

# BOSTON COLLEGE

## SCHOLARSHIP CELEBRATION



**NAREN BRIAR '20**

Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences

MAJOR: Political Science

HOMETOWN: Wylie, Texas

SUPPORTED BY: The Annexstad Family Foundation Leaders for Tomorrow Scholarship Fund established by the Annexstad Family Foundation

### *Featured Student Speaker*

I'd like to say thank you to all the donors who support scholarships at Boston College, and I would especially like to thank the Annexstad Family Foundation for their support of my BC education.

My Boston College story began long before I came to Chestnut Hill, and even before I was born. In 1996, my mother and father sought refuge in the United States after escaping the murderous regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. They escaped Iraq with \$50 in their pockets to settle in Dallas, Texas, and two short years later, I was born as the second daughter of two resilient Kurdish refugees.

My parents worked tirelessly to raise our family in a nation that was absolutely foreign to them as they put together the remains of their fragile Kurdish identity. We lived a humble and wholesome life. My father wasn't home often when I was growing up because he worked abroad as a translator for the United States government. He saw his work as a means to thank the country that had taken us in. I didn't see my mom all that often either, because she was working to support my older sister, Van, and me. And so Van became like my mom. She would pick me up at school, and we would walk home to our small house in Wylie, Texas. I'd start my homework on the living room table, and she would reheat food my mom had cooked for us the night before. One evening when I was in fourth grade, Van asked me about my aspirations. I told her that I wanted to go to the local community college, just like my mom had tried to do. Van laughed. She said that I could go somewhere much better. I knew that Van had a passion for a school that she hoped to attend, Boston College, thousands of miles away from our family home.

A couple of years later, Van began the college application process. I had been quietly watching her academic achievements, hoping to emulate her radiance and brilliance one day. But BC was not in Van's future. Unfortunately, I lost Van that year to an unexpected and symptomless heart disease. My older sister, my role model, and my maternal figure was suddenly taken away.

As I am sure you can imagine, 12-year-old Naren was absolutely in ruins. During my parents' long period of grief, our family dynamic completely reversed. My parents and my community fell into a deep depression and relied on me for support. I gathered



*Naren's sister Van*

the fragile remains of what little hope was left in my family. I stepped into Van's role as the oldest daughter of an immigrant household, raising my two little siblings, acting as emotional support for my parents, and translating for my mom and dad, who knew little English. By the time I was 13 years old, I was translating social security and tax documents into Kurdish for my parents.

By my senior year in high school, I was very anxious to leave Dallas. My house would forever be filled with memories of my sister, and my difficult experience at school during this time only made things worse. Each day, I was reminded of Van's achievements at a time when I was feeling down, exhausted, and frustrated. My environment was not conducive to academic and personal growth. I knew I was capable of more; Van had told me so! Her words echoed in my mind as I began the college application process. "You can go somewhere much better," she had said.

I spoke with my high school counselor about Boston College, to which she responded, "I would reconsider and apply to state schools instead." Thankfully, I did not listen to her. The wait for my BC letter seemed like forever. It was after calculus tutorials—March 30, 2016, exactly five years after Van died—that I received a letter from Boston College. It read, "Congratulations, we are delighted to offer you admission." For the first time in five years, I cried nonstop tears of joy with my friends.



*Gasson Hall in winter*

After just a few short months, I became a freshman at Boston College! Early that semester I was invited for coffee by a woman named Elin from the Annexstad Family Foundation. Elin gave me a warm smile and said, "Our foundation recognizes students who have overcome adversity, and provides them with scholarships to assist with tuition." Elin told me about Mr. and Mrs. Annexstad, who established their foundation to provide college scholarships to young people who, like themselves, overcame extraordinary challenges in life. I was overjoyed that they thought I was worth investing in. I was now even more motivated to succeed!

As the winter arrived with brutal cold and snow, I found warmth in my studies. I was absolutely entranced by the world of academia. Who knew harboring so much knowledge, on any given subject, could help a person grow in ways I couldn't conceive of! I worked with and learned from the most phenomenal professors at BC who shared the same passion as I did: justice.

I began navigating my academic career at BC with the help of Professor Ralf Gawlick, who is also of Kurdish descent. Professor Gawlick became like an uncle to me. He attended Kurdish cultural events, helped me prepare presentations on the Kurdish plight, and supported me every step of the way. He became the best mentor I could ever have asked for.

It was during my sophomore year internship with Congressman Joseph Kennedy that I met Professor Eve Spangler of BC's sociology department. That day was incredibly exciting, as I was to sit in on a foreign policy meeting with the congressman. I felt for the first time that I was able to put to use the knowledge I was acquiring. Upon entering the meeting, Professor Spangler and the congressman engaged in a spirited, but polite, debate. I was left in awe. I immediately signed up for one of Professor Spangler's classes for the next semester. From then on, we were no longer only professor and student; we were best friends.

That same academic year, I became immersed in understanding how the Middle East operates. I wanted to answer important questions about the flight of the Kurds. Why were civilians with a Kurdish identity victims of ethnic cleansing? My professors helped me apply the material I learned and the knowledge I gained to my own life experiences. Of particular impact was Professor David DiPasquale of the political science department, who taught me Islamic political philosophy. The material Professor DiPasquale taught in his classes completely changed my world perspective. I didn't know who I was anymore; it was that intense. I made it a point to continue taking one of his courses each semester until I graduated.

The information I had acquired through my classes, readings, and conversations motivated me to begin writing and documenting the experiences of Kurds. I published articles on the history of the oppression Kurds have endured, and about current conflicts, including the revolts in Iran. I also wrote for a larger American audience on how non-state actors like ISIS were formed. I looked at how global efforts could promote policies to ensure that people like my mom and dad, and all ethnic and religious minorities, including Kurds, Yazidis, and Assyrians, could attain justice and never have to flee their homeland again.



*Naren at Duhok refugee camp*

That summer, I traveled to a refugee camp in Duhok, Kurdistan, to distribute supplies which I had crowdfunded for and to work with survivors of ISIS. Given the contemporary social and political climate in Kurdistan, it wasn't safe for a woman to drive alone. My dad assisted me in finding a driver to get me to and from the refugee camps. He hired Hajim, who became a great friend. He too was Yazidi and had fled Sinjar when ISIS began invading.

My time in the camp was life-changing. I met a 14-year-old Yazidi artist, Ahlem, who had fled ISIS on foot with her family. Her paintings documented the experiences of the Yazidi people. With Ahlem's permission, I collected her paintings and sold them for her worldwide. There were customers from all corners of the world who became aware of the Yazidi plight through Ahlem's artwork.

At the refugee camp, I took photos of the artists with whom I worked, of religious leaders in the community, and of parents and their children. I took photos of my friend Hajim's family, his parents, and his wife, who was expecting a baby girl. Through my photos, I documented the experiences and the resilience of Kurdistan's Yazidi refugees. When I left Duhok, I assured Hajim, his wife, and the rest of my dear friends that I would see them again. Shortly after my return to BC, I received a Facebook message from Hajim. There on my computer screen was a photo of a precious baby girl, with a message that read, "Meet your little sister, we named her Van, after your older sister. We hope she resembles you in how you seek to help those in need with your natural humanitarianism."

Returning to my junior year at BC, I was excited to see my professors and mentors, to show them my photographs, and to share my incredible experiences at the Duhok refugee camp. Professor John Michalczyk of the film studies department allowed me to explore the world of film. He supported me in my endeavors, providing me the opportunity to communicate to a wider audience through documentary film. I published writings which attracted the attention of the foreign policy advisor to Marco Rubio and the chief spokesman for Colonel



*Hajim and his wife, with baby daughter who they named Van*



Myles Caggins III of the United States' Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq. Senator Elizabeth Warren wrote, thanking me for my work in the Middle East. She began, "Dear Naren" and ended with "strong women get it done." I was very moved and proud. BC's 4Boston service group, which hosts speakers who embody the notion of "men and women for others," asked me to speak about how I became involved in creating sustainable solutions for marginalized populations. Afterwards, many students inquired about how they too could participate in my projects.



*Naren with children at Duhok refugee camp*

Earlier this academic year, I was honored to display my photographs and to present at Harvard University on the struggles in Northern Syria during the Turkish invasions, and to exhibit my photographic work at Yale. I also began the process of taking the LSAT, applying to graduate schools, and I made sure to relish the chance to enjoy the company of my close friends before we'd all say our goodbyes. I took walks through campus to fully enjoy and immerse myself in BC's amazing architecture. The very design of campus incited pleasure in me, a pleasure that I couldn't get in the rundown suburbs I had grown up in.

As my time at BC winds down, I can't help but grow emotional when reflecting on my memories and the growth I have experienced here: joy, pain, and everything in between. I am also reminded that all of this would not have been possible without the generosity of the Annexstad family. I came to BC from nothing and I leave BC stronger, better prepared, and confident for any challenges life may throw at me. My Kurdish background, my family's refugee history, and my academic experiences at BC have made me particularly cognizant of and passionate about human rights law. Soon, I will hear back from various law schools. I hope to pursue law in the public sector, continuing my activism within a legal framework.



*Grotto inside an Assyrian church near the border of Syria*

My time at BC has been transformational. I know that none of my experiences in the last four years would have been possible without the Boston College admissions office offering me a spot in BC's Class of 2020, or without the incredible scholarship support that has allowed me to attend BC. I am not sure that I am capable of properly articulating how eternally grateful I am to the Annexstad family for providing me this opportunity. I have worked hard to ensure that Mr. and Mrs. Annexstad and Boston College know that their investment in me will be worthwhile. I have put forth every ounce of effort and energy, and many nights at O'Neill Library in the first-floor booths, working as hard as I could to thank my generous donors. I know that I would not be here today if it were not for Mr. and Mrs. Annexstad and the Annexstad Family Foundation.

Once again, I want to express my deepest appreciation to all of you who believe in BC students, and who provide them with incredible opportunities to succeed. Your gifts change lives, not only at BC, but around the world.