

Fitchburg High scholarship recipients have inspiring background stories to tell

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FITCHBURG -- The path hasn't been easy for any of the four Fitchburg High School seniors who were named Dell Scholars Monday.

But most agree the journey has been worth it.

"My future is in my hands," recipient Samary Guzman said. "It's like I can go wherever I want."

Fitchburg High School seniors Guzman, Shekhinah Al-Aziz, Jillian Wolons and Shellaina Gordon are four of only 400 students nationwide selected by the Dell Scholars Program this year, which recognizes students who have overcome significant obstacles to pursue their education.

Through the program each student receives a \$20,000 scholarship, laptop, textbook credits and support services.

Guzman said she was interested in the scholarship because it was based on more than just her grades

"It gave me a chance to express what had happened in high school that my transcript doesn't show," she said.

Junior year, after her father unexpectedly left her life, she had a falling out with her mother and moved out briefly. She tried to juggle academics, her position on the volleyball team and a 30-hour-a-week job, but her grades slipped.

"I had always tried really hard to get good grades," she said. "I got my first C then my first D. It was like I'm going nowhere. College is out the window. I can't do anything."

The first quarter her senior year, she turned her academics around and got straight A's, she said.

"I was like, see, I can do it," she said.

She is still deciding where to attend college, but is leaning toward Salem State University where she hopes to study nursing.

Wolons, who plans to attend George Washington University, said she was also raised by a single mother and growing up hasn't always been easy.

"I've had some financial struggles, but that has never stopped me from knowing what I want and being determined to get there," she said.

She said she has also struggled with an anxiety disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I've had these things that I've been dealing with but I think those are things that have only made me smarter," she said.

They have also made her appreciate her mother even more.

Guzman agreed.

"She has always been the one to push me and it took me until senior year to realize that," Guzman said.

Gordon said though she is the second youngest child, she has three brothers with autism and one who also has epilepsy. As a result she has had to give up a lot of independence to help out her family, Gordon said.

"Having to fill in roles I kind of had to grow up myself," she said.

In the fall she plans to attend Northeastern University to pursue a degree in biochemistry.

Al-Aziz, the third oldest in a family of nine, said she also had a lot of family responsibility at a young age. Her parents divorced when she was 8-years-old leaving her and her siblings to help care for some of her younger siblings.

"I used academics as a way to help with what I was going through," she said.

When she found out about the scholarship Monday morning, she was visiting Boston College, which she plans to attend.

Like the other recipients Al-Aziz is involved with a variety of advanced classes and extracurricular activities including National Honor Society, peer leadership and varsity soccer.

Though students at FHS have been named Dell Scholars in past years, four in one class is exceptional, Principal Jeremy Roche said.

"They're unbelievable," he said.

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