Daniel Chahla, United Arab Emirates, 2009

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My parents are refugees of the Lebanese civil war. I am the youngest of four first-generation children raised to do what we loved and to do it the best we can. My parents implored that we use education as the keystone to our personal development. During my humble upbringing in Saint Paul, Minnesota, I developed a keen interest in technology. I instinctively developed a passion for repairing broken electronics at a young age. I started to experiment with hardware and software as I repaired broken electronics others had discarded. I came to combine this hands-on learning with my work at the Geek Squad. This enabled me to see technology through the eyes of the developer as well as the end user. Much of my work revolved around listening to customers citing their problems, fixing the issue, and explaining to them how and why the problem happened. In each of these phases, I underwent countless iterations of learning by discovery. Intuitively, I designed an innovative software idea that Apple initially invested in and abandoned after discovering I was only 17 years old. Shortly thereafter I founded and operated my own non-profit technical support center with the prospects of gaining credibility in the real world. In return for services, my clients donated to Human Efforts in Aid of Lebanon (HEAL). By my 19th birthday, my company (First-VM) had raised over $30,000 for refugees like my parents. With the support of St. Paul Central's exceptional faculty I was honored with a number of scholarships. My strong support network within the Twin Cities compelled me to attend the University of Minnesota.

Within my first semester, I desired to gain a more international perspective. The large influx of growth in Dubai along with its Bedouin roots enticed me. Without the Gilman Scholarship I would not have been able to afford to attend the American University of Dubai. While abroad, I took mostly business and political science courses that offered an extremely unique international perspective. This perspective not only came from my professors, but also my peers. I had the opportunity to learn from the local Emiratis.

Since graduating, I have founded my own web design company in Minneapolis. I recently expanded my developing wings by generating cross platform applications for mobile devices. I focused on designing an interactive user experience that allows non-tech savvy individuals to be rich but intuitive.

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Follow-on Service Project

Outside of school, I immersed myself in Dubai's attractions, but my eye often wandered to the immigrant constructions workers who labored at the city's numerous building sites. I was able to find funding to buy these migrant workers first aid kits. One hot day, I received an email from the Gilman Scholarship inviting me to an Education Without Borders event happening in Dubai. I researched the event online and applied to set up a booth. In the following weeks, I was able to map a cost effective plan to set up first-aid kits in dense construction zones. With a $2,500 donation, my Follow-on Service Project ultimately benefitted 30,000 labor workers, giving them new access to proper sanitization and bandage equipment. I gave a presentation at my home campus about this outreach to spread awareness of the Gilman Scholarship and how involved one can be to learn from and help your community no matter where in the world.