

Montgomery Scholars Program Newsletter

# SCHOLARLY PURSUITS

VOLUME 22 | ISSUE 35 | FALL 2023



## Another Year of Firsts



MONTGOMERY SCHOLARS  
MONTGOMERY COLLEGE

From the Director's Desk	2
Congratulations, Class of 2023!	4
Kudos to Our Beacon 2023 Participants and Winners	5
Interview with Anna Chacon '22	6
Interview with Viola Clune '22	8
Where Are You Now?	10

## GIVING

We encourage the Scholars community and friends to give to the program. A gift, no matter its size, is really helpful at a time when educational funding is scarce. You can make your gift at our secure, online giving site: [montgomerycollege.edu/onlinegiving](https://montgomerycollege.edu/onlinegiving). Click on "Select an area of support" and then click "Other" and type "Montgomery Scholars" in the box.

You can also send a check made payable to Montgomery College Foundation and write "Montgomery Scholars" on the memo line. Send your check to:

Montgomery College Foundation  
9221 Corporate Blvd.  
Rockville, MD 20850

**Thank you so much!**

Cover photos: Courtesy of Anna Chacon and Viola Clune



## FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

**Dear Scholars, Parents, and Friends,**

Since the Montgomery Scholars program was founded in 1999 and our first class graduated in 2001, we have seen our alumni go out into the world and establish their careers. I think I speak for everyone in the Scholars family when I say that we are very fortunate and privileged to follow these outstanding individuals and see them make their place in the world.

We are so accustomed to hearing wonderful, fantastic news from our alumni that no accomplishment or achievement is surprising at this point; in fact, I am surprised when we hear of something that hasn't yet been accomplished. I'm proud to share with you what I believe are a number of firsts. **Aaron Kaufman**, Class of 2008, won a seat in the Maryland House of Delegates in last year's District 18 election. Class of 2012's **Jonathan Jayes-Green's** profile and contributions to social justice can be found on a display at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. Additionally, Jonathan is currently on a full scholarship at Harvard University, pursuing a master's degree in public administration. **Viola Clune**, Class of 2022, transferred directly to Yale University after receiving generous scholarship offers from Williams College and Amherst College, among others. Viola is pursuing a degree in history, while keeping up with dance and trying her hand at journalism. **Anna Chacon**, Class of 2022, became our first Jack Kent Cooke Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship winner. After spending a semester at the University of Maryland, College Park, she transferred to the University of Utah, where she is pursuing a history degree. Both Viola and Anna have remarkable stories to tell, and you can read more about their journeys in this issue of *Scholarly Pursuits*.

These are, of course, only a few of the countless stories of Scholars doing amazing things, year in and year out. If we missed your story, we'd love to hear it. Send it to us at [mcscholars@montgomerycollege.edu](mailto:mcscholars@montgomerycollege.edu) so that we can share it with the rest of the Scholars family.

Outside the classroom, we had an unusual first with our annual trip to Asheville and Swannanoa in North Carolina. Instead of following Traditional Song Week with our activities in Asheville, we had to schedule our extra Swannanoa activities ahead of the week due to conflicts with Montgomery College's summer class schedules. Our students got to experience the charming community before The Gathering, which meant there were many Ubers and Lyfts to Asheville during the week. Who can blame them?

We look forward to seeing many more firsts—keep them coming!

**John W. Wang, Ph.D.**  
Director, Montgomery Scholars  
[john.wang@montgomerycollege.edu](mailto:john.wang@montgomerycollege.edu)

## Firsts for Scholars



Aaron Kaufman '08



Jonathan Jayes-Green '12



Viola Clune '22



Anna Chacon '22

## Class of 2024 Annual Trip to Swannanoa



The Class of 2024 visited the Thomas Wolfe Memorial.



Scholars learned how to play the Native American flute.



Students had a river day.



Scholars participated in a Friday evening performance.

# CONGRATULATIONS, CLASS OF 2023!



**Raemont Afable** (Watkins Mill High School) recently joined the budget panel for the student government association, where it has been interesting to learn how much preparation goes into club events. He continues to study mechanical engineering, taking classes like thermodynamics. Earlier this year, he received the Herb Block Scholarship. He is focusing on gaining as much information as he can while at MC.

**Ryan Afable** (Watkins Mill High School) has been accepted to the BSN program at the Universities at Shady Grove.

**Marielle Amigos** (Albert Einstein High School) is finishing her last semester at Montgomery College. She is completing some prerequisites for nursing school and has applied to the University of Maryland School of Nursing at the Universities at Shady Grove for spring 2024. She is still the vice president of the Medical Careers Club and is also playing her last season of volleyball as one of the team's captains. While she doesn't plan to continue college volleyball after MC, she does plan to continue playing for fun in leagues and tournaments.

