

GATOR

FLORIDA

SUMMER 2020



***A CELEBRATION OF GATOR GOODNESS,
GRIT AND GRACE DURING THE
CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC — page 22***

CONFRONTING BIASES

Hear from UF's premiere implicit bias scientists and campus leaders in the aftermath of racial violence — page 18

ALONE TOGETHER

For some international students, returning home during the quarantine was not an option — page 48

INK AND MEMORIES

Meet one special Gator whose life was cut short by COVID-19 — page 36

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UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

EL SALVADOR

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

LEBANON

NEPAL

WHEN HOME IS 8,300 MILES AWAY

Every year, elite international students arrive at UF. When COVID-19 struck, 53 of the Davis United World College Scholars stayed behind. Here are some of their stories.

Raised in a large, extended family, UF junior Yehya Haj, 22, usually talks to his mother once a day. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, that ritual hasn't changed — but their topics of conversation have.

"Normally, the first thing she asks me is, 'Did you eat? Do you have enough food at your house?'" said Haj. "Now, the new question is, 'Did you go outside today?'" She really doesn't want me to risk getting the virus."

Like other Gator parents, Haj's mother has been deeply concerned about her child's wellbeing during the pandemic. The difference is, she and Haj's father live more than 3,000 miles away in central Lebanon — and their son is not returning home any time soon, not while travel restrictions are still in flux and a vaccine for the virus has yet to complete clinical trials.

Fortunately, Haj did not ride out the first stage of the pandemic alone at UF. He is part of a close-knit tribe of exceptional international students — the Davis United World College (UWC) Scholars at UF — whose undergraduate studies and living expenses are covered by visionary American philanthropist Shelby Davis.

A successful mutual funds investor, Davis believes the first step to achieving world peace is to nurture cross-cultural understanding on U.S. campuses. His needs-based scholarship program supports thousands of promising undergraduates from abroad each year at American public and private universities. UF has been onboard with that mission since 2005, five years after the Davis UWC Scholars program was launched, and covers half of each student's cost of attendance, making UF a partner in



YEHYA HAJ



SHELBY DAVIS

creating global leaders. When UF suspended on-campus classes in mid-March and urged students to return home, 53 of this year's 149 Davis Scholars decided to stay put. Some could not afford the last-minute plane fares to their far-flung homes, such as Sarajevo and Kathmandu. Others did not want to risk airport infections or the uncertainties of being able to re-enter the U.S. at some unspecified future date.

And so, despite the pain of being apart from their families, the remaining Davis Scholars agreed to shelter in place, turning the deserted Gainesville campus into a mini United Nations.

UF has been on board since 2005 and covers half of each student's cost of attendance, making UF a partner in creating global leaders.

As the last of March's azaleas shed their petals, the "left behind" Davis Scholars adjusted to a radically different UF experience: one with wide-open, empty plazas, locked buildings and quiet streets that once hummed with honking scooters and rushing students.

Throughout the spring, these Davis Scholars settled into a new normal — one of back-to-back Zoom lectures, polite waves at a distance and occasional forays to Walmart and Publix for essentials.

Mealtimes at Gator dining halls — with glimpses of fellow Davis Scholars — took on a new significance:

"It's now the highlight of the day, walking to the Reitz lawn!" joked Durgesh Jha, a freshman physics major from Nepal, in an April interview.

The public health crisis was powerful, but so, they discovered, was their will to keep working toward their degrees as one big Gator family.

Here are stories of four Davis United World College Scholars from this past semester.

Davis UWC Scholars

BY THE NUMBERS

\$20 MILLION+

Shelby Davis' contributions to UF since 2005, paying for Davis United World College Scholars to attend.

149

International Davis Scholars enrolled at UF this year. They hail from 60 different countries.

18

United World College schools worldwide that partner with the Davis program to offer students an international baccalaureate degree before they continue their studies at a four-year college.

\$25,000

Amount granted annually to each Davis Scholar at UF to cover their expenses (up \$5,000 from previous years' grants).

100

Percentage of Davis UWC Scholars who are in the UF Honors Program.

30

Age of Shelby Davis when he left his post at Bank of New York to start his own mutual fund company. The son of self-made insurance broker-dealer Shelby Davis Sr. inherited little from his father's \$900 million fortune, but gained his father's skill for growing wealth and adopted his father's personal mantra, "Learn, Earn, Return," which emphasizes large-scale philanthropy.

2017

Year Davis said: "We're in a global world and a global workplace, so kids from various parts of the world need to learn to live and work together. Maybe, as we integrate the world, we can have a better chance of having global peace."

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

“When you are at a game and you see all orange and blue, and everybody is cheering, ‘Go Gators,’ it’s so amazing!”

