Davis Scholars Program Celebrates Decade of Transforming Lives

Westminster School welcomed its first Davis Scholars to campus in fall 2008. Since then, 26 scholars from 18 countries have participated in the program, including seven who are at Westminster this year. The students are from Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Colombia, the Czech Republic, Egypt, Ghana, Hungary, Latvia, Malaysia, Moldova, Slovakia, Somaliland, Poland, Turkey, Ukraine, the U.S and Vietnam. They came to Westminster seeking new educational opportunities and big dreams.
Originally, the Shelby Cullom Davis Foundation invited Westminster to be one of five pilot schools to participate in the program, which aims to promote international understanding and cross-cultural connections across boarding school campuses and around the globe. Ten years later, the other independent schools involved in the program, in addition to Westminster, are Andover, Lawrenceville School, Milton Academy, Taft and Emma Willard School.

**Recruiting Scholars**

Kimberly Pope P’12, ’15, ’16, director of the Davis Scholars Program at Westminster, travels around the world to identify students who would be a good fit for the program. She has visited Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Ghana, Hungary, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Turkey and Vietnam. Westminster usually enrolls two new Davis Scholars per year.

“I work with embassy employees, students, heads of schools and other organizations in order to recruit Davis Scholars,” she said. “Many times, I interview students in groups with the ASSIST program, and sometimes an interesting candidate comes to me through different sources. This year, I worked with Ukraine Global Scholars.”

When it is not possible for Kimberly to visit prospective students in their homeland, she arranges video chats or calls them. “Everyone must fill out our application,” she pointed out. “I try to Skype with parents after students are admitted as Davis Scholars.” Key characteristics she looks for in candidates are intellectual curiosity, a strong work ethic, a sense of humor and a willingness to share their culture. The biggest challenge the scholars face at Westminster is that everything about their lives will be different.

“I mentor them and act as an additional advisor,” said Kimberly. She also provides regular reports to Lance Odden, the school’s liaison with the Shelby Cullom Davis Foundation, about the progress of the scholars, and he visits Westminster annually to meet with them. Besides the $20,000 annual grant in funding for each scholar from the Shelby Cullom Davis Foundation, Westminster must provide substantial aid to meet each scholar’s full tuition, along with providing necessities like travel, clothing, tutoring, textbooks and medical care.

While at Westminster, the scholars have taken advantage of all aspects of campus life, and the impact they have had on the Westminster community is immense. “They are the epitome of Grit & Grace,” said Kimberly. “They come so far with the intent of making the world a better place and share their perspective of the world with other students.”

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Westminster’s first group of Davis Scholars in 2008 are, front row, Martha Zamora ’10 and Vladimer Bok ’10, and, back row, Nabi Hassanzoy ’10 and Kwaku Akoi ’10.
Current Scholars

Westminster’s current Davis Scholars are Boyan Alipiev ’19 from Bulgaria, Vlad Ivanchuk ’19 from Ukraine, Ozzy Kutluel ’18 from Turkey, Dorottya Nagy ’19 from Hungary, Phalla Phoap ’20 from Cambodia, Valeria Garcia Osorio ’19 from Colombia and Aly Tolba ’18 from Egypt.

Phalla Phoap previously attended Jay Pritzker Academy, a private college preparatory day school in the rural area of Siem Reap, Cambodia. He had never visited the U.S. before coming to Westminster last fall.

His favorite class this year is AP Physics, and he hopes to study computer science in college. “There are more courses to choose from, and the afternoon activities allow me to try new things and stay competitive,” he said about being at Westminster. “In my first trimester, I joined the cross country team, and it was a remarkable experience being a newcomer who was welcomed into such a supportive group of people.”

His experience as a Davis Scholar has already changed his life. “I have become a more independent person, get to try a lot of new things at Westminster and get to know a new group of people,” he said. “I look forward to pursuing my studies in computer science along with developing new hobbies.”

Vlad Ivanchuk, who attended a public high school in Ukraine, had an unexpected path to Westminster. Two years ago, he applied to a highly selective organization called Ukraine Global Scholars, which assists talented Ukrainian students in getting an education at the best schools in the U.S. He was one of 20 finalists out of 350 applicants and was introduced to a network of Ukrainian graduates of the best U.S. colleges and universities who serve as mentors and volunteers. It was from these mentors that he learned about the Davis Scholars Program.

“I started researching boarding schools that offered Davis Scholarships, and inspired by the small, close-knit and family-style Westminster community, I decided to apply to become a Davis Scholar at Westminster,” he said. He, too, had never visited the U.S.

“Coming from a low-income family in Ukraine, I realized that the limited educational opportunities available in my country did not always provide me with sufficient resources and opportunities to pursue my passions,” he said. “Being awarded a Davis Scholarship to attend Westminster was a turning point in my life.”

