

From past to present: Alumni Association celebrates exceptional York students with 2015 scholarships

Six outstanding individuals will be honoured for their academic excellence and student leadership during the YUAA annual general meeting at Mazzoleni Hall at the TELUS Centre for Performance and Learning on Sept. 24. The recipients are:

Mirian Dang – Alumni Silver Jubilee

With a front-row seat into the life and struggles of those dealing with disease, Mirian Dang has made it her mission to affect positive change for generations of future patients.

Through her clinical role studying the biology of juvenile leukemia at the University of Toronto, Dang has taken advantage of the unique opportunities to attend national and international conferences and see her work published in peer-reviewed academic journals. She has also combined research and advocacy in hopes that she can make strides toward relieving physical and psychological burdens suffered by many cancer patients.

“My goal is to apply the knowledge I've gained to help improve the lives of patients in my lifetime,” shares Dang. “By working alongside physicians and other medical professionals, I know first-hand the kind of stress that befalls these patients; however, I am confident that there is plenty of room for improvement.”

Over the past half-decade, Dang has also put her people-first approach into action by working closely with teenagers with mental illness. “My interactions with these young people have made me realize the negative stigma they have to face day-in, day-out because of their conditions. As was true in my clinical research with leukemia, this experience has motivated me to take action toward eliminating this stigma associated with mental illness.”

To this end, Dang established Discovery Days in Mental Health, a program dedicated to dismantling this stigma by advocating for improved mental health literacy (learn more at discovermentalhealth.com).

On top of her outstanding advocacy work, Dang is a standout student, a well-performing athlete and an active member of the York community. Whether she's raising awareness for cancer as Chair of the Cancer Research Advocacy Network or creating opportunities for York students to explore the medical field as president of the Healthcare Conference Committee, Dang has placed herself in a prime position to make a difference.

Zabeda Oumer-Haji – Golden GRADitude

Zabeda Oumer-Haji understands the profound impact that active involvement with your community can have and has committed herself to bringing this understanding to other young people.

“Though I grew up in a low-income family with many barriers ahead of me, I realized I could overcome these by getting involved both at school and in the community,” Oumer-Haji recalls. “Not only was I able to see results in my own life, but I also recognized the potential for making a difference in the lives of others.”

With this in mind, the fourth-year Health Policy student set off on her journey to become an active member of the York community.

Inspired to become a campus leader through her role as first-year representative with the Student Association of Health Management, Policy and Informatics (SAHMPI), Oumer-Haji has since become an executive member on three student organizations ranging from academic to cultural. Through these various leadership roles, she has been able to reach out to future and current students as a mentor, helping them along their academic journeys and encouraging them to get involved on campus.

Her hard work was recognized in 2014 with the Rob Tiffin Student Leadership Award.

Oumer-Haji has also taken her volunteerism off-campus into the community as a board member of the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto, where she is able to put her passion for improving affordable housing in Canada to good use.

Now in her fourth year, Oumer-Haji has made it clear that her involvement with community betterment will not slow down any time soon.

“Overall, my experiences have helped me learn so much about myself. I can now recognize the types of policy and social issues that I hope to tackle in my future career and I have a much deeper appreciation for working with the community in hopes of making a difference and creating future leaders.”

Siraat Mustafa – Golden GRADitude

The York experience can be defined in many ways, and for Siraat Mustafa, this experience was immeasurably impacted by his involvement in the student community.

“When I walked into orientation week, I wasn’t too sure where I’d put my energies and time besides school work,” recalls Mustafa. “As I began to immerse myself with leadership opportunities and involve myself with my student community, I began to challenge myself to go above and beyond.”

And from his resume of extra-curricular activities, it's clear that he has indeed done just that.

During his first four years at York, Mustafa was highly involved in the McLaughlin College Council, serving as first-year representative, vice-president academic affairs, vice-president events & programming and finally as president.

"I look at my service on McLaughlin College Council as one of the most memorable and meaningful experiences I have ever had," reflects Mustafa. "With support from campus partners and key stakeholders, I was able to advocate for students' needs on the frontline and ensure the 'student voice' was heard across the University."

Looking back on his own student experience, Mustafa decided to give back to the community that gave him so much, serving as both a RED Zone student ambassador with Student Community & Leadership Development and a peer mentor with McLaughlin College.

Mustafa recognizes that he could not have accomplished all he has on his own. "Whether it's my family and friends, my professors or my fellow staff members, I've been fortunate to have so many people around me throughout my York career who've kept me grounded, offered valuable mentorship and provided me with countless opportunities to excel."

Moving forward from student to alumni, Mustafa is committed to continuing his involvement in the York community, sharing the following mantra with future students: "The greatest gift we have during our University experience is our time. So use it wisely. Get involved, join a club, create a club based on a unique interest and serve your community."

