

THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH'S INTERNATIONAL AWARD ACHIEVER REFLECTS ON LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE

Ali Poonja, a third-year medical student at the University of Alberta, says the Award helped him conquer Mount Kilimanjaro

WATCHING A SUNRISE FROM THE TOP OF AFRICA'S HIGHEST MOUNTAIN is a brag-worthy achievement for anyone — especially someone who admits he wasn't what you'd call "an avid hiker."

Ali Poonja can thank The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award, which he achieved in 2012, for helping him conquer Mount Kilimanjaro.

Since 1963, the Canadian arm of The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award has supported young people between the ages of 14 and 24. They pursue a non-competitive, extracurricular framework designed to deepen community and self-awareness, build confidence, broaden skills, and further their development as active, responsible citizens.

Mr. Poonja, now 24, and a third-year medical student at the University of Alberta, started his journey in high school in Okotoks, just south of Calgary.

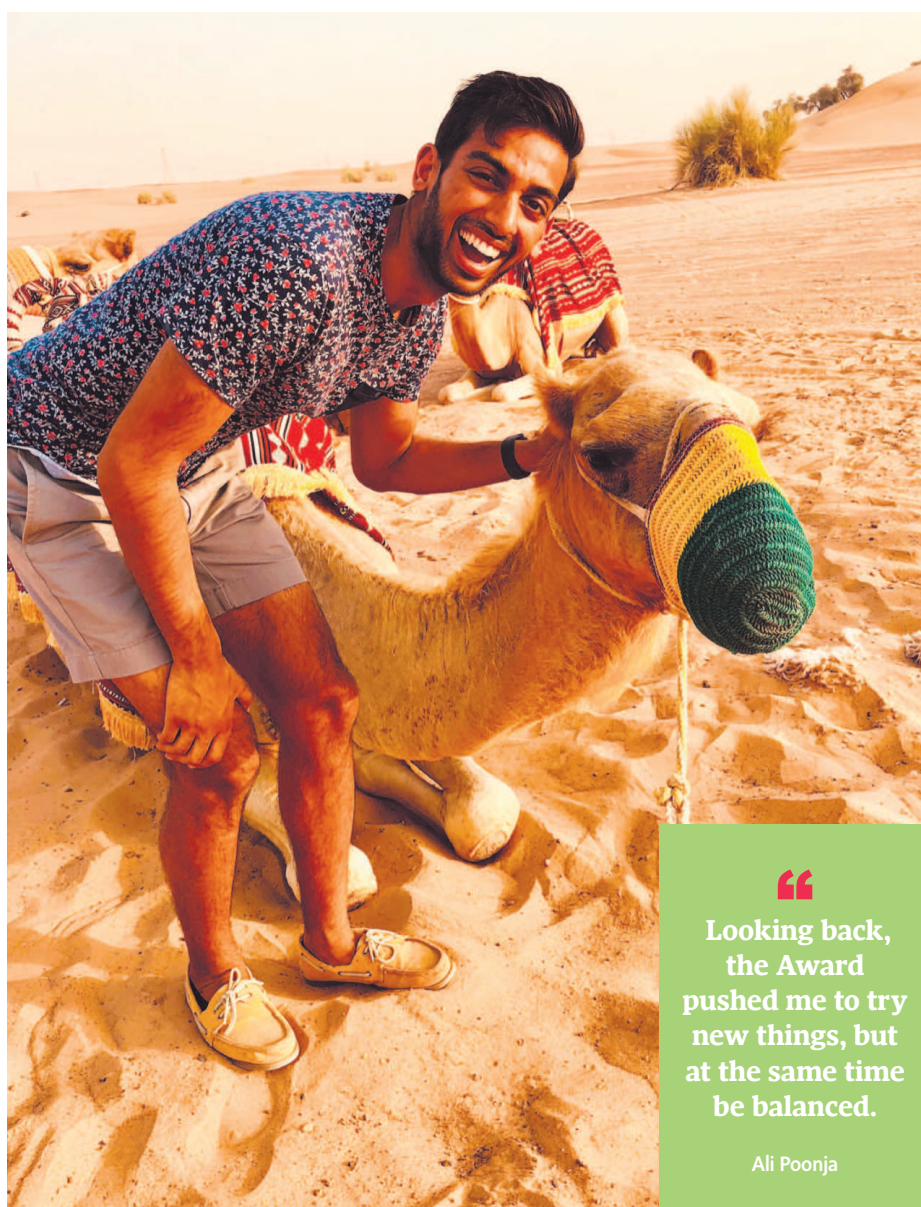
"Looking back, the Award pushed me to try new things, but at the same time be balanced," he says. "Going through high school ... you can get bogged down a lot in the grind of the every day."

The Award helped Mr. Poonja "step back from all this stuff that's going on," and try something new.

One of his self-discoveries was a passion for speech and debate. In fact, Mr. Poonja loved public speaking so much, he represented Canada at the 2012 World Public Speaking and Debate Championship in Australia, where he placed fourth overall.

As a medical student, he says, "it's also helped so much in establishing rapport with patients from diverse backgrounds."

The Award also led Mr. Poonja to



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Ali Poonja

discover another passion: outdoor adventure. As he progressed through the Bronze, Silver and Gold levels, he pushed himself to "to step out of my comfort zone for longer periods of time." He wasn't an outdoorsy person before starting the Award, but by the end he was undertaking five-day group canoe trips through the Alberta wilderness.

"It can be stressful to plan meals and plan your route — and to be in a forested area and realize you have no idea where you are — but it's fun at the end of the day when you get through it," he says. "That's the biggest lesson: Handling stress and realizing that if you push through it, good things will come out of it. It helps to always have other people around you with different skills and experiences, to help you go through it."

The Award aims to inspire lifelong personal development. While Mr. Poonja finished the Award in 2012, his passion for outdoor adventure remains strong, whether it's the epic trek he took to the top of Kilimanjaro a few years ago, or stress-relieving day trips into the Rockies.

Last month in Edmonton, Anne, Her Royal Highness, the Princess Royal, presided over a ceremony celebrating 25 Alberta youths who had completed the Gold Award. The ceremony was an occasion for Mr. Poonja to reflect on everything he learned from the Award. It also introduced him to other University of Alberta students, including some fellow medical students he didn't know were also Duke of Ed alumni.

"It's interesting to see how other people have grown from the Award. As intensive as the experience was, there were a lot of funny moments. So it makes for good conversation over coffee."

AWARD OPENS DOORS FOR VANCOUVER TEEN

Jasleen Bahia says taking part exposed her to fresh experiences, and helped her discover new hobbies



“Something I think is really unique about the Award is that it doesn't focus on academics, it's more about trying to build character.”

Jasleen Bahia

Before last year, Jasleen Bahia had never been camping. When the 17-year-old went to Golden Ears Provincial Park in Maple Ridge, B.C., it wasn't a casual overnight trip. The Vancouver Police Department Cadets taught her how to make her own food, set up a tent and prepare it for inclement weather.

"I learned a lot about being able to survive in the wilderness and being independent," she says.

The excursion was one of many firsts for Ms. Bahia in the last year, thanks to The Duke of Edinburgh's

International Award. The Award was launched in the United Kingdom in 1956 by Prince Philip, Gordonstoun School founder Kurt Hahn, and Lord Hunt, who was leader of the first successful Mount Everest ascent. It expanded to Canada in 1963.

It rewards young people between the ages of 14 and 24 for acts of service, skill development, physical activity and taking an "adventurous journey," to challenge and empower them to become the best they can be.

The Award is given out across

three levels — Bronze, Silver and Gold — with each level requiring additional weeks of involvement.

"Something I think is really unique about the Award is that it doesn't focus on academics, it's more about trying to build character," Ms. Bahia said.

After receiving the Bronze Award last year, Bahia completed Silver this year. She said taking part has exposed her to new experiences, and enabled her to develop hobbies and interests. "Through the [Duke of Ed] Award I've found a passion for doing stuff that I wouldn't have found otherwise," she says.

Ms. Bahia, a Grade 12 student at

Brittania Secondary School in Vancouver, got involved with the Award through the Cadets. In addition to achieving The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award, Ms. Bahia also landed in the top 100 of more than 5,000 candidates for the prestigious Loran Award, which recognizes character, commitment to community service and leadership potential. It's valued at \$100,000 for a four-year Canadian undergraduate program.

Ms. Bahia's list of extracurricular activities will make you dizzy. It includes basketball, ultimate frisbee, soccer and table tennis at school, as well as more creative hobbies such as sewing. As part of the Award, she's also taken up painting and dancing.

Ms. Bahia also created two after-school programs at an elementary school in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The first is a science-focused program called Little Einsteins. The second, Biz Whiz, teaches financial literacy to Grade 6 and 7 students, and she calls it her "most rewarding" volunteering experience.

Now that she has achieved both the Bronze and Silver Award levels, Ms. Bahia plans to go for Gold. But first, she wants to take some time to appreciate her journey.

"I've definitely grown as a person. There's so much that I've learned from the Award."

BOLD IDEAS PAY OFF FOR AWARD PARTICIPANT

Jillian LeBlanc had some bold ideas about how to improve opportunities for women in her remote community in Northern British Columbia, but she didn't have much confidence that they would come to fruition.

The 24-year-old had just returned to her home town of Prince Rupert after graduating from the University of Ottawa when she founded a scholarship and mentorship program for young women seeking access to higher education, called the LeBlanc Scholarship for Furthering Women Leaders.

"Your family is always going to be like, 'yeah Jillian, that's a great idea!' but I still lacked confidence and was self-conscious talking about what I wanted to accomplish," Ms. LeBlanc says.

Soon after launching a pilot of the scholarship program this past June Ms. LeBlanc says she happened to notice a Facebook advertisement about The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award for young Canadians.

The Award, which currently has over 13,000 new people register each year offers 14- to 24-year-olds an opportunity to learn new skills, broaden their experiences and test their own limitations.

"I had never heard of it before ... and I thought it sounded interesting," she says. "They were giving opportunities for funding, providing micro-grants to help youth get projects off the ground."

Ms. LeBlanc sent in her application, and enrolled in The Duke of Ed Passion to Purpose leadership forum, (part of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's national youth service initiative — Canada Service Corps) which provides grants and services to help Canadian youth pursue projects such as Ms. LeBlanc's scholarship program.

She also decided to pursue the Bronze level of the Award that challenges participants to demonstrate how they give back to the community, overcome a physical challenge,

“It's given me confidence in my crazy ideas.”

Jillian LeBlanc

complete an overnight adventure in the wilderness and develop a new skill.

As she pursues her Award, Ms. LeBlanc is volunteering on municipal campaigns, learning how to speak Gaelic and ride horses, as well as preparing for an overnight adventure in the wilderness "as soon as the snow melts."

Not only has the Award encouraged her to pursue new activities, it's also provided the support, mentorship and funding she needed to grow



her own support, mentorship and funding project in her community.

"It's given me confidence in my crazy ideas, because when other people believe in you they don't seem as crazy."

HOW TO ENROLL

The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award challenges young Canadians to improve themselves and their communities by encouraging them to go beyond their comfort zones.

The Award is accessible to all Canadians aged 14 to 24, regardless of socio-economic status, ability, ethnicity, geography or gender.

There are three levels: Bronze (14 years), Silver (15 years) and Gold (16 years). You can start any level as long as you meet the minimum age requirement. As a participant, you have until your 25th birthday to complete your Duke of Ed Award. All activities counted toward the Award must be extra-curricular and voluntary.

Divided into four program areas: voluntary service, skill development, physical recreation, adventurous journey and a Gold-level project.

Participants choose activities that interest them and then begin working toward achieving their goals.

For more information, go to www.dukeofed.org

HOW TO DONATE

Donations help shape the lives and futures of Canada's young people.

To learn more about how you can support the work of The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award and personally make an impact, please visit www.dukeofed.org/donate

If you would like to send a cheque, make it payable to:

The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award – Canada
152 Front Street West, Suite 402
Toronto, ON
M5J 2L6