As a Westminster student, Vlad has faced some cultural differences to which he has adapted. “Most notably, I was not used to the American-style of ‘small talk’ conversations,” he said. Although Vlad enjoys all of his classes, he finds his most engaging class to be AP U.S. History taught by Mary Pat Gritzacher. “While in Ukraine, the history classes are all about memorizing dates, names and events,” he said. “At Westminster, we learn to analyze the history, build connections, synthesize and, most importantly, think and make our own conclusions.”
He also likes participating in new activities. “In a diverse, thought-provoking, yet supportive Westminster community, I get to challenge myself every day by studying new subjects and taking rigorous classes, by participating in new activities and by playing new sports or simply by speaking to new people,” he said. He played Demetrius in Dramat’s fall production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” and was a delegate to the Yale Model U.N. conference in January. “What I like most about all of these new experiences is the incredibly supportive community embodied by fellow students, coaches and advisors,” he said.

Former Scholars
Not surprisingly, Westminster’s Davis Scholars have gone on to be successful students at leading colleges and universities including Barnard College, Bates College, Colby College, Harvard University, Hamilton College, College of the Holy Cross, Lake Forest College, New York University, Princeton University, the University of Richmond, Simmons College, Wesleyan University and Yale University. One of the benefits of the program is that following graduation from Westminster, the scholars are eligible for $20,000 in annual scholarship funding from the Shelby Cullom Davis Foundation to attend one of its 95 partner colleges or universities.

Kwaku Akoi ’10, who is from Ghana, was in the first group of Davis Scholars at Westminster. He was a Fourth Form student at Achimota School in Accra, Ghana, when Kimberly visited his school. Without his knowledge, the head of Kwaku’s school recommended him for consideration for the program. The opportunity to study in the U.S. was beyond his imagination at the time.

“Before becoming a Davis Scholar, I was never fully sure of how attainable a college education in Ghana would be for me,” he said. “Looking back to the very first time I heard about the scholarship, I am amazed at how unexpectedly better my life has turned out. Ten years may seem like a long time, but I still remember my first day at Westminster like it was yesterday.”

Following Westminster, Kwaku attended Wesleyan University where he double majored in economics and French studies and graduated in 2014. He was a member of the African Students Association, the Wesleyan Entrepreneurship Society, performed in a theater production and played junior varsity soccer for a year. “On the academic front, I was very well prepared to handle the academic rigor at Wesleyan,” he said. “And in terms of the day-to-day experience living on campus, I had a very easy transition after two years living at Westminster.”

Kwaku also met his future wife, Opraha, at Wesleyan and, they currently live in Memphis, Tenn., where Kwaku is a lead digital architect with Hilton Hotels and Resorts. He serves as a creative lead on some of Hilton’s biggest information technology projects, developing digital experiences for millions of users worldwide. “My three biggest interests in life are technology, business and design,” he said. “I feel lucky working in a role where all three intersect on a daily basis.”

Looking ahead, Kwaku says someday he would like to get into social entrepreneurship. “I am especially interested in large-scale sustainable housing projects in developing countries like Ghana and the kind of positive impact that better housing arrangements can have in uplifting the living conditions of millions.”

Martha Zamora ’10 was another member of the first group of Davis Scholars at Westminster. Before Westminster, Martha lived in Oakland, Calif. and attended Saint Elizabeth’s High School, as well as the Youth Law Academy at Centro Legal de la Raza in Oakland. It was through the academy that Martha heard about the Davis Scholars Program. After Kimberly visited the academy to identify potential scholars, Martha decided to apply.

As a Westminster student, Martha enjoyed taking art classes and liked the faculty. Following Westminster, Martha earned a B.A. at Barnard College, majoring in Spanish and Latin American cultures with a double minor in gender studies and race and ethnicity studies. Martha participated in a number of student activities, including the Spanish Club, Women’s Student Assembly, and the African Students Association. She is currently working as a program assistant at the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, where she oversees event planning and coordination for cultural and artistic events throughout the city. Martha hopes to continue her education in the future by pursuing a master’s degree in public administration or nonprofit management.
groups and worked as a residential advisor. Martha also served as a teaching assistant at The School at Columbia’s after-school program and as a dean for the Sadie Nash Leadership Program’s summer institute, before earning an M.Ed. in student affairs at UCLA.

“I pursued an M.Ed. in student affairs because of the immense influence my undergrad mentors had in shaping my life and college experience,” said Martha. “The administrators of color at Barnard did so much to help me navigate and survive a historically and predominantly white institution. I took their example and began mentoring younger students of color at Barnard. I found out you could do that for a living as a student affairs professional, so I applied to higher education programs.”