**Wanjiru Ayatta** (Richard Montgomery High School) was accepted into Penn State and the University of Arizona. She received the Indian Health Service Scholarship, Transfer Tuition Scholarship, and the Arizona Native Scholars Grant. Wanjiru has transferred to the University of Arizona and is pursuing a bachelor's degree in medicine with medical school in mind. She previously worked at the National Institutes of Health, assisting in research about mutations in miRNA loci. She participated in the NIH Summer Research Program to continue helping in the research process.

**Julianne Barros** (Gaithersburg High School) is currently studying at the University of Maryland, working toward a B.A. in economics. She earned the Maryland Transfer Scholarship. She is adjusting to the big school environment, and sometimes misses the small classes she had in Scholars at MC.

**Jasmine Hall** (Berman Hebrew Academy) was accepted into the University of Maryland, American University, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Maryland Institute College of Art, and the Corcoran School of Art at the George Washington University. Jasmine participated in the Johns Hopkins University Humanities Collaboratory in the summer of 2023. She is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree at the University of Maryland with a double major in studio art and American studies.

**Elizabeth Porter** (Winston Churchill High School) has been finishing her B.A. in mathematics with a minor in data science at Hood College. She received the Presidential Scholarship and has been enjoying the rigorous honors program at Hood. She has been active in the Model UN Club, Math Club, and Feminist Student Union.

**Sudha Sudhaker** (Sherwood High School) plans on pursuing a degree in nursing at the University of Maryland. She is currently working toward finishing her general studies STEM degree and completing her nursing prerequisite classes at MC before transferring.

**Danny Velado** (Our Lady of Good Counsel High School) is pursuing a B.A. in vocal music and music education at the University of Maryland. He has been involved with the Mighty Sound of Maryland as a tenor saxophonist and continues to sing with Brothers' Flanagan, a professional group, outside of school. He is currently studying under the Frederick Douglass Scholarship.

**Sam Wilbur** (Covenant Life High School) is a recipient of the Fredrick Douglass Scholarship and is studying to become a philosophy, politics, and economics major with a creative writing minor at the University of Maryland.



Julianne Barros



Danny Velado



Sudha Sudhaker



Jasmine Hall



## Kudos to Our Beacon 2023 Participants and Winners

In June, 14 Montgomery Scholars were selected to present at the 2023 Beacon Conference, a conference that has celebrated and showcased outstanding student work from community colleges in the Mid-Atlantic region since 1993. **Wanjiru Ayatta, Ivanna Badra, Julianne Barros, Jasmine Cruz, Jasmine Hall, Neha Jehangir, Essi Kouakou, Karter MacLean, Rio Miura, EJ Nyameh, Ana Paz, Liz Porter, Diego Santos, and Jake Speer** were all selected to share their work at the conference, some with posters, and others with full presentations.

Professor Rebecca Eggenschwiler and Dr. Nathan Zook were this year's Capstone mentors, and Dr. Andree Betancourt was the speech coach. Most of the selected scholars and their mentors made their way to Rockland Community College in Suffern, New York, where they met and mingled with other community college students and professors.

The Scholars celebrated several first-place winners at the conference.

**Julianne Barros** won the international studies category for her work "Brazil, an International Symbol: A Model for Democratic Corruption." In sociology, **Wanjiru Ayatta** took first for her work "Examination of Infertility Solutions: The Imbalance in Global Distribution." **EJ Nyameh** won in chemistry for his paper "The Environmental Implications of EVs in a Globalized World." In women's/gender studies/LGBTQ studies, **Ana Paz** took first place for her work "Narrowing the Gender Pay Gap: The Solution for Gender Equity."

Congratulations to all participating and winning Scholars! We are looking forward to next year's conference, which will be held on Friday, June 7, at Dutchess Community College in New York.



Neha Jehangir gives her presentation.



Karter MacLean presents his poster.



## Finding Your Place: An Interview with Anna Chacon

*Anna Chacon graduated from the Montgomery Scholars program in 2022. She was the program's first Scholar to receive the prestigious Jack Kent Cooke Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship. She currently attends the University of Utah. This interview has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.*

### Professor Wang

I wanted to ask you if you could tell us a little about your background prior to coming to Scholars and what drew you to Scholars. What was going on at the time? What brought you to us?

### Anna Chacon

I really struggled with some mental health and personal issues in high school. So I took time away from school in my junior year, which was, of course, the crux culminating year of figuring all of my life out. I was in [advanced placement classes], an honors student, and then when this happened in junior year, I had to take about a semester off. I had to drop all of my classes that I was taking for that year. It kind of just disrupted everything, and I felt knocked down because I was in on-level classes for the first time in my high school experience, and I was struggling to even go to school. For a while I wasn't planning on returning to school because of that, because of things along with mental health.

### Professor Wang

I'm so sorry to hear all of that.

### Anna Chacon

Yeah, it was a thing. Then I was planning on dropping out and getting my GED, for about two months. I think one day I felt like I worked too hard to just let all of this go. So, I recognized that I needed to dial things back a bit and that I wasn't really going to be able to do the things that I had

hoped right out of high school. I wasn't even sure what I wanted to do at that point because I was just so out of it and really disconnected from my goals and any sense of purpose.

