Oxford bound: Meet four of Canada’s latest Rhodes scholars

Chasing their educations brought these four young people down very different and difficult paths. Now, a prestigious scholarship is helping them to make their mark on fields from economics to refugee studies

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Includes correction

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Liam Elbourne, left to right, Annette Riziki, Michael Liu and Arisha Khan are among the 11 Canadians selected for Rhodes scholarships in 2018.

Darryl Dyck, Lyle Stafford and Tijana Martin/The Globe and Mail
The Rhodes scholarship describes itself as the oldest and perhaps the most prestigious international scholarship program in the world. This year, 11 Canadians were selected for the award: two from each of Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes, three from the Prairies, and one each from British Columbia and Newfoundland and Labrador. The scholarships offer full funding to pursue postgraduate studies at Oxford. The winners are chosen on the basis of their academic achievements, their ability to use their energy (as demonstrated through sports, music and artistic pursuits), their courage, devotion to duty and instinct to lead. Past winners have gone on to celebrated careers in a wide range of fields.

Liam Elbourne, St. Francis Xavier University

Liam Elbourne is shown in Coquitlam, B.C., over the Christmas break. 'I was so obsessed with soccer growing up that I never applied myself,' he said. 'I never could have imagined being at this point.'

Darryl Dyck/The Globe and Mail

As a teenager, Liam Elbourne was an indifferent student with a single-minded focus on a career in professional soccer. “Soccer was my whole life,” he said. He travelled from his home in Halifax to the north of England for trials with Newcastle United and Leeds United, but didn’t make the grade. He moved to Vancouver to play in the Whitecaps residency program and then to
Sweden for another shot at being a pro. Opportunities were scarce and he was faced with the possibility of moving to the third division to get regular playing time.

“I made the decision at that crossroads to go to school,” he said. Mr. Elbourne returned home to St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia and found new purpose in the world of books and ideas.

He studied business and economics and excelled as a student and athlete, captaining the men’s soccer team as a central midfielder and four-time academic all-Canadian. A mentor in the business and economics department, Professor Cornelius Christian, provided guidance and encouragement to Mr. Elbourne. This year, the two published an academic article, the findings of which were noted in The Economist, on the impact of drought on the likelihood that a Roman Emperor would be assassinated.

Mr. Elbourne said it was a shock just to reach the interview stage for such a prestigious award. He was at home waiting to hear from the selection committee when he heard a buzzing beneath his massive Great Dane. He wrestled the dog off the phone and could scarcely believe that he had been chosen.

He recently visited the school he attended as a teenager, Halifax Grammar School, and the teachers he spoke with joked that had they been asked to predict which student would go on to great things in academics, it wouldn’t have been him.

“I was so obsessed with soccer growing up that I never applied myself,” he said. “I never could have imagined being at this point.”

Mr. Elbourne said he would like to study economics at Oxford and pursue a career in academia.

**Arisha Khan, McGill University**

Open this photo in gallery

Arisha Khan stands at Queen's Park, in Toronto. After her experiences in the child welfare system, she was part of a youth council advising former Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne.

Tijana Martin/The Globe and Mail

Arisha Khan was in and out of the child-welfare system for years, and attended three or four high schools in the Toronto area before she graduated. There was little stability in her life and navigating the educational system was difficult. She worked part-time jobs to support herself, bounced between homes, and found that the system’s low expectations seemed designed to thwart her progress and funnel her into a less demanding program.
“I had to fight to get into academic-level courses because of the amount of school I missed,” she said. “When you’re in the system they pressure you to take the easier courses so you just get out.”

Had she taken the easier courses, she never would have earned the credits she needed to enter university. She worked several jobs in retail, trying to save money for her future, while couch surfing or sleeping in her car. She attended school from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. and worked 4 p.m. to midnight most days, she said.

But Ms. Khan, who came to Canada from Pakistan as a toddler, is quick to say her success should not be seen as a story of triumph over adversity. Children shouldn’t have to work when they’re in school, she said. If the system is meant to take the place of a child’s parents, the system should provide what the child needs.

“We try to glamorize these stories, but you wouldn’t want that for your own kid,” she said.

She was appointed to a youth council that advised former Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne, and learned “how crazy it is that a single line in a policy could make or break so many lives.” The public servants she met on the council became mentors to her, and for the first time, Ms. Khan said, she saw a future other than working in retail.

She has a tattoo that says “At risk,” a term she hates but that serves as a reminder of her goals. She considers herself lucky to have been able to forge a path for herself, to be one of the 50 per cent of youth in the child-welfare system who make it through high school.

She said she often hears that only 2 per cent of children who were in care go on to graduate from university. She wants to change that. British Columbia recently made tuition free for students coming out of the child-welfare system, and other provinces are looking to improve the supports available for students such as Ms. Khan. She has also worked to implement a scholarship at McGill for students from the child-welfare system.

“When I really needed it, support was hard to get,” Ms. Khan said. “Now I have supports, I can do this and I can graduate, [but] there’s a nagging part of you that feels like a foster kid that isn’t worth investing in.”