Currently, Martha lives in Providence, R.I., and works as a community director for the Office of Residential Life at Brown University. “The position consists of student support, crisis management and program development for a first-year community,” Martha explained. “The student body is what makes the job so enjoyable.” In the future, Martha might leave higher education and do community work with LGBT youth.

Doychin “Dodo” Stavrev ’13 was attending high school in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, when he was asked if he wanted to skip his literature class to write an essay for an unspecified program. Later, he found out it was an application process for the ASSIST and Davis Scholars programs. “I ended up making it to the final round where I was interviewed by a representative of each program, including Mrs. Pope,” he said. He recalls subsequently asking her why she picked him. “Mrs. Pope said she was looking for someone outgoing and could tell I would be that type of guy,” he said. “Needless to say, I pretty much owe her everything I have achieved since.”

In 2017, Dodo graduated from the University of Richmond with a B.S.B.A. in finance. “Quite frankly, some of the classes I took at Westminster were harder than their equivalents at college,” he said. While in college, he served as president of Gateway Capital Management, an exclusive student-funded, student-managed long-short investment club. As a senior, he was also part of the Student Managed Investment Fund, which managed about $500,000 of the University of Richmond’s endowment.

Dodo now lives in New York City, where he is an investment-banking analyst at J.P. Morgan. “It is a very challenging job but you get to learn a lot over a very short period of time, and it opens doors for you in the future,” he said. Among his long-term goals is mentoring high school students. “I want to be more involved with high school students, and much like the Davis Scholars Program, provide not only advice but also funds for kids who want to pursue their college degrees or interests.”

Nadira Abdilahi ’16, who is from Somaliland, says the headmaster at Abaarso School, back home where she was a student, told her about the Davis Scholars Program, and she remembers thinking it was her chance. “Growing up, I always knew that I wanted to go to high school and then college, even

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though it’s not common for Somali girls to pursue higher education,” she said. “Many get married at a young age to not be a burden to their families. I loved school and always thought I was meant to do great things, but the idea of going to high school and college in the United States wasn’t possible at the time. I never thought about it until it became a reality for my older sister. She basically opened doors for me that I didn’t even think were there.”

One of the reasons Nadira applied to the Davis Scholars Program at Westminster was that her sister was attending The Ethel Walker School, also in Simsbury, at the time, and Nadira wanted to be close to her. “Westminster was the first place I considered home in the United States,” said Nadira. “I was worried about not fitting in, but I truly felt welcomed by the community, and I am forever grateful to anyone who made this possible.”

While a Westminster student, Nadira participated in community service, volunteering at Reggio Magnet School of the Arts in Avon and at a soup kitchen. She also became a tour guide and played field hockey, basketball, tennis and lacrosse. Her favorite class was Honors Physics taught by Greg Marco P’08, ’11. “I liked all the teachers I got to interact with at Westminster and am grateful for all the knowledge and mentorship I received from them,” she said.

Around the time of her Westminster graduation, Nadira and her sister were interviewed by journalist Anderson Cooper for a story about Abaarso School that appeared on “60 Minutes.”

Nadira is currently a sophomore at Yale majoring in economics and African studies. She is interested in development economics, especially in East Africa, and is involved with the Afrobeats dance group and the African Student Association. She volunteered to be a counselor for international students and has joined organizations that address global health issues. She is currently working with Yale’s Office of International Students and Scholars, and the Student Technology Collaborative.

“Becoming a Davis Scholar at Westminster has opened a lot of doors for me,” she said. “The program and the school have given me many opportunities to further my education, and I simply wouldn’t be at Yale if I wasn’t a Davis Scholar.”

After college, Nadira plans to attend graduate school to earn a master’s degree. “I would like the focus of my career to be in Africa, particularly East Africa,” she said. “I intend to address and, hopefully, find solutions to the economic problems faced by many countries in East Africa such as extremely high unemployment rates, especially for women.”

**Accomplishing Unexpected Milestones**

In addition to Kwaku, Dodo, Martha and Nadira, other former Davis Scholars at Westminster have made significant achievements in college and beyond. They have done such things as create the Coco voice app, work in the Afghanistan Embassy in Washington, D.C., win the National Collegiate Squash Championship twice, serve as a production assistant with the National Basketball Association, win the Betty Richey Award — the most prestigious annual honor bestowed by the College Squash Association — and serve as an investment analyst at a private equity firm. They have reached milestones they never thought possible.

When asked about the most rewarding part of her work with such a transformative program, Kimberly replied: “Everything. I feel like a fairy godmother and am so proud of the scholars. I am also delighted that Westminster School continues to be a part of the Davis Scholars Program, which brings so many outstanding students to our school community.”