I felt just kind of ... off my track. I applied for Scholars because I was really looking for an opportunity to be able to afford to go to college. It felt like a good opportunity for a lot of reasons. It was the humanities focus, which was really what I was drawn to at that point. So I applied, not really thinking anything would come from it. At that point I was working full time and going to school and I was just planning on paying my way through MC, but, when I heard back I was like, "Oh wow! This is really great!"

### Professor Wang

Can you talk a little bit about your experience as a Scholar? How was it for you? What did you get out of it?

### Anna Chacon

I mean, it was definitely different because of the pandemic.

### Professor Wang

Oh, right.

### Anna Chacon

Right? So I definitely went into it with a different idea because when I applied for it, the pandemic wasn't even a thing. So I had a whole different preconception of what my first two years would look like.

### Professor Wang

It was all Zoom, right?

### Anna Chacon

Yeah, part of it was also I was so shocked by the rigor, the immediate rigor of it. I wasn't expecting that, especially with the preconceived notion of community college in my head. [The classes] were different, and challenging, and difficult for me. There was a point in there, in the first semester, where I was like, "I can't do this; this is too much."

I don't really know what it was ... actually, I do know what it was. It was everybody being so supportive of me. It was Professor Sen, Dr. Moran—everybody was so supportive. All the faculty really had my back and that was the first

time where I felt supported in an academic sense and not just going along with the machine—that everyone was really there to help me and saw me as a person.

So that pushed me on until spring, and then I really started feeling inspired academically. The mixing of the classes and the interdisciplinary approach was something that spoke to me because I was like, "I like all of this stuff, I can't just choose one." I started really enjoying what I was learning and what I was doing, and it gave me this sense of purpose. It was a short-term goal of finishing my degree, but it was something that I enjoyed doing, and it made me feel good to work on it, even when everything in my life was a hot mess.

### Professor Wang

You know, we in the Scholars program are very familiar with the idea of the cohort experience and that community of support that we offer to our students. Can you talk a little bit about that? If there is anything you want to say about it to a prospective student?

### Anna Chacon

Yeah, I would say that I definitely didn't understand that either—that concept of being with a group of people who are there to support you and you're a part of this community. That was something that I didn't grasp until everybody was there to support me. It was really subtle; it wasn't really everybody gathering around, like "Hooray!" I genuinely felt connected with everybody that I was working with, whether it was faculty or whether it was my peers. That was really unique, especially for it being the pandemic.

I think that connection is something I initially overlooked. I initially didn't understand the value of it but then in those moments where I was really struggling and where I didn't even realize that I needed support, everybody was there for me. I felt very involved in my own learning experience, and for example, me and [two other scholars] are best friends.

### Professor Wang

And you didn't know each other before Scholars?

### Anna Chacon

No, never met each other, and we are close. We have sleepovers all the time. They're my best friends. I wouldn't have been able to make those kinds of friendships without Scholars, and that was something I came into Scholars without. I didn't have any close friends or peers who were really my age.

### Professor Wang

Can you tell us a little about your experience with the Jack Kent Cooke Award?

### Anna Chacon

That was insane.

### Professor Wang

It's a highly prestigious—some would say the most prestigious—transfer scholarship in America, and you were our first winner. It's awarded to 50–75 students per year out of the entire United States, and you were one of them.

### Anna Chacon

It was one of those things where I was like, wow. It shocks me every time I really think about it like that. That was something that my Scholars counselor recommended to me, Professor Kleine. She was talking to me about my transfer plans and at this point I was like, "I have no clue. I'm

just trying to get through these two years and everything else in my personal life is still wreaking havoc on me." I didn't even know where I was going to go, or what I was going to do and how I was going to do it. I found myself again in this position like I did two years prior, where I had no idea what I was doing and no idea how I was going to afford it.

I knew that I wanted to keep studying because I knew I wanted to figure out what I wanted to do, and at this point I really felt for the first time that I was enjoying learning. That is something Scholars gave me. I remember Professor Kleine was like, "You should look into the Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship."

#### **Professor Wang**

I'm so glad she told you that.

#### **Anna Chacon**

At this point I knew the statistics; I knew how selective it was. But I decided to apply, and I spent a good amount of time working on my essay and writing my essay about my personal struggles and experiences, and at this point I was really struggling with housing, so that was a main focus of mine. I wrote all of that down and I was very transparent about everything, and that's one of the things that I stand by now, transparency and being an open book.

Then, a few months later, I heard from some fellow Scholars who had applied. They were like, "Did you get an email?" and I was like, "What are you talking about?"

#### **Professor Wang**

The finalists.

#### **Anna Chacon**

Yeah, and so then I checked my email and I saw that, and I was like, "Okay, all right, I don't know what this means, but here [are] all these names that I recognize of these semifinalists, people who are amazing, who are brilliant, who are driven." So, it was nice, but I still wasn't really holding on to a lot of hope at that point.

