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In any nation, in any language -- leaders

International students made mark through MCC's Sullivan Institute

By Jennifer Myers, jmyers@lowellsun.com
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LOWELL -- How does a girl from Warsaw, Poland, end up at Middlesex Community College? A Google search, of course.

At home in Warsaw two years ago, Izabela Kaczynska was searching for a Massachusetts college where she could study fashion merchandising.

"We always heard in Poland that the best education you can get is in the United States," she said. "And my sister was living on Nantucket, so I was looking for something not too far away."

A Google search delivered MCC. She made a call and got the ball rolling. Earlier this month, Kaczynska won the school's highest award -- the James E. Houlihan Jr. Student of the Year Award.

"This student defines the meaning of the phrase 'best all-around,'" MCC President Carole Cowan said while presenting the award. "She successfully balances her academics, co-curricular experiences, a part-time job, and internship with a smile on her face."

Tomorrow, Kaczynska, 24, will graduate, a member of the MCC Class of 2010, with a liberal-arts degree. Beside her will be Moses Kirori of Nairobi, Kenya, and Jasmin "Jaz" Patel, of Ahmedabad, India. In addition to being international students, the trio also just completed fellowships in the elite Paul Sullivan Leadership Institute.

The Institute, a program designed to cultivate leaders from the best and brightest of the MCC student body, was the dream of Sullivan, the late Sun columnist and WBZ radio talk-show host, who taught business and journalism at the



Jasmin Patel, left, from Ahmedabad, India, Izabela Kaczynska, from Warsaw, Poland, and Moses Kirori, from Nairobi, Kenya, have much to celebrate when they graduate from Middlesex Community College tomorrow. They completed fellowships in MCC's Paul Sullivan Leadership Institute. Sun/Julia Malakie

college. Following his death in September 2007, Sullivan's widow, Mary Jo Griffin, MCC's director of outreach and development, made her husband's dream a reality.

This year 13 fellows, second-year students nominated by faculty, completed the program. They had the chance to learn and apply the important principles of leadership: Confidence, public speaking, networking, community service, integrity and character through a series of workshops and public events.

"It is tough to put into words what the institute did for me," said Patel, 22, who will graduate with an associate's degree in business tomorrow and hopes to complete his bachelor's degree in finance/accounting at Miami University in Ohio. "We learned a lot more than we could have on our own."

The fellows had the chance to rub shoulders with U.S. Sen. John Kerry and Massachusetts Secretary of Education Paul Reville, people with whom they previously could not imagine having the courage to speak.

"It inspires you to be more than you think you can be," said

Kirori, 23, who will graduate with a degree in communications tomorrow and hopes to complete his bachelor's degree at New York University.

"One day I am going to be a great filmmaker," he announced with confidence, pausing a moