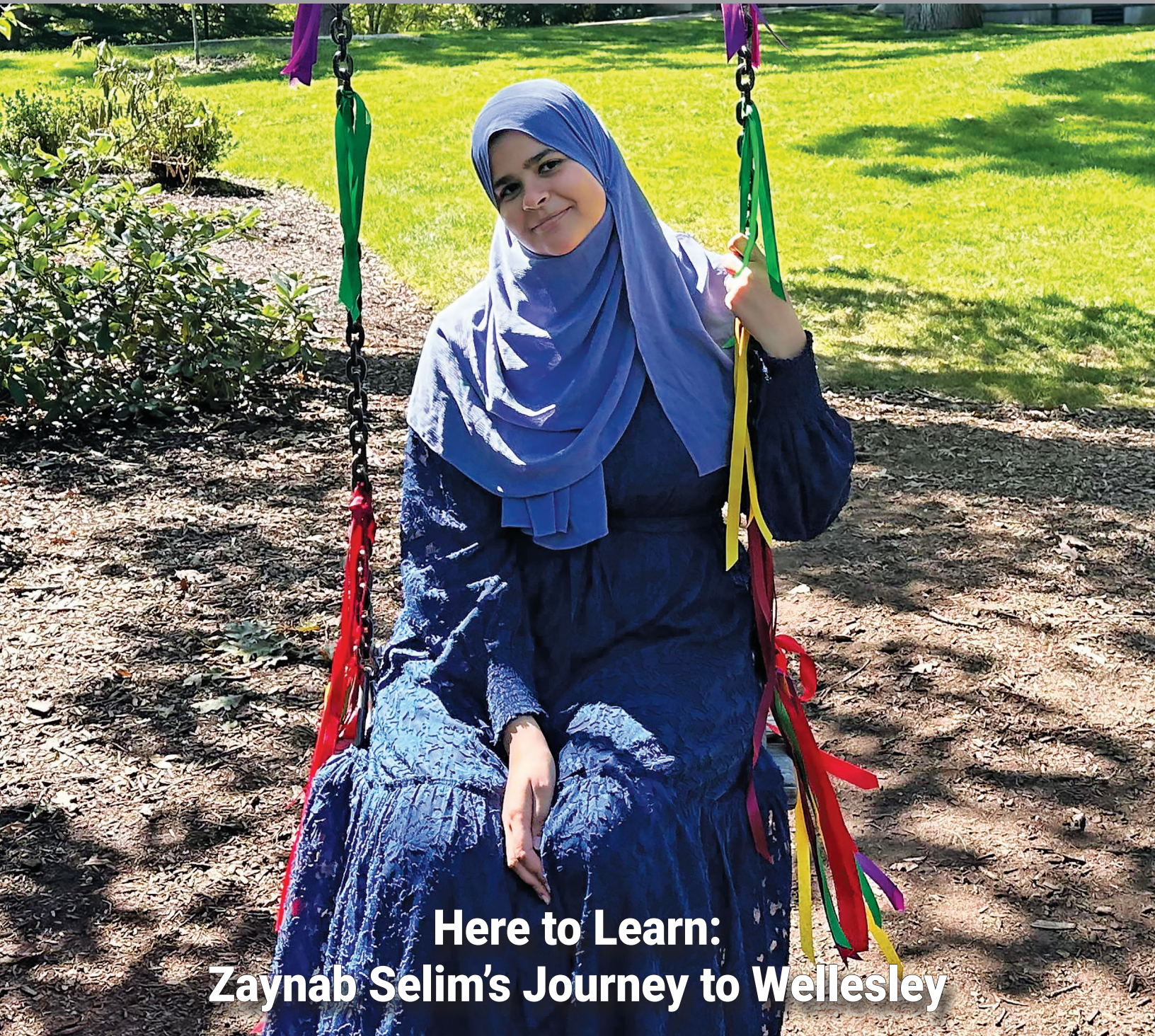


Montgomery Scholars Program Newsletter

SCHOLARLY PURSUITS

VOLUME 25 | ISSUE 37 | SPRING 2025



**Here to Learn:
Zaynab Selim's Journey to Wellesley**



MONTGOMERY SCHOLARS
MONTGOMERY COLLEGE

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GIVING

We encourage the Scholars community and friends to give to the program. A gift, no matter its size, is helpful at a time when educational funding is scarce. You can make your gift at our secure, online giving site: 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!



FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Dear Scholars, Parents, and Friends,

So far this year we have seen tremendous changes made at the federal level that have affected people of all backgrounds, particularly in this region. Regardless of one's political beliefs, it's safe to say that everyone feels they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Everyone desires a better future, a better life.

It has always been part of Montgomery Scholars' mission to help our exceptional students achieve the immense promise they hold, despite whatever disadvantages they may face due to circumstances out of their control. Our students deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and they all wish for a better future and a better life. As faculty, our job is to provide our students the tools to get there—tools they may not have had access to previously, or didn't know how to use.

Over the years, it has been satisfying and fulfilling to see our students continue to take giant steps toward contributing to the American experience, whether it's breaking the cycle of poverty, starting their own business, or taking political office. The list goes on. There are Montgomery Scholars alumni in just about every field, blazing a trail for others to follow.

In this issue, we celebrate recent graduate **Zaynab Selim '24**, our first transfer to renowned Wellesley College, where former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attended as an undergraduate. A Muslim woman and American citizen, Zaynab is a reminder that our future leaders can come from any background. We are all human beings striving to achieve the American dream, and Zaynab is well on her way.

John W. Wang, Ph.D.
Director, Montgomery Scholars
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WHERE ARE YOU NOW?



Sophia Venero and Jeff Ta '13

Here are some of the Scholars from the first 23 classes and their whereabouts. If anyone has an update for the newsletter, email mcscholars@montgomerycollege.edu and we will include the information in the next issue.

Class of 2013

Sophia Venero and her husband, **Jeff Ta**, both graduated from St. George's Medical School in June. They are both starting a family medicine residency at Stony Brook Southampton.

Class of 2015

Sahar Naghibi is a licensed and board-certified naturopathic doctor with expertise in complex chronic diseases. After completing her primary care residency at Seattle Healing Arts Center, she started her own private practice with a clinical focus on allergies, chronic fatigue, mental health, endocrinological disorders, cardiovascular disease and diabetes, autoimmune disorders, and gastrointestinal issues. She sees patients in person in



Sahar Naghibi '15

Washington and virtually across the U.S. In summer 2025, she will relocate her practice to Maryland to be closer to family.

Class of 2018

Jennifer Dias and her husband, **Angelo Dias**, who met through the Montgomery Scholars program, are excited to start their family with the addition of their first child.

Class of 2020

Anne-Michelle Lieberman graduated with a B.S. in electrical engineering from the University of Maryland, College Park. She has applied to Johns Hopkins University to begin a master's degree in engineering in the fall, specializing in robotics. She has been working as a contractor with NASA's Microwave Instruments and Technology Branch at Goddard Space Flight Center.

Class of 2021

Audrey Hall graduated from Georgetown University in 2023 with an English degree and has since acquired a paralegal certification from Boston University. Audrey works as a paralegal/analyst with the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Faith Tabora graduated from the University of Maryland with a general communications degree. After she graduated, she participated in The Fund for American Studies, where she pursued the journalism and communications



Jennifer and Angelo Dias '18

track. While at TFAS, she was placed at Rational 360, a public relations firm in Washington, D.C. She climbed from intern to fellow, and recently received a full-time offer as a digital associate.

Class of 2024

Zaynab Selim transferred to Wellesley College, where she is majoring in media arts and sciences.



Audrey Hall '21



Zaynab Selim '24



We're Here to Learn: Zaynab Selim, Current Wellesley Student, Reminisces on Growth and Gratitude

By Lauren Wolf Strawbridge

A week before Ramadan, Montgomery Scholars Director John Wang Zoomed with Zaynab Selim '24, whose humility and warmth helped defrost the start of MC's wintry semester.

Selim had entered the Scholars program in fall 2022, but unlike the two-dozen other new students stepping into orientation with anticipatory excitement, proud of having been selected, she felt less than enthused.

Like most teens in 2020, the height of the pandemic interrupted the middle of Selim's high school career. She was attending Northwest High School at that time, but, interestingly, her reluctance wasn't rooted in everything screeching to a halt. She admits she was not generally a fan of high school and didn't feel connected to the environment or her classmates.

Attempting to "get out as fast as [she] could," Selim took advantage of MCPS and MC's Dual Enrollment program during her senior year, which allows students to earn college credits at MC while still in high school. She took only English and math with her peers and spent the rest of her school days among college students. To an outsider, and possibly to those who knew her best, Selim's academic choices had all the makings of an invested student. But she says that couldn't have been further from the truth.

