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PRAYERS ANSWERED WITH AN EVANS SCHOLARSHIP FOR CADDIES

by Gene Wojciechowski

You don't know Kawthar Rkein. Neither did I until the 17-year-old caddie walked into a packed ballroom, stepped behind a wooden podium and, as her legs shook uncontrollably, began a 12-minute interview session that one way or another would literally change her life.

Not much was at stake. Only an academic scholarship to such high-priced universities as Northwestern, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin or, in Rkein's case, Marquette. Maybe that's why Sandra Rkein, a single mom who supports her two daughters and her own mother on a cleaning woman's wages, has been praying to St. Jude (patron saint of the hopeless) so much.

So on the morning of Dec. 11, Kawthar Rkein, her knees knocking, stood in front of more than 100 Evans Scholars selection committee members at a suburban Chicago country club and told her story. She talked about the three ethnic youth clubs she joined at high school, just so she could meet different kinds of people ... about the money she saved from caddying that she used to pay for school books ... about the honors courses she loved... about her lifelong dream to go to college. Nobody had time to ask her about her work as a soup kitchen volunteer.

Rkein's tiny but confident voice only cracked once—when she talked about her mom. "My mom," she said, taking a deep breath, "is amazing." So was Rkein and the other 19 finalists who took turns speaking to that selection committee earlier this month on a bitterly cold day at River Forest Country Club in Elmhurst, Ill.

Think about it: You're what, 17, and you're summoned to a room full of adults, many of them wearing the green blazers of the Western Golf Association, which oversees the largest privately funded college scholarship program in the country? There's a waiting area and then, when it's your turn, a WGA rep leads you through a pair of glass doors, to the front of the ballroom, where you shake hands with the WGA big hitters. Then you're directed to the podium, where 100 committee members—all allowed to ask pointed questions about your academic record, caddying experiences, life aspirations, etc.—are assembled in front of you. These are the

people who will vote yes or no on your scholarship after you leave the room.

Nerve-racking? One finalist's face turned a splotchy red by the end of the interview. Another finalist kept wringing her hands every eight seconds. Another finalist could have used a beach towel to soak up the forehead flop sweat.

Nearly 600 caddies nationwide applied to the Evans Scholars program this year. It's a breeze:

All you need is club sponsorship, a sparkling academic record, a history of community service and/or meaningful extracurricular activities, leadership skills and serious financial need (parents' tax returns are required). Gandhi would have had a hard time winning one of these things.

The finalists appear in front of the state selection committees, like this one. And they tell their stories.

Brett Mason is first-chair tuba in the band, wrestles on his high school team, worked three jobs in the summer (including a gig at the Chicago Board of Trade) and is an Eagle Boy Scout. His old man is a painter, but the economy has killed the trades, so he doesn't a l w a y s have steady work.

P a t r i c k Mirski lives with his Polish-born mother and speaks two



Kawthar Rkein speaks at the podium in front of the Evans Scholars selection committee.



Riley Cruse speaks to the 100 people who will help decide if he gets an Evans Scholarship.

languages. He studies at least four hours a day, averages about 75 loops a summer, and tells the committee that with or without the Evans Scholarship, he'll somehow earn enough to go to the University of Michigan.

Joshua Singleton thanks the committee "for listening to me and my silly dreams."

Emily Gruendel, who wants to be an architect, loves fly-fishing, throwing the discus and shot for the high school track and field team, and volunteering for Special Olympics events.

Katie Howard does work for Habitat for Humanity, sends money to a hospital in Africa to help support AIDS programs, and really misses her dad, who died five years ago.

Henry Cornillie wants to be a lawyer, speaks Latin, quotes philosopher John Stuart Mill and, when asked what he'd do if he represented embattled Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, he says, "I'd give [U.S. Attorney] Patrick Fitzgerald the U.S. Senate seat in exchange for clemency and leniency."

Some of the finalists haven't seen their fathers in years. Some of the finalists' families live paycheck to paycheck—that's when there is a paycheck. Some of the families face home foreclosure or have already lost their houses. Others deal with suffocating financial debt and no health insurance. One finalist's father suffers from depression. Another finalist's parents have had to take leave of absences to care for a son wounded by a roadside bomb while serving in Iraq. The family savings account is nearly exhausted.

And yet during the interviews, not one of the candidates complain about their situations. Instead, they thank their parents for trying so hard. A few days ago, the oversized envelopes began to arrive at the finalists' mailing addresses. Brett Mason was with the wrestling team delivering fundraiser cookie dough when his mom called. He went home, opened the letter and got as far as, "I am pleased to advise that the WGA Scholarship Committee has awarded you a Chick Evans Caddie Scholarship..." before he went into what he called, "a little shock." "We're gonna frame it," said his mom, Nancy, of the letter.

Katie Howard started crying when she read her acceptance letter. She thought about her mom's struggles.



Don Johnson, president and CEO of the Western Golf Association, conducts the scholarship vote.

She thought about her dad. "I just know he would be really proud of me," she said.

Kawthar Rkein said she could "barely breathe" as she drove home to open the WGA letter. It didn't help that her mom kept telling her on the cell phone, "You better hurry up. You better hurry up." Just before Rkein opened the letter, her mom said, "Either way, we'll still love you." Then ... "I am pleased to advise ..." Screams of joy. Hugs. Tears. Smiles. Kawthar still can't quit smiling. "My mom almost had an asthma attack," Kawthar said later. "We had to get her inhaler."

As it turns out, all 20 finalists at the Chicago-area selection meeting were awarded Evans Scholarships. But no scholarship could have meant more than the one Rkein received. "We have so many hopes in that envelope," said Sandra, who didn't know how she would have paid for Kawthar's college education. "There were so many kids, all so bright, with so many qualities. We just didn't know if it was going to happen." I told Sandra that Kawthar was one of the committee's favorites.

"Will you let them know that I am so, so thankful," she said, pausing to steady her voice. "God bless them. They have no idea what this means to us. This is a brand new life for us." Christmas arrived in an oversized envelope on Dec. 17. After the hugs and tears, Sandra and her daughters fought the evening rush-hour traffic and drove from the North Side of Chicago to the South Side. Sandra had made a promise weeks earlier. If Kawthar got the scholarship, Sandra owed someone a thank you in person. So they drove to 3200 East 91st Street.

That's where you can find the National Shrine of St. Jude.



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