A few months later I was sitting on a couch, and I just had one of those moments where I was like, "I haven't checked my email, I need to check my email," and I opened my email and I saw "Jack Kent Cooke" and my stomach just dropped because I hadn't heard from them in months. "Jack Kent Cooke Award Recognition." I just started crying because I was like: "What? This isn't for me." I told myself for so long that it wasn't for me, it wasn't meant for me, I wouldn't get it, and I saw it and I was like, "That's not real," and I just started crying, and I yelled, "Mom, I got the scholarship." And she started crying and she started yelling and really everything kind of felt like it was coming together at that point, and I felt so invigorated because I was thinking that I've tried for so long not to give up on myself and to have hope, and now there's this foundation that's like, "We have hope in you, we're going to help you through this, we're going to find what it is to get you to where you need to be." That was amazing.

#### **Professor Wang**

Oh, that's awesome. It's like \$50,000 a year?

#### **Anna Chacon**

Yeah, \$55,000 a year.

#### **Professor Wang**

Tell us a bit about what you're doing now.

#### **Anna Chacon**

I went to UMD for my fall 2022 semester, and that was another instance where it was definitely a shock of how different it was.

#### **Professor Wang**

A huge school, yeah.

#### **Anna Chacon**

I didn't really feel like I had a community there, but I still was feeling really fulfilled from an educational perspective and really enjoying the classes that I took, like I had this feeling and declared my major as history, and I'm so glad that I did because I didn't realize how much of a passion it was of mine.

That definitely stemmed from Scholars because of the interdisciplinary focus, but also how that focused on history so much. I studied history for the first semester, and then at [that] point I really needed a break from Maryland. I went to Denver to visit a friend, then to Park City, Utah, to visit a friend, and then I went down to Chile for the first time to visit my family. Just trying to see, just trying to explore, just trying to get out. I felt really trapped in Maryland and at UMD. I felt stuck. My cousins in Chile told me, "You should reach out to your scholarship because I feel like they'll support you with this." And they did.

#### **Professor Wang**

The Jack Kent Cooke people?

#### **Anna Chacon**

Yeah. Right away, they were like, "Take some time off, defer for a semester and you'll figure this out. Figure out whether you just need time away from school and you need to go back to UMD." They were really understanding. So, I took the spring semester off and the summer, and throughout that I went back to Park City, Utah and I worked as a lift operator at a ski resort, and I learned how to snowboard. I had so much fun.

#### **Professor Wang**

I bet.

#### **Anna Chacon**

It was such an amazing community of people who were living their lives without care about the world's perspective, and people who were from all different backgrounds. I lived with someone who was from Chile, I lived with someone who was from Taiwan, and then a bunch of people from Florida. People from all over the world and all these people came to the ski industry to have fun and to do what they want and be around people they want to be around, and I found that really inspiring. Then I had this little voice in my head that was like, "You could just go to the University of Utah." When I brought it up to the Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship, they were all for it. They were like, "Yeah, absolutely, apply for it," and it's been an amazing decision.

#### **Professor Wang**

So you applied to the University of Utah.

#### **Anna Chacon**

Yeah, and I got in, and I've loved it. This is my first semester. I'm living in Salt Lake [City], and I'm going to "the U" and I'll be working at the ski resort, where I've got an amazing job. I'm working at these top snowboard shops with these professional snowboarders, getting to try all these top snowboards just for fun. So, I found this great balance. It has been an incredibly supportive, great experience.

#### **Professor Wang**

That's amazing ... what a story. Of course, Jack Kent Cooke made it possible for you to do this.

#### **Anna Chacon**

Yeah, exactly.

#### **Professor Wang**

If you were to reflect back, can you tell us a little bit about how Scholars has helped you get to where you are now?

#### **Anna Chacon**

Well, to sum it all up, Scholars really gave me support and a sense of hope in a moment when I didn't really have that.

#### **Professor Wang**

I'm so glad we were able to be a part of that. This is something that I have trouble conveying to our prospective students. I say you get a cohort experience, we have very supportive faculty and staff, but they have no idea what we're talking about because all they know is high school.

#### **Anna Chacon**

Yeah, that's one of the things that I think about, having transferred to UMD and University of Utah and seeing that difference. Seeing the fact that nobody really cares about you at bigger schools like that. You might be able to make a certain kind of connection with a few people, but it's a lot lonelier and more isolated and you are there for yourself and by yourself. That's something that I didn't recognize because in high school your teachers will have a relationship with you, they care about you, you have counselors that will care about you to a degree, but you don't get this community that is so supportive and cares, genuinely cares about you as a person, and that's something that a lot of experiences in general in our world lack, but specifically education-wise. You don't get that kind of support at bigger schools; you don't even get that kind of support in outside classes at MC. Even in the regular MC course load, you don't find that.

#### **Professor Wang**

Right. Especially with big public schools. You're just on your own. So, are you starting your junior year right now?