"I was very much the demotivated high schooler," she claims. True as that may have been, others saw the flame of possibility within her, especially her mother.

Selim says she told her mother she didn't want to go to school, but her mother was proactive. "She sent me the [Montgomery

Scholars] application. She was like, 'Zaynab, you should apply to this.' And I was like, 'OK, like, whatever.' But I did end up applying. And, you know, here I am."

"Here" is Wellesley College, a prestigious four-year institution in Massachusetts with a 14% acceptance rate, according to *U.S. News & World Report*. Selim is the first Scholars graduate to attend. And she's now happily embracing her educational career.

So, when exactly did this dramatic mindset shift take place? In Scholars, of course.

"Over time, I really started to grow as my mind grew. I really started to enjoy school. I like learning [now]."

Even though Selim's changing attitude toward her education was a slow simmer, her professors saw her transformation over the course of the program—Dr. Wang included. He says she participated more as time went on.

But that didn't come naturally to Selim.

"Once I knew I cared about learning, another step was, how do I speak up?" she says. "Because I've always been a shy, anxious person. So, getting me to say one thing in class would take, like, 10 minutes of me sitting there. Like, what do I do?"

Fortunately, the structure of Scholars provides the perfect testing lab for students to find their voices, Selim being one of them. After all, students research, learn, write, explore, and grow alongside the same cohort of 25 students for two years. Selim confirms that this setup helped her get out of her shell and "out of [her] own head" a little faster.

She says she's still friends with everyone she was in Scholars with, even after they all followed their separate transfer paths. Selim's happened to lead to Wellesley, all because of a forwarded email.

"[When] it was time to transfer, I would look at the emails, and I'd be like, 'OK, whatever,'" falling back into that hard exterior she had built throughout high school. "But when [Dr. Wang] sent out that Wellesley email, I don't know why I opened it."

Perhaps kismet?

At the bottom of the email, Dr. Wang had written, "This is a historically women's institution. If that's not you, disregard this message."

Curious, Selim researched the school and instantly felt a connection. Although the low acceptance rate intimidated her, she still sought out an informational session, went in, and talked to people. Her Scholars career hadn't just prepared her academically, it prepared her socially. This confidence shone, and now she uses all those advanced skills in her new classes, including Islamic Art and Islamic History in Africa.

"There are 12 people in my class, and I'm like, I love this. I just really like the closeness," she says.

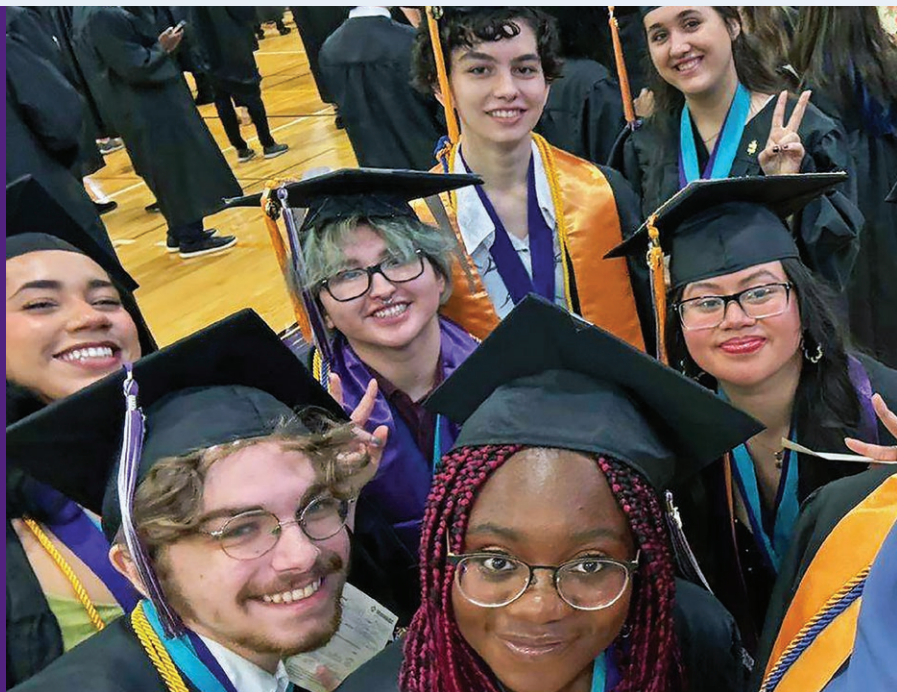
Selim says she's drawn to the other students' drive, kindness, and openness. At the top of her list: "We're here because we like to learn."

