

July 22, 2011

Dear Mrs. Ahmad-Llewellyn,

Thank you so much for providing me with the opportunity to attend Adventures of the Mind 2011. It was truly a life changing experience being exposed to so many mentors and students from all walks of life. I learned much throughout those fast paced four days about everything from neuroscience to filmmaking.

One of the most unforgettable experiences I had was while attending a breakout session called "The Future of Education". The speakers were a professor at one of the nation's top research universities, an author and screen writer who was also an Ivy League graduate, and the Dean of Academics at the University hosting the conference. For the next hour I listened to them criticize the educational system and lecture about how students are more concerned with standardized testing and fitting a certain college profile than getting an education. As part of the handpicked research group that collaborates with the University of Pennsylvania I had already begun exploring these issues at school. In fact, as one of the senior leaders of the group, next year my classmates and I had begun exploring the correlation between student ability to achieve and their perception of their ability to do so affected by outside pressures and stress. The comments of the speakers made me examine my work from a new perspective. I began to think like a social scientist, as a participant in my work and not just an observer. In turn, I have become more critical of my behaviors as a student.

This experience reflects a new insight I gained from attending Adventures of the Mind as a whole. I learned to reexamine my behavior and to think less about the stereotypical markers of success and to think more about shaping my own requirements to succeed. Further, this lesson echoes your own motto of being the "boss of me".

Additionally, I want to thank you for believing in me as a youth. I will always remember you as a mentor because of the value you place on giving back and providing opportunities for people who otherwise would not have them, which is a lesson in itself.

In future years, I hope to help out Adventures of the Mind in any way possible. Thank you for beginning my journey with this amazing program.

Sincerely,
Hibba Meraay

Miss Porter's School
Middletown CT

Muslim Student Influences Miss Porter's Experience

Starts Club At School To Raise Awareness And Tolerance Of Different Spiritual Paths

By MELISSA PIONZIO, mpionzio@courant.com
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Since joining the Miss Porter's School student body as a sophomore last year, Hibba Meraay has already made her mark. Meraay, an American Muslim of Syrian-Palestine descent, dreams of becoming a diplomat and helping promote peace in the Middle East. In her quiet yet determined way, through several initiatives she helped implement at the all-girl private school, the 16-year-old seems well on her way to achieving her goal.

The school already "had some interfaith panels, conversations around different faiths," said Meraay. "From those events came the idea of having an actual club and raising awareness and to have more opportunity for students."

The name of the spirituality club is Dehateha, which Meraay says is a Native American word for enlightenment. The club raises awareness and promotes tolerance of different spiritual paths and offers participants the chance to learn about different beliefs. Movie nights, group discussions and other events based on spirituality help further that goal, she said.

"I wanted to foster awareness and create a space where students could come and have questions answered," said Meraay, who plans to expand club activities outside the campus by arranging visits to houses of worship, such as a mosque, Quaker meetinghouse or Hindu temple. "Although everyone is open to other ideas and faiths, these visits will open the door to additional experiences."

Meraay doesn't let opportunities pass her by. A lifelong resident of Middletown, where she lives with her parents, sister and brother, she was attending a summer program through the city's public school system when she heard about A Better Chance. Founded in 1963, the organization helps academically talented students of color in grades 6 to 12 gain access to academically rigorous schools.

Meraay quickly realized A Better Chance could help further her goals, so she applied and was accepted, leading to her acceptance at Miss Porter's. "They were my support system to get me here," she said.

Meraay said she liked the idea of attending a preparatory school that would challenge her academically, but was also looking for a supportive atmosphere and a sense of community. She found it at Miss Porter's, she said.

“The best surprise I found about coming to Miss Porter’s was not all about academics, but the support I received and the continuing opportunities,” said Meraay, whose brother Mohammed was recently selected as A Better Chance scholar. “A lot of my work is focused around the idea of community service and my mentality that I want to contribute to the atmosphere that has made me who I am.”

Laura Danforth, associate head of school at Miss Porter’s, said she has gotten to know Meraay very well through their daily conversations, and her occasional visits to the Meraay home for dinner. Meraay, said Danforth, takes her learning very seriously, and is an extraordinary individual when it comes to service work and raising awareness about diversity.

“I find Hibba is like an old soul. She is just such a thoughtful young woman, very deliberate with her education and the decisions that she makes about herself and her life,” said Danforth. “In my 30 years in boarding school life, she is just one of the most kind and considerate kids I know. I think the teachers experience that as well and she is just highly respected by her teachers and the students.”

Although Miss Porter’s has provided Meraay with plenty of new experiences, including participation in crew, Model U.N. and the chance to mentor younger girls at Hartford’s Grace Academy, Meraay has her own gifts to share. In addition to the spirituality club, she helped create a Zen Den where students can mediate, pray and think. Through her work with the More Than Me Foundation, she held a T-shirt fundraiser to help pay for the education of a girl in Libya for one year.

“The slogan was ‘Be a Woman,’ ” she said of the T-shirts. “There is always the stereotypical view of being a man; Be a Woman is a way to represent mutual bonding ... and women helping one another in the positive light of empowerment.”

As the school year wanes and summer approaches, Meraay and her family are preparing for a visit to Syria to see relatives. While there, she’ll get started on a documentary about her family heritage. She is curious, she said, about life in Syria and wants to show through her project what life is like in her family’s homeland, which has become more complicated lately by unrest, protests and violence.

“Living here, but also experiencing life in the East, I’m more interested in the reality of it and how people live their day-to-day life,” she said. “There are misconceptions about life in the Middle East. I want to show a glimpse into the real life of a Middle Eastern Muslim.”