

Grade 12 Williams student recognized for human rights work



Hamza Khokhawala, a Grade 12 student from Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, is marking the end of his high school career with significant recognition from the York Region District School Board.

Khokhawala was one of four York Region students to be honoured by the YRDSB with their annual Human Rights Ambassador Award. He was recognized alongside Keyao Tang of Markham, Darleen Julman of Thornhill, and Shariah Golding of Newmarket.

The YRDSB bestows these awards each year in recognition of students who have ?made exceptional contributions to advancing the principles of human rights, equality, diversity, inclusion, and/or anti-discrimination in their schools.?

For Khokhawala, it was recognition of a long-held passion.

?Hamza embodies respect, dignity, and justice,? said the Board in Hamza's citation. ?As founder of the Financial Literacy Club at Dr. G.W. Williams, he promotes educational equity by making financial knowledge accessible to all students.

?In Grade 11, he helped develop anti-Islamophobia workshops for Grade 9 and 10 students. Now in Grade 12, he leads the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and co-presides over the YRDSB Regional MSA, mentoring students and advocating for equity. He revived the first in-person Regional MSA meeting since COVID, restoring a vital space for connection. Hamza is also a key planner for Williams' first-ever Iftar dinner, promoting cultural awareness.

?His leadership is defined by action?creating programs, mentoring peers, and fostering a school culture where all students feel valued and empowered.?

Hamza tells The Auroran that learning he was receiving the award was a ?surreal? moment.

Nominated by his teacher, Zahra Murad, with whom he worked closely in getting the MSA up and running, he says he and his peers were motivated to move forward with such an organization because they felt the voices of Muslim students were ?not being heard.?

?We wanted to foster a sense of community amongst these people and amongst these students, and collecting the Muslim youth together and have a sense of upbringing that way,? he says. ?We created this school board-wide initiative and initially we were very small with three or four executives.?

Things snowballed quickly following an initial rollout of events large and small and, as he prepares to leave for the next chapter of

his education, it now boasts a team of 15 leaders.

?Around the school board, we saw disparities in that sense of community,? he says when asked why the MSA struck a such a chord throughout the Region. ?When students first see the fact this is like a club they can belong in and see themselves identifying?that grew our reach. There are schools in York Region, in certain places, that don't have many Muslim people in general, so when you're in areas where you feel like you're alone, or you feel there's no one there who understands you, we were kind of that facet where students who are Muslim could go and find that sense of belonging.

?I think that was a big part of our growth, especially so incrementally after our first event, and after our second event the amount of people just skyrocketed. Initially we had a great network of teachers around the school board who either helped their Muslim student associations, or were Muslim-identifying and had connections to students who are also the same. With teachers, that word of mouth, and?the connections got bigger and bigger throughout.?

Given recent world events, it also helped create an environment where Muslim students could have a safe place to go as ?it's not easy to do that in schools that don't have that big of a population.?

Even at Williams, Hamza said there were a few stumbling blocks in getting this off the ground. He recalls finding posters they'd put up to advertise the burgeoning group ripped down, which contributed to a feeling of discomfort.

?We didn't really know why they did that, but we had our assumptions that maybe their thoughts didn't align with what we were trying to do and there were moments where some of our executives were like, ?No, we just don't feel comfortable because of everything that is going on and we don't feel like we're in a safe place to be in a position like this.' The fact that other students were making these students uncomfortable and [feeling unable] to do something that they were generally passionate about because of their safety and because of their reputation as a whole, it kind of affected me and I was like, maybe something bigger, something more powerful could have a stronger reach, stronger breadth.?

The goal posts of the MSA were then moved beyond the YRDSB itself to inspire other school boards across the GTA ? and beyond ? to follow their lead.

As Hamza prepares to leave Williams for McMaster University to pursue business and humanities with the ultimate goal of becoming a public policy or corporate lawyer, he's looking back knowing that he and the team have left a long-lasting legacy here in York Region both with the MSA and in their efforts to further financial literacy.

?It surprised me how many people were interested in taking it over,? he says of the financial program. ?We started finance in Grade 11 and it was just me and my friend originally. Then, my second year in Grade 12, a couple of our friends wanted to join to help us out. Eventually we had a group of five people ? but that was worrying because all of us were in Grade 12. We were all graduating, which meant we had no one to hand the club off to after the year. My co-president and I created an application form, posted it, and we had over 25-plus applicants for the positions and we only had four positions. That surprised us because we didn't think we made that much of an impact in people to actually take it over next year, but it ended up working out. That was the kind of legacy we were able to leave and inspire others.?

They took a similar approach to finding the next round of leaders for the MSA, opening it up to anyone who was ?interested in making a true change in the community? ? and the new team is already in place for the 2025-2026 school year.

?I do want to say that all these different opportunities, whether it be the award or whether it be these leadership skills, anyone can do them,? he said. ?I didn't originally do it to have a leadership position because that wasn't my motivation. A lot of people in high school usually join clubs or sometimes they start new things just to have those president titles under their name. They can apply for university, apply on a resume, stuff like that. But in my opinion, it's not about that. It's more about what you think is very interesting and where you see caveats or gaps in your school and that you could fit or you could fix it, your own perspective.

?That's a huge piece of advice I'd like to give to those who are recently starting off high school or maybe they're recently starting off applying or getting these positions. Do what you're passionate about, because even then, that's what is most impactful on the application anywhere, whether it be a job, whether it be at university, whether it be stuff around those areas. If you're truly passionate about something and you can talk about it more [than] just, ?oh, I'm just a leader in this,' it's so much more impactful and so much more beneficial to you as an applicant, because you're someone who can actually speak on your achievements, not just have your achievements.?

By Brock Weir