While Wellesley's supportive community is inspirational, Selim still credits Scholars for her ability to keep up with this new academic rigor.

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Zaynab at Swannanoa in 2024



"It's just really helpful to feel like I have that solid foundation ... to know what I'm doing." Her pride is palpable.

It should be noted, however, that Scholars wasn't her only building block for success. "There's just a couple of us transfers who came from community college, and we all really feel like community college in general ... helped prep us for coming to Wellesley."

This includes MC's diversity. Although Selim acknowledges that her new school's population isn't quite as diverse as MC's, she appreciates how accepting it is.

"I'm going to be kind of different all the time, but ... people are very normal about it. I guess, in that sense, it's similar to MC. Like, no one's going to look at me like, 'What's going on?'"

According to Selim, there's a "substantial amount of people" in the Muslim Students Association, which she joined this past year. And, according to *U.S. News & World Report's* "Best Colleges of 2025," the school's ethnic diversity boasts a 55% minority enrollment, just one of the many factors that placed Wellesley as the seventh-best National Liberal Arts College.

To Selim, one of the reasons her new institute ranks so high is the way it embraces its student diversity, offering prayer rooms, and even extending the dining hall hours for the month of Ramadan, allowing students who observe the holiday an opportunity to break their day-long fasts together, rather than alone in their dorm rooms.

As a media arts and sciences major, Selim has found herself leaning into her interests, taking advantage of the broad array of classes. More importantly, she's applying herself within them.



"I'm seeing all these different classes and learning all these new techniques, and it's just like, all that knowledge, even if I'm not super specialized at [any] one thing, I feel like I can take pieces of what I've learned and turn it into something that is my own." She attributes the interdisciplinary nature of Scholars for this perspective. "I was like, 'I need to keep doing this. ... I can't just stick to one thing.'"

To anyone considering Wellesley for themselves, Selim has this to say:

"If you want to continue exploring your interests and just have that space to not be confined to one thing, I feel like Wellesley is the perfect place to do that. ... I don't like saying 'prestigious,' but the quality is really there. ... You can rest assured that the things you're doing here and learning here will benefit you in some way. ... Obviously having a career is important. Yes, that's what we're all working towards. But sometimes people forget to learn just to learn. ... I just love being able to do that. So definitely give it a chance."

And finally: "Don't be deterred like I was in the beginning."

New Faculty



Professor Emily Holmstead is the oldest of four children and was educated in Montgomery County. She has a master's degree in secondary English education and a bachelor's degree in English with a minor in editing. She has taught in four of the best school districts in the country, including Montgomery County, Fairfax County, Lake Washington, and Bellevue. She also took a one-year teaching position in Thailand, where she established the Advanced Placement English program at an international

school. She is an experienced English 102 teacher and has enjoyed her time at Montgomery College. She has a passion for working with students and families from different backgrounds. She prides herself on making her lessons engaging, interactive, relevant, and exciting. She specializes in helping students improve their critical thinking and persuasive writing skills. She also loves fancy chocolate, Vietnamese food, travel, true crime podcasts, and museums. Professor Holmstead took over teaching the Capstone Seminar for Professor Eggenschwiler, who has taken over teaching the World Literature course for the first-year core curriculum.



Lauren Wolf Strawbridge has worked at Montgomery College since 2017, teaching English composition and communication as well as acting as the interim program coordinator for the Achieving the Promise Academy. Before joining the College, she was the junior editor for a global advertising agency based in Washington, D.C. She has been an active member of the community, serving on the board of directors for EveryMind, Montgomery County's mental

health association, and partnering with the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission to bring attention to Mental Health Awareness Month. She urges her students to discover their own passions and use their writing skills to support the causes they believe in. Professor Strawbridge's publications include journalism, creative nonfiction, and poetry. Her greatest accomplishment, however, is being a mother to two beautiful children. Professor Strawbridge is teaching the English 102 course while Dr. Wang is on a reduced course load to look after a newborn. Starting in fall 2025, she will teach the Capstone Seminar.

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