LOVING UF CULTURE: “WE’RE SO TIGHT”

Davis UWC Scholar Lejla Ramić was born in 1998, just three years after the end of a brutal war that left 100,000 dead in her homeland of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Today she is flourishing as a third-year bioengineering student at UF. That would not be possible if she had stayed in Bosnia, she said recently.

“Back home, there is only one university where they teach this field,” the 21-year-old said.

But her current proximity to the latest STEM research isn’t the only reason Ramić loves UF: This studious, high-achiever is wild about Gator athletics.

“When you are at a game and you see all orange and blue, and everybody is cheering, Go Gators, it’s so amazing,” she said, a throb in her voice. “It’s something I’ve never experienced before in my life — football, basketball, volleyball, baseball, so many sports we don’t have at home.”

“I love the culture of it — we are so tight,” she added. “Everyone is united in the same spirit.”

Ramić’s journey to UF began in 2016 when she was chosen to attend United World College Mostar near Sarajevo. From war-torn ruins, the founders of UWC Mostar built an institution dedicated to uniting people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future.

Both of Ramić’s parents have college degrees, but attending college in the United States would have been impossible for her without the Davis scholarship.

“As you can imagine, in Bosnia the living standard is quite lower than the

living standard in the U.S.,” she said. “No matter what your pay is there, it is very hard to afford the full price of tuition here.”

With her love of math and the sciences, Ramić applied to UF after earning her International Baccalaureate diploma in 2018. She says the Davis Scholars staff at UF made her transition from Bosnia surprisingly smooth.

“I felt right away like I belonged here,” she said.

Since October 2018, Ramić has served as chair of the Engineering Student Advisory Council, and during 2019, she worked as technical staff at the O’Connell Center — giving her more opportunities to soak up UF basketball and gymnastics events.

In her spare time, she loves cooking dinner for her friends, including her favorite comfort food, trahana soup, made with fermented grains. She was looking forward to sharing new dishes after spring break — and then the pandemic led to a campus shut down. By late March, she and her RA were the only residents left in Broward Hall’s women’s wing.

She admits being on a deserted, shuttered campus gets lonely at times. There is one former hangout she especially longs to visit, even more than the O’Dome or The Swamp.

“I love the libraries here,” she said. “People don’t know about all the resources they offer. UF should advertise that as much as they can. The libraries are amazing.”

EL SALVADOR

“Thank God we are healthy. It would be particularly complicated for us as international students to have any health-related complications.”

“IT FILLS MY HEART”

Four years ago, Emilio Quiteño was “just this Salvadorian kid,” he said, sitting wide-eyed in his grandma’s living room, listening to his mother’s friend explain how her son was able to study abroad for free — first in Norway and then at NYU Abu Dhabi — thanks to a full-ride international scholarship program. On the friend’s urging, hard-working Quiteño applied, but he was deeply skeptical of his chances.

“Of course I wanted to do that — live somewhere else, get a great education — but it sounded almost crazy,” he said. “I mean, it was like someone telling you they became an astronaut and walked on Mars. ‘Great on them, but that’s never going to happen to me.’”

Much to his surprise, the UWC board accepted him and several other promising students from El Salvador and flew them to Victoria, Canada. There, at one of 18 preparatory institutions around the world in the UWC movement, Quiteño spent two years honing his English skills and earning an International Baccalaureate diploma. At age 19, based on his academic and personal merits, he received a Davis UWC Scholarship to attend UF. Now in his second year of UF’s Honors Program, Quiteño is majoring in psychology and applied kinesiology and minoring in Latin American Studies.

“It’s a great experience,” said the 21-year-old. “Being a Davis Scholar opens many doors for you. You meet people from different countries, you grow so much as a

person and you have a lot of opportunities from the university as well.”

He lives in Murphree Hall and has passionately embraced both academics and extracurriculars, such as helping lead UF’s Hispanic Heritage Month. This summer, he is welcoming new students as a Preview staffer, too — a role that convinced him to stay on campus this spring.

He remembers the “tornado” of UF students moving out in mid-March, leaving him and his roommate — another Davis Scholar, from Nigeria — behind. Now they are washing their hands often and practicing social distancing.

“Thank God we are healthy,” said Quiteño. “It would be particularly complicated for us as international students to have any health-related complications.”

Students far from Gainesville may miss UF life, but Quiteño says the campus is radically transformed under lockdown.

“I used to enjoy ... seeing all the UF traffic because everybody here is so different,” he said. “I like seeing faces — it’s like the spice of life. Now it’s empty.”

Despite the difficult time, he takes comfort that the Davis Scholars Program has his back and those of other scholars.