#### **Anna Chacon**

I'm technically between my junior and senior [year]. So, this spring semester I'll be a senior.

#### **Professor Wang**

Looking ahead, what to do after graduation?

#### **Anna Chacon**

I really have been enjoying volunteering with this homeless foundation, so I'm thinking about social work, a master's in social work. [The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation has] opportunities for me if I want to pursue a master's or even a law degree. If I'm an "outstanding Jack Kent Cooke scholar," then I can apply for up to \$100,000. So, that's definitely something that I'm thinking a lot about, but I do recognize that I want to narrow it down a bit more. So right now, I'm just trying different things and whatever it is that sticks with me.

#### **Professor Wang**

I was so glad that we were able to be a part of your journey, and it's so heartening to see you in a good place. We can't be happier for you.



# Taking a Chance with Transfer: An Interview with Viola Clune

*Viola Clune graduated from Montgomery Scholars in 2022. She is the first Scholar to transfer directly to Yale University, where she is studying history. This interview has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.*

## Professor Wang

Could you tell us a little bit about your background prior to joining Scholars and what led you to Scholars?

## Viola Clune

I did not always want to go to school. I went to Ridgeview Middle School and Quince Orchard High School. I always enjoyed school as much as anybody can. I love to read. In high school, especially, I really got into history. But I would say that there was some cognitive dissonance where the thought of college was very scary. I felt like in high school, I was finally coming into my own and figuring out who I was. A lot of that was beginning to be rooted in the communities that I was finding in the Montgomery County area, and dance was a big part of that, too. The thought of leaving that and starting all over was very intimidating. It just felt like such a big decision that I did not feel equipped to make at all.

I had known about Montgomery College, but I think I probably learned about the Scholars program in my junior year. At the time, it was like, humanities, interdisciplinary program. I don't have to make any big decisions. I can punt the big question of big school, little school, and West Coast, East Coast, for a while longer. And so, it just made sense.

## Professor Wang

Can you tell us a little bit about your experience through the Scholars program? What you thought of it?

## Viola Clune

I was on Zoom, so I'm sure that that impacted my experience. I really found, especially when I think of Scholars, the first thing that comes to mind is just the Core class with music, history, literature. While it was more work than I had experienced in high school, I found it really rewarding. I felt like I was being introduced to the academic world, so to speak, and just interacting with a bunch of—like in the case of literature, just classic literature that I'd never been exposed to. Then with history, learning history in, I guess, a more critical way. The first assignment that we had for Professor Moran's class stands out because we were looking at a source, but then seeing how it might not be accurate and questioning the assumptions that it makes. I think my growth as a student and scholar

and somebody who now is interested in academia definitely began with Scholars.

## Professor Wang

You're a history major, correct? When did you realize that's what you're going to do? High school? Scholars?

## Viola Clune

Yeah, pretty much high school. History was always my top choice, and then I considered other things, and then I think Scholars solidified it for sure.

## Professor Wang

You mentioned that you really appreciate the community you had built around you to find who you were. Was Scholars able to give you more of that or give you some of that? What was your experience like with the community aspect of the Scholars program?

## Viola Clune

I think it made me a lot more confident in who I was as a student. Actually, going back to the whole high school part where I decided that I wasn't going to apply to four-year schools, I think part of that was also rooted in insecurity. I just didn't think of myself in those [academic] terms. I think the Scholars program, the professors really helped me, one, become a better student, but also understand what type of student I was and what my interests really were and what I was good at and what I wasn't and needed to work on more. I think it just gave me a lot of confidence in that way.

## Professor Wang

So, you're now at Yale, been there for a little bit over a year, right? Can you tell me a little bit about your transfer process, and your decision-making and how you ended up where you are?

## Viola Clune

I applied to eight schools to transfer to and most of the schools I was applying to were small liberal arts colleges. The reason for that was I guess I was trying to transplant the Scholars' experience to a four-year school. At a smaller school you can kind of have something similar. I was pretty convinced that I was going to end up going to Williams College in Massachusetts.

## Professor Wang

They offered you a full scholarship, right?

## Viola Clune

Close, pretty close.

## Professor Wang

So did Amherst?

## Viola Clune

Yeah. So, I was pretty set on that, and [Williams College] admitted me very early. I was flown out, I got to visit the school, and you know, the person who directed the transfer program, you could kind of feel like there was a personal relationship building. And at that point, I hadn't heard back from Yale or the other two Ives that I applied to. But, I still was like, no matter what, I'm set on this. But, all of that kind of changes when you actually have an admission letter from Yale.

## Professor Wang

Yeah, yeah. It's tough to turn down.

**Viola Clune**

So, I definitely did feel like I had a different initial experience, where Yale only gave me, I think it was less than two weeks, to decide. Certainly [Yale] was not paying me to visit or really giving me time to visit. So those were all factors that I was weighing, but ultimately, I chose Yale. And I think what made me come to the decision was really thinking about the resources it had to offer, not just because it's Yale but because of its size, because of its location and its city, but also, it's less than two hours away from New York City. I felt like going through the application process, I was very focused on the academic side of who I was as a person. And then when I remembered, OK, I'm not just a student. I felt like I could only sort of be fully happy at a place like Yale versus Williams.