Sabrina Sukhdeo – Harry Arthurs Alumni Families Entrance Scholarship

For many, it is in overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges that help to define their approach to life. This has certainly rings true for Sabrina Sukhdeo, whose health challenges have shaped her need to instill resilience and passion in those around her.

"At only 11 years old, I was diagnosed with Wegener's Granulomatosis, a rare disorder that affects the blood vessels, meaning I would be faced with a myriad of hospital visits, blood tests, chemotherapy and perpetual uncertainty regarding my abilities," shares Sukhdeo. "It might sound strange to classify this as a positive, but I have been able to see my condition as a foothold rather than a fence in my life."

Sukhdeo transformed this attitude into action through a host of extra-curricular activities in which she uses her own experiences to inspire other young people to beat the odds.

This is most evident in her work with the Air Cadet Program and the World Action Council (WAC). With more than 100 youths under her supervision as Squadron Warrant Officer of her

unit, Sukhdeo promotes citizenship, leadership and fitness through in-class instruction, fitness testing, survival training and assisting the Royal Canadian Legion.

As president of WAC, Sukhdeo empowers young people by helping them recognize their potential through local and global good-works community projects. The Council supports impoverished children who suffer with hunger and child labour, with the goal of making a difference in the lives of the needy overseas and fostering a sense of social responsibility among students. In this role, she has spearheaded successful activities like food drives, fundraisers and awareness campaigns. Sukhdeo prides herself in the fact that she is able to usher other students through academic and social obstacles to achieve their own successes.

"My desire to inspire was no doubt emphasized by my own health struggles and it was incredible to know that I was able to impact youths from all walks of life... across socioeconomic status, ethnicity, ability and gender. As I continue to become further involved with my community, these early experiences will help to define where I go next."

Michael Mastrangelo – Harry Arthurs Alumni Families Entrance Scholarship

With big dreams of attending York University and pursuing a career in civil engineering, Michael Mastrangelo has the potential to make a huge impact on society. He knows, however, that a promising future doesn't come without its share of obstacles.

"My parents currently have three children pursuing higher education, making the financial strain of tuition, books and transportation impossible to ignore," Mastrangelo shares. "However, thanks to scholarships from generous donors like Harry Arthurs, I can rest easy knowing that the burden of paying for mine and my siblings' education will not be a factor in our future success."

And with fewer barriers standing in his way, Mastrangelo's future is indeed bright. Not only was he able to excel through a rigorous bilingual program, he worked hard to balance his academic pursuits with his many extra-curricular and community activities. A particular point of pride for Mastrangelo is his role as co-president and co-founder of the Trudeau Conference Council, which is tasked with planning and executing a two-day conference that brings together more than 90 student leaders.

"This role is a crash course in team building – an invaluable skill I can put to use throughout my professional career," shares Mastrangelo. "I'm honing my ability to plan and organize effectively while learning to find innovative solutions to unexpected issues."

And while it is Mastrangelo's strength in math and science that makes his pursuit of a career in engineering a natural one, it is another, more personal reason that brought him to York University.

"My family has a long history at York, with both my father and brother having attended Glendon College... a legacy that now drives my desire to join the University's civil engineering program," Mastrangelo shares.

"I'm confident that I have what it takes to make York proud and to honour the generous support that made it possible for me to turn my dreams into a reality."

Daniel Colvin – Harry Arthurs Alumni Families Entrance Scholarship

Whether his pursuit is academic, extra-curricular or simply a hobby, Daniel Colvin understands the importance of hard work in every undertaking. "Nothing worthwhile or interesting can be accomplished without putting in the necessary effort. I take pride in my work and would never settle for anything less than the absolute best I am capable of."

From school to sports to hobbies, Colvin has indeed taken this mantra to heart.

Not only has he proven himself an outstanding student with a strong interest in engineering, Colvin also participates in a pair of unique activities that demonstrate how hard work can help one achieve greatness, no matter the undertaking.

Curiosity is what first led Colvin to the unconventional sport of extreme unicycling. "Though I started off slowly, I made sure that I put in the utmost effort to learn tricks and push my limits with each passing day."

Eventually, he joined online communities, shared his skills through videos and began acting as a role model to younger riders. Because of his commitment, he now has multiple sponsorships and has competed at national and international levels.

In the past few years, Colvin also combined his passions for engineering and videography, building cranes, telephoto lenses and sliders for his camera. But he hasn't stopped there – the quality of his inventions has continued to improve and expand into other innovative projects.

"I've become fascinated with CNC machines and 3D printers," shares Colvin. "Last year, my brother and I built a 3D printer and, since then, I have designed and constructed a second printer of my own design, which has even more advanced features than the first. These projects provided me with valuable engineering experience and have given me a much deeper understanding of the design process."

And though he's already demonstrated what he can accomplish through hard work, there is no doubt his success will continue on through his career at York and beyond.