“It fills your heart, even if you can’t go out on certain days because of the quarantine,” he said. “When you close your eyes at night, you know that because of Mr. Davis, this Salvadorian kid is able to study at UF and not worry about tuition or food or housing. It has drastically changed what I can aspire to in my life.”



LEJLA RAMIĆ



EMILIO QUITEÑO

LEBANON

“My family would have never been able to afford tuition for me. Without the Davis Scholarship, I would not have gone to college.”

VILLAGE LIFE TO SUPERSONIC TRAVEL

Part of a large Lebanese family, third-year mechanical engineering student Yehya Haj says he is the first on his father’s side to attend college.

“They didn’t really finish their education,” said Haj, whose father works in construction. “So [my being a student at UF] is a big thing.”

Most Lebanese people remain in the same village all their lives, he explained. Few care to venture outside the support system of their extended family. But Haj, who early on showed an aptitude for science and an eagerness to experience new ways of life, was different. The UWC recruiters who interviewed him at age 16 for IB preparatory school recognized that spark.

“I really didn’t mind which school they picked for me,” he remembered. “All I cared about was the education and the personal development.”

A chance remark that he liked snow and outdoors activities landed him at UWC Red Cross Nordic, at the end of a fjord in Norway. There, as well as taking classes toward an International Baccalaureate diploma, Haj participated in remote-control builds and other group science projects. The process was so enjoyable, he decided to pursue a career where he could design and create “things that work.”

That is how he ended up in UF’s Department of Mechanical Engineering,

along with two friends from UWC Red Cross Nordic, who are now his roommates.

Like most students, Haj was 18 when he first set foot on the Gainesville campus. Other than sweating a bit more, he says the move to Gainesville has done him good. Haj is thriving in the Honors Program and making good progress toward his bachelor’s degree.

He is also a member of the UF Gatorloop Team — engineering students who compete regularly in an international competition to build the fastest single-person vehicle for Elon Musk’s SpaceX Hyperloop system, in Hawthorne, CA.

“I don’t think I would have had the opportunity to explore the things I’m doing at this point if I had stayed in Lebanon,” he said. “My family would have never been able to afford tuition for me. Without the Davis Scholarship, I would not have gone to college.”

Looking to the future, he says once he has achieved success in his field, he wants to support students who otherwise would not be able to afford to go to college — paying forward the Shelby Davis motto, “Learn, Earn, Return.”

“I want to be able to do what he does for us,” says Haj. “I know personally how amazing and life changing it is.”

NEPAL

“Your life really takes a turn when your dreams come true.”

QUENCHING THE “THIRSTY HORSE”

First-year physics student Durgesh Jha, 20, says receiving a Davis Scholarship to attend UF fulfilled his deepest dreams.

“It was like a thirsty horse getting water, as they say in my language,” he said.

That language is Maithili, spoken in southern Nepal, where Jha was born. At age 10, he was sent to boarding school in Kathmandu where he learned Nepali, the county’s most common language. When pressed, he admits he also speaks Hindi and Bhojpuri, as well as English, making him pentalingual.

But his favorite means of communication is through music.

Prior to the closure of UF, Jha liked to sing a cappella with a group of friends. Evenings would find them gathered by the lake near Simpson Hall for impromptu jam sessions.

Music has helped him connect with new people since boarding school and his two years at UWC Mostar, where he was in the class behind fellow Davis Scholar Lejla Ramić. Now that he is at UF, the Davis UWC Scholars Program provides him with a close network of friends within the large university system, he says.

Even so, Jha found it hard to adjust to UF at first. Even the “subtlest” things, such as Gainesville’s flat topography, reminded him he was far from home and even Europe.

“Back in Bosnia, there were hills all around, but here, when you see the sunset without the hills, the horizon seems much wider,” he said.

He has had a lot of time to contemplate those differences since mid-March, when he had to forgo a last-minute plane ticket to Kathmandu — “that would have been between \$1,500 and \$2,000” — and decided to hunker down in his dorm room for the duration of the pandemic’s quarantine.

To console himself, he bought a guitar and he’s back to strumming.

He is looking forward to the university opening up again; already he is plotting his path forward in the sciences.

“The universities back home [in Nepal] don’t particularly promote the culture of research,” he said, “and the Davis Scholarship has made that accessible to me, coming here. Now getting involved in research is just a matter of my taking the initiative.”

Receiving the Davis Scholarship is one of the best things that has ever happened to him, he said. Already, he is thinking of paying it forward.

“Your life really takes a turn when your dreams come true,” said Jha. “In the future, I hope to use my own privilege to make it easy for others, or rather to make it even for others to have a shot in life.”



YEHYA HAJ



DURGESH JHA