**Professor Wang**

How has it been at Yale so far? Tell us about your experiences there, what it has been like for you.

**Viola Clune**

I think like any experience it has positives and negatives. I would say, if this gives you an idea, others in my transfer cohort said that I have had one of the best transitions, so maybe that's something positive. I think in the beginning it was just hard being away from home and stuff. In terms of getting adjusted to classes here, I haven't felt that it's been too much of a big adjustment. I would say that the rigor of Scholars courses are very equally paired with this school. It wasn't anything shocking in terms of workload.

I think some of the challenges have been things with the Yale bureaucracy.

**Professor Wang**

Yeah, it's a big place.

**Viola Clune**

It is. I talked to a professor about this who went to Yale and now teaches here. He was first generation. He was saying how even though it has become a lot more diverse and accepts more different types of people, this system itself is still the same as when it wasn't diverse, and so it can still kind of feel like you're here, but you're always, you know, not fully here—not fully reaping all the benefits of the institution or having a completely comfortable place in it. I would say it's not a bad thing. I don't know if I want to be completely comfortable within this institution.

**Professor Wang**

Sure, sure.

**Viola Clune**

I would say those were challenges, especially coming from community college and, even more specifically, Scholars, where I had a very strong support system with faculty and even [administrators]. I could put faces to names of who's making decisions and who can advocate for me. I think it's a bit of a different story here, and I've struggled with that a little bit. I think socially I've had a pretty good experience, and I don't really know how to account for it. I think getting involved in things has been helpful. I guess one of the most important things in transferring, but not feeling like a transfer student constantly, is not only being friends with people who are transfer students. I have transfer friends, of course, who, you know,

we understand each other, but I think getting into a community where you can forget that you're a unique [matters].

**Professor Wang**

For the prospective students out there thinking about the Scholars program, but who may not really understand what it means to have that cohort experience or to have the student faculty support, is there anything you can offer to them to kind of give an idea of how that's affected you, what shaped you, or what's done for you?

**Viola Clune**

First, I would say that what you would get in Scholars, you're not going to get anywhere else. Maybe I shouldn't say that, but I'm pretty confident in that statement. I think whether it's a big school or a smaller school, having a cohort of 20–25 people, with professors who are keenly focused on you, is very unique. And in terms of the value that brings, especially for continuing your education, I think, as I was saying earlier, you'll leave Scholars feeling very secure in your abilities as a student.

I also think that the types of assignments, the things that you're reading in Scholars, you might read them in other college classes and other universities. What makes Scholars different is that you are taking on advanced and challenging coursework, but with this tremendous support system. You have fellow students who are doing it at the same time and learning with you. Then you have professors who are wanting to challenge you, but at the same time understanding you did just graduate high school and this is all new. I think having the support of both a cohort of students and then professors who are with you along the journey basically allows you to tackle this college-level coursework and especially within humanities, foundational humanities things, but knowing that you don't have to be perfect at it right away. It's not about succeeding ... I don't know. It's like you're learning.

**Professor Wang**

It's not just grades.

**Viola Clune**

Yeah. You have people who are supporting your learning and actually care about if it makes sense and if you're understanding it. It's not just like, "Oh, we're teaching it, and if you get it, that's nice."

**Professor Wang**

What are you doing now? What's going on this year? What are you looking forward to?

**Viola Clune**

I accidentally ended up in three graduate classes this semester.

**Professor Wang**

Accidentally? It doesn't sound like an accident.

**Viola Clune**

When I say accidentally, obviously I knew they were graduate classes, but it was not my intention to take graduate classes. For two of them, there were professors I wanted to take classes with, and they weren't teaching undergrad. I was like, "Oh, maybe I'll try to take their grad class."

What I didn't know was that Yale has a program where you can get a B.A. and M.A. in history at the same time if you take a certain number of grad classes and, I don't know, do some other things.

**Professor Wang**

Is that what you're doing?

**Viola Clune**

I think so. You apply at the end of this semester. I was already doing it unintentionally, so I'm like, "Oh, might as well continue with it."

**Professor Wang**

Yeah, might as well.

**Viola Clune**

It's really nice because I'm getting to interact with Ph.D. students who have the inside scoop and stuff, and [I'm] also just seeing if grad school, like getting a Ph.D. after undergrad, is something that I want to consider seriously.

**Professor Wang**

OK.

**Viola Clune**

I'm really enjoying that because it's just all history classes, so I just read and write a lot. But it's cool and fun. That's on the academic side of things. I am a member of Yale's Latin dance team, and I'm also an associate editor for *The New Journal*, which is a publication that is technically not Yale-affiliated but is published by Yale students. It tries to focus on New Haven and issues concerning the broader community. And I'm actually writing a piece for the first time.