Ms. Khan will study evidence-based intervention and policy evaluation at Oxford, and said she’s thinking of medical school down the road.

Michael Liu, Harvard University
Michael Liu stands outside Sunnybrook Hospital. As a student at Harvard University, he became interested in the social determinants of health and their impact on brain development.

Tijana Martin/The Globe and Mail

Michael Liu came to Canada with his parents at the age of 4. His parents had very little to start with, he said, and he remembers them working additional jobs to support his schooling.

“They wanted to give me the best opportunities,” he said.

Mr. Liu, 21, attended the University of Toronto Schools in downtown Toronto, which he remembers as an academic hothouse. He was surrounded by curious and driven peers and enjoyed his time there, he said. In a tweet, the school described him as the 21st alumnus to win a Rhodes Scholarship.

Mr. Liu, who was also a competitive baseball player, said his parents didn’t push him to achieve academically. In fact, when he was admitted to Harvard, they thought he shouldn’t go in case the pressure to succeed was too much, he said.

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He arrived at Harvard intending to study brain development, but gained an interest in public health and social advocacy. He became a director at Y2Y, a homeless shelter in Cambridge, Mass. A disproportionate number of the people who use the shelter are racialized or LGBTQ, he said, and he became engrossed in looking at the social determinants of health, and how early adversity and trauma can affect brain development.

“These are complex health challenges,” Mr. Liu said. “We need rigorous evidence-based research, but also an appreciation for the differences in lived experience.”

He said the interview for the scholarship was a brisk affair, with about 30 questions from the panel in about 30 minutes. He said they began by asking what it was like to live in the United States during a tumultuous political era. Later that day, he went to a movie to distract himself as he waited to hear who had been selected. He got the call as he was driving home. He had to pull over because he was overwhelmed.

“I felt super grateful,” he said.

Mr. Liu said he plans to return to North America after spending some time at Oxford. He has already been offered a full scholarship to study medicine at the University of California at Los Angeles and is waiting to hear from other medical schools.

He said he could see himself working at a hospital such as St. Michael’s in Toronto, where research and outreach to vulnerable populations are tied closely together.

Annette Riziki, University of Manitoba
Annette Riziki is shown at the University of Manitoba campus in Winnipeg, where she studied psychology. She and her family had never even heard of Winnipeg when they arrived in Canada as refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

LYLE STAFFORD/The Globe and Mail

Annette Riziki came to Canada as a resettled refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo at the age of 14.

She had spent most of her life to that point in Uganda, where her mother fled to when Ms. Riziki was just two years old. She recalls both good and bad moments in Uganda. At times, she was treated as an outsider, she said. “People could always tell I wasn’t Ugandan and that had its own implications,” she said. “We would be called economic leaches and told we should back to our own country.”

Her mother told her to enjoy her childhood and focus on her studies and she would take care of the rest, Ms. Riziki said. She never knew it was possible they would end up in Canada. The family travelled as part of a large group that split in Toronto’s Pearson Airport as they went their separate ways. They had never heard of Winnipeg and arrived in May to temperatures the locals basked in but which struck Ms. Riziki as freezing.

She thought the transition at school would be easy, but it was not. She was placed in Grade 10, but forced to redo a number of Grade 9 classes to catch up to her age cohort, which she did in just one semester.

“I had to teach myself math, English, social studies,” she said. “Coming here was my redemption as a student because I was able to pursue so many opportunities.”

Her first week at the University of Manitoba, where she studied psychology, was difficult. She remembers telling her mother that she couldn’t do it.

“Her advice was ‘It’s just the first week, things will change and when you get through this you will learn what steps to take,’ ” Ms. Riziki said. “It can take me hours to learn something, but once I get it, I get it.”

Ms. Riziki said she had given up hope of winning the Rhodes scholarship on the day of the announcement. She had been told to expect a call in the morning and it was already 11:45 a.m. when her phone rang. She texted her mother with the good news, and her mother came home that day and danced for five minutes, she said. Her father, though, was not surprised at all. He had been telling people for months that his daughter would be at Oxford next year.

“It took me a week to believe it was true,” she said. “I kept asking myself. ‘Why me?’ To see yourself as someone who could be picked out, it was very difficult to imagine.”
Ms. Riziki plans to pursue a graduate degree in forced migration and refugee studies at Oxford.

**The other scholars-elect**

**British Columbia:** Linda Worden (Williams College)

**Prairies:** Rahul Arora (University of Calgary); Julia Sawatzky (University of Alberta)

**Ontario:** Edil Ga’al (Victoria College, University of Toronto)

**Quebec:** Clarisse Emond-Larochelle (Université du Québec à Montréal)

**Maritimes:** Katherine Reiss (Mount Allison University)

**Newfoundland:** Matthew Downer (Memorial University)

Editor’s note: (Jan. 7) An earlier version of this article included an incorrect spelling for a professor: Cornelius Christian. This version has been corrected.