich Leader Award — thanks to a 94 in chemistry, 98 in physics, 92 in calculus, plus tutoring other students daily in Catholic Central's after-school Youth First program. She learned hard work and the courage to try new things from her mother.

"Back home, women could not really work or go to school if they're married and have children," notes Chahrour. "My mom shows other people that you are in Canada and you have rights. You also have the opportunity to be educated and have your own job. I think that's very important."

Nor was it easy for her father, with limited English, to get that first job and work his way into running his own small business.

As asylum seekers who arrived in Edmonton, Alta., on a tourist visa, Chahrour is thankful for the opportunity Canada gave her family, and grateful for the aid extended to more than 35,000 Syrian refugees resettled in Canada since November 2015.

"Canada is doing what it can to save people's lives, actually, by bringing them here," said Chahrour. "I believe that countries should be doing just what Canada is doing. I really admire the government here and people who are welcoming all the refugees. It gives you hope in humanity."

Chahrour believes all refugees deserve a safe haven and the chance to restart their lives. The idea that some refugees are "queue jumpers," taking advantage of Canada's tradition of welcoming refugees, makes no sense to her.

"We came in a legal way," she said. "We were one of the first Syrian refugees here after the war started in Syria. We didn't do anything illegal. We're not bending any rules."

Confusion about Canada's legal obligation to grant a fair hearing to anyone claiming asylum on Canadian soil was highlighted by a March Ipsos-Reuters poll which found almost half of Canadians said refugees crossing the border to claim asylum should be deported.

After a spike in refugees crossing the land border from the United States in January and February, the number of asylum seekers coming to Canada has actually slowed through the spring.

As a Muslim girl at a Catholic school, Chahrour has sought and generally found a degree of reasonableness, decency and acceptance in Canada.

"I believe I'm a Canadian because I can live with Canadians who are born here and be one of them," she said. "I still have the Syrian culture in me, and my religion. Living in Canada has not changed me but added to my belief and my traditions and even to my family."

Chahrour began high school in Windsor's public school board, then exercised her right to choose by transferring to Catholic Central.


"When I saw students from the Catholic school, they were all respectful in general. They did not cause trouble around the school. I didn't like the atmosphere in the public school, so I decided to move," she said. "They respect other people and cultures and religions more than in the public school that I was in."

It was the very fact that there is a religious core to the school ethos at Catholic Central that made respect for other religions a given, said Chahrour.

"They make it clear that although we're Catholic you still have to respect other religions and the differences between us, because we're all human. I really like that," she said.

By the time she's 29, Chahrour expects to have her PhD in astrophysics.

"I want to be working on research projects — just doing research, trying to find answers," she said. "I want to look more into the origins of the universe."

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