**Professor Wang**

Oh, cool.

**Viola Clune**

[It is for] this coming issue. And it's about black hair care in New Haven. So that is exciting because I've never really done formal journalism, so it's something new.

**Professor Wang**

Fun stuff. Any shout-outs you want to give?

**Viola Clune**

Well, I would say that I have to shout out to Professor Moran because she was my first real history professor. Her guidance has been very helpful as I continue with history. And I would give a shout-out to you as well, not just because you're interviewing me, but I had never really had such strong writing critiques in high school. I wasn't used to getting a B on a paper, but it was very helpful.

**Professor Wang**

Haha! OK, any last words?

**Viola Clune**

I guess, last words would be, one, there's no stigma in going to community college. It is becoming a very popular pathway for people who want to continue and get a four-year degree and go beyond that. And there are so many people here, I mean from the people I transferred with coming from community colleges, but also Ph.D. and law students who went to community college first and ended up in Yale Law or getting a Ph.D. at Yale. So, there's that. For people who might be thinking about transferring from Scholars to a four-year school, I guess I would just say half the battle is thinking that you could even possibly get into a school. And so it never hurts to apply and see where it lands.

# WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

Here are some of the Scholars from the first 23 classes and their whereabouts. If anyone from the classes of 2001–2023 has an update for the newsletter, email [mcscholars@montgomerycollege.edu](mailto:mcscholars@montgomerycollege.edu) and we will include the information in the next issue.

## Class of 2004

**Sarah Dale (née Megorden) '04** had a baby girl, Hazel Colette, in August.

## Class of 2008

**Allison Obscura (née Butts) '08** joined the pediatrics department at Kaiser Permanente in May 2023. She is happy to be back in the D.C. area after living abroad in England, where her son was born in 2021, and Mexico. She counts herself lucky to be an alum of the Scholars Program.

## Class of 2012

**Jonathan Jayes-Green '12** is attending Harvard University on a full scholarship, pursuing a master's degree in public administration.

**Nat Pila '12** took a big step in his career at the District of Columbia Public Library by joining the Outreach and Inclusion Services Department. The end of Nat's first week on the outreach team happened to coincide with his four-year work anniversary. He is grateful for the opportunity and looking forward to working with people from many different walks of life. In the same week, Nat and his partner got a furry addition to the family: Pascal the Rascal. Adopted at 5 weeks old, Pascal is now a 3-month-old kitten who loves to play soccer, drink ice water from his special cup, and sleep on his favorite blanket.

## Class of 2014

**Daniel Garay '14** currently serves as a public affairs specialist with the District of Columbia Department of Buildings. He remembers that when he joined the Scholars program, he was challenged to think critically, collaborate fluidly, and communicate inventively in ways he never had before. He cherished his time in Scholars, and the tools he developed in the program have continued to serve him to this day.

## Class of 2015

**Sahar Naghibi '15** just finished her naturopathic doctorate at Bastyr University in Seattle, Washington, and is practicing as a naturopathic physician. She will be seeing patients in Maryland, Washington, and Montana in the months to come. She is passionate about using herbal medicine, pharmaceuticals, homeopathy, and nutrition to address her patients holistically. She has a deep reverence for the foundation of her education received at Montgomery Scholars because it developed her ability to think outside of the box and view the world critically and comprehensively—skills she now applies to medicine daily.

## Class of 2018

**Jennifer Sorto '18** married husband **Angelo Dias '18** in August of this year. She met Angelo in 2016 through the Scholars program. They both feel very lucky to have found each other at MC.

## Class of 2019

**Govita Etwaroo '19** currently works for Collins Aerospace/RTX Corporation, where she manages contracts with federal government and private clients. She plans on going to graduate school in the next couple of years, perhaps to study government contracting and

procurement law. Aside from her professional life and aspirations, Govita has rekindled her love of Indian classical dance. After an eight-year break, she started dancing again and recently performed for the Embassy of Guyana.

**Hiruni Fernando '19** received a B.A. in political science in May 2021 and an M.S. in applied political analytics in May 2023 from the University of Maryland, College Park. He currently works as a data scientist. He has a lot more free time since finishing his M.S., so he has recently taken up rock climbing as a hobby.

**Nina Lao '19** finished her bachelor's degree in public health science at the University of Maryland, College Park. During her last semester of college, she was hired to become a career Montgomery County firefighter and emergency medical technician. As soon as she graduated, she attended the Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service's six-month training program. For about a year and a half, she has been gaining quality experience as an EMT and firefighter. She is currently applying to physician assistant programs.

**Aaron Liiva '19** graduated in 2022 from UMBC with a B.S. in computer engineering. He is working at the Naval Research Laboratory in the spacecraft engineering division. During apple pie season, he also continues his quest to bake the perfect apple pie.

## Class of 2020

**Manthan Desai '20** graduated from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada, in June with a joint bachelor's degree in biochemistry and computer science. Following graduation, he moved back to the U.S. and now resides in Florida. In the near future, he hopes to pursue a master's degree in the machine learning field, but for the time being is searching for an entry-level role in the IT industry to gain practical experience.



Sarah Dale (née Megorden)



Sahar Naghibi



**Elise Evans '20** completed her B.A. in art history and computer science at St. Mary's College of Maryland in December 2022, and recently deferred attending the history of technology, science, and environment program at the University of Maryland. She has been enjoying being a private tutor, amongst other part-time work.

**Farris Hamad '20** is still working as an auditor at Ernst & Young. He was recently promoted and is still studying for the CPA exam.

**Anne-Michelle Lieberson '20** is in her final year of undergraduate studies in electrical engineering at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is currently interning with NASA's Microwave Instruments and Technology Branch at Goddard Space Flight Center.

**Leticia Soto '20** took a two-year gap after graduation so she could take care of her son. She got married to her husband Gregory in July 2019, and her son Luke was born in February 2020. She is now back in school, in her third year. She is pursuing her B.A. in accounting at the University of Maryland Global Campus. She works as an office manager.

### Class of 2021

**Alexander Baetsen '21** is currently studying at the University of Maryland, College Park, where they are completing their B.S. in elementary and middle school special education. As a senior in the program, they are also working as a student teacher at Pine Crest Elementary School for their year-long internship. They will graduate in May 2024 with dual certification in both general and special education, with plans to teach in Montgomery County. Alexander will also start graduate school next fall in pursuit of a master's in special education. In their spare time, Alexander enjoys swing dancing, roller skating, and learning to cook new recipes.

**Jose Flores '21** just graduated from the University of Maryland with a B.S. in physiology and neurobiology. This past summer, he was published in the *Journal of Visualized Experiments* in a research paper studying the effectiveness of a recently developed microrespirometer in measuring oxygen consumption and metabolism of *Drosophila melanogaster*. He is currently taking a gap year and plans to apply to medical school in 2024.

**Patrick Ibañez '21** transferred to the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, College Park after receiving both the Frederick Douglass and Delegate Carr scholarships. He is currently a marketing analyst at the Dingman Center for Entrepreneurship.

**Afua Koranteng '21** is finishing her last semester at Hood College. She will be working as an R.N. on the Neuro IMC unit at University of Maryland Medical Center.

**Kira Ng '21** is finishing her undergraduate degree in global studies at UMBC. She received an undergraduate research award to facilitate the creation of story maps among multiracial Asian Americans in the UMBC community. After a study abroad trip over the summer to Japan, she is excited to graduate and hopes to spend time travelling and exploring the world.

**Cindy Tran '21** graduated with a B.S. in public health science from the University of Maryland. While in school, she worked as a primary care medical assistant and later advanced to become the interim director of clinical staff. Today, Cindy works as a travel dermatology medical assistant, providing care across Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Additionally, she recently secured a spot in DeSales University's MSPAS program, where she is set to commence her studies next year to become a physician associate. Moving

forward, Cindy is interested in becoming a pre-PA mentor for other students and is considering starting a blog with tips for applying as well as to document her personal journey to becoming a PA.

### Class of 2022

**Anna Lior Chacon '22** took a semester off last spring and traveled to Chile and the western United States. During this time, she met her Chilean family for the first time and worked as a lift operator at a ski resort. After that time away from the University of Maryland, she decided it was not a good fit for her and applied as a transfer student to the University of Utah. Now, she is living in Salt Lake City, pursuing her history degree and her interest in snowboarding. She works seasonally at Max's Snowboards, a world-famous snowboard shop that works closely with some of the top professional snowboarders and snowboard brands in the country.

**Homa Keshmiri '22** transferred to University of Maryland, College Park and is currently interning on materials science research with the U.S. Navy.

**Vrisha Sookraj '22** is a senior psychology major and disability studies minor at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is a recipient of the full tuition Frederick Douglass Scholarship. She also wrote for the school's student newspaper, *The Diamondback*, as an opinion columnist and was featured in a CNBC article. Recently, she has been involved as a research assistant at the school's Autism, Family, Culture, and Communication Education Lab, where she provided behavioral support and taught social skills to kids with autism. Additionally, she has volunteered with Maryland Mentor Corps and has worked as a teacher's assistant. Vrisha hopes to soon pursue graduate school in either counseling or clinical psychology and continue to work with children throughout.



Jennifer Sorto and Angelo Dias



Nina Lao



Cindy Tran

Montgomery Scholars Program Newsletter

# SCHOLARLY PURSUITS

For further information about Montgomery College, please go to [montgomerycollege.edu](http://montgomerycollege.edu)

For further information about the Montgomery Scholars program, please go to [montgomerycollege.edu/montgomeryscholars](http://montgomerycollege.edu/montgomeryscholars)

Comments, feedback, or input, please email: [john.wang@montgomerycollege.edu](mailto:john.wang@montgomerycollege.edu)

