

Two Johnson High School students get \$20,000 scholarships

January 17, 2009



Fee Long Moua and Mahad Mohamed arrived in St. Paul at around the same time, about a dozen years ago, with their families and not much else.

Moua, his six siblings and parents moved into a one-bedroom apartment with his uncle's family. Mohamed, his mother and two sisters were homeless.

Now, both are seniors at St. Paul's Johnson High School, and their plans for college got a huge shot in the arm last week when they learned their struggles to overcome adversity had earned them each a \$20,000 scholarship from the Washington, D.C.-based Horatio Alger Association. The honor rewards students who overcome big odds.

That money is doubled if they attend the University of Minnesota, where both are hoping to be admitted, which means their hard work has likely earned them a free ride through college.

When his parents found out, "they were so happy," Moua said. "They just don't know what to say to me anymore."

"My mom gave me a hug," Mohamed said. "She was happy. She said my life is on track."

CROSSING THE RIVER



Moua remembers being bitten by fire ants at the refugee camp where he was born in Southeast Asia. He remembers not having clothes or enough food. "I was like skinny to the bone," he said.

The family came to the United States in 1995. His parents couldn't find work, Moua said, and the family lived on food stamps. There wasn't money to pay for things like school field trips or new clothes. "I sometimes had to wear pants of

my sister's," Moua said with a laugh.

He's now one of Johnson's top 10 students and second-in-command of the school's JROTC program. He also works at a mall most weekdays from 4 to 10 p.m. When he gets home, he said, "sometimes I just work until I fall asleep."

Given the disease he saw in the camp, Moua decided he wanted to study medicine in college.

Coming into this year, he figured he would only be able to afford it with a lot of financial aid or by joining the military, an idea his father — a former soldier — did not support.

His father likes to tell him that life's challenges are like a river one needs to cross to get to one's goals.

The first step across came with news Moua had won a \$1,500 scholarship from the Optimist Club of St. Paul. Then came the Alger scholarship, which he called "the main, big push, a real big hand."

"It has really changed my view," Moua said. "I can see myself closer to the other side of the river now."

BETTER THIS WORLD



Mohamed's parents, who are both from East Africa, met in Atlanta, where he was born.

The couple split up, and Mohamed's mother came to St. Paul with him and his older sister and a younger sister on the way.

They lived in shelters, Mohamed said, until they were able to afford a house.

Part of the volunteer work Mohamed does is with homeless teens in St. Paul. He also puts in a lot of hours through his mosque helping people in need.

He's earned a spot on Johnson's A/B honor roll and participated in track, soccer and the student newspaper.

He describes himself as passionate about business, particularly marketing, and his goal is to attend the U's business school, earn an MBA and work at a Fortune 500 company in Minnesota.

"I don't want to be just nobody in life," he said. "I'm trying to better this world and trying to better myself as well."

The scholarship will help.

"When I found out the news, it was just an excellent day for me," Mohamed said.

"His eyes were just like saucers," said Dan Kennedy, guidance counselor at Johnson who helped the boys prepare their scholarship applications. "For me, that was the moment right there. ... It made it worthwhile."

THEIR STORIES MOTIVATE

About 35,000 students apply each year for Horatio Alger scholarships, said spokeswoman Carrie Blewitt, and only about 100 receive the national-level, \$20,000 awards. "These students are the cream of the crop," she said.

The awards recognize low-income students who have overcome extreme odds to succeed in school. Along with the \$20,000, the award includes a free trip to Washington this spring, a laptop and printer, and other prizes.

It's the first year a Minnesota high school has produced two national winners.

"We have a population of students who deserve this," said Johnson Principal Kay Arndt. She credited Kennedy for making kids aware of opportunities and helping shepherd them through the process. "He's the kind of guy who meets kids here on Saturday mornings," she said.

"Their stories motivate me," Kennedy said. "When you hear their stories, how can it not motivate you?"