Rhodes Scholar's talent for connecting cultures blossomed in Greenville

By Brock Letchworth
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Aisha Saad credits a close-knit community in Greenville and personal connections here for laying the foundation for her research and travels the past three years.

Since graduating in 2005 from J.H. Rose High School, Saad has dedicated herself to connecting cultures both on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill campus and internationally.

The 21-year-old's endeavors paid off last weekend when she was named one of 32 Rhodes Scholars nationwide.

The Rhodes Scholarship will take Saad to England’s Oxford University where she will seek a master's degree in nature, society and environmental policy. She eventually plans to go into environmental law where she will focus on policy development domestically and internationally.

Saad said she spent part of Monday morning sending e-mails of appreciation to former teachers and others whom she said helped influence her.

"Because Greenville is such a close community, it was a great place for me to learn how to be a public figure in a community setting where I was a part of the minority," Saad said. "I learned how to bridge a lot of background gaps, a lot of social gaps and communication gaps. There are so many people that I will not forget, people who helped me get into the mind-set of thinking big and connecting across disciplines."

Saad’s family moved from Cairo to the United States when she was 6. Her father accepted a teaching position in East Carolina University’s Department of Construction Management in 1999, bringing the family to Greenville.

The oldest of five children, Saad attended E.B. Aycock Middle School for two years before advancing to J.H. Rose. The family moved to Cary following her graduation in 2005.

Pitt County Schools officials could not confirm Monday whether Saad is the first graduate from the county to receive the honor.

She is on pace to graduate in May with degrees in environmental health sciences in the UNC School of Public Health and Spanish in the College of Arts and Sciences. She is fluent in Arabic and Spanish and has reading proficiency in French and conversational proficiency in Hindi.

She was the recipient of the Morehead-Cain Scholarship.

During the past three years, Saad has interned with government ministries in Peru and in the blood diseases ward of Cairo University’s Teaching Hospitals and hiked a couple of the world’s largest mountain ranges.

She also spent last summer mediating for Cherokee Investment Partners in Bhopal, India, where the firm’s plan for cleaning the Union Carbide site in Bhopal, India, fueled a negative reception from activist groups.

Saad said she noted during her Rhodes Scholarship interview Saturday how she thought her experiences as a Muslim in Greenville prepared her for that role.

"At times, it was difficult after 9/11, when public response was really puzzled about how to interact with the Muslim community or how to receive them, but in Greenville everyone overlaps at the Little League baseball
games, at neighborhood cookouts and those types of things. There is so much of that community overlap that it bridges across the personal connections, and to me, that has been an approach that I have taken into even environmental issues. Looking at mediation with one-on-one personal connection has been my entryway into trying to bridge different perspectives."

Ihab Saad, Aisha's father, says her efforts are consistent throughout her family.

"We came from a different background, growing up in Egypt," he said. "We are of the Muslim faith so we felt that it was a responsibility of ours to try to bridge some of the gaps that people put between different cultures. All of us have been quite active in the community trying to build bridges and serving in whatever capacity we can to get a better understanding of who we are and how we can be a valuable part of society."

Worldwide, about 85 Rhodes Scholars are selected annually. The scholarship provides tuition, fees and a stipend for living expenses for up to three years.

Saad is the 42nd Rhodes Scholar from the UNC-Chapel Hill since the award debuted in 1904.

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A coastline in crisis

JACK BETTS, The Charlotte Observer
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RALEIGH - Perhaps nowhere is the law of unintended consequences more vivid than on North Carolina's Outer Banks.

There, in the depths of the Great Depression, well-intentioned engineers built a barrier of sand dunes from the Virginia state line down the banks, past the sharp westerly turn at Cape Hatteras and on to the end of Ocracoke Island’s southerly inlet.

It was a noble idea: It protected the sandy lanes the sturdy Bankers used in their daily efforts to wrest a living from the shifting soil and nearby sea. It allowed Banks residents who had long lived on the sound side to move closer to the ocean. It allowed the state to pave Rt. 12 right down the banks, opening up the Banks to tourism and bringing up a measure of prosperity once unimaginable there.

And it backfired. Building a barrier that would stop the ocean from washing over the flat stretches and replenishing the islands with new sand guaranteed that the Banks would become narrower, riskier places vulnerable to the sea. The ocean scoured away sand in front of the barrier, eroded its base, broke through the dunes and began gobbling up Rt. 12 in places up and down the Outer Banks.

The highway, says East Carolina University coastal geologist Stan Riggs, has "gone to sea" many times over the years as state transportation officials have had to rebuild the highway farther from the encroaching sea.

The disappearing beachfront up and down the state’s barrier islands, all the way to the South Carolina line, reflects the same concerns: The building of barriers has had an unintended consequence of more beach erosion and prompted communities to spend millions on sand replenishment to save their beaches.

Sometimes these projects work nicely to rebuild beaches; often they, too, erode away in hurricanes and other storms. It is an endless fight against an inexorable foe.

That's one reason why Riggs, who has painstakingly measured N.C. coastal changes for more than three decades, and five colleagues have come up with a vivid guide to how this state's coastline developed, how it has changed rapidly in the past seven decades -- and how global warming and sea level rise might dramatically change it again. It's called "North Carolina's Coasts in Crisis," available at www.coastal.geology.ecu.edu/NCCOHAZ/.

Among other things, it urges the state to develop a management plan to cope with results of devastating, Katrina-like storms. That might mean withdrawing from parts of a dramatically reshaped island chain and creating opportunities to take advantage of a "String of Pearls" with destination villages along the northeastern coast. There would be "Islands of Opportunity" along the southeastern coast where barrier islands are much closer to the mainland. There would be more inlets, smaller islands and less land in many places, altering the tourism economy but not eliminating it. It will have to change, just as the coastal face
has changed over time.

Anyone who has seen a photograph of the Outer Banks taken from outer space has no doubt spotted the curious curving line running from near Lake Drummond in the Great Dismal Swamp down to a point west of Cape Lookout. That line shows where North Carolina's coastline was about 80,000 years ago, when sea level was 20 to 25 feet higher than it is today.

But the islands have been in constant change. About 7,000 years ago much of what we call Eastern N.C. was solid ground. About 1,100 years ago, what we call Pamlico Sound was drowned in a huge body of water; much of the Outer Banks was below water. When the first settlers arrived in the 16th century, they noted a series of short barrier islands punctuated with many inlets. Obviously, our geologic history reflects a long series of big changes on the coast.

Now we're in for more change. Sea level is rising at a rate of up to 1.5 feet per 100 years and beaches are eroding at a rate of up to 17 feet a year on some parts of the Outer Banks. It's time to adapt.

"We must accept these changes as inevitable but we seem reluctant to do so," the report from Riggs and his colleagues notes. "This is why our coasts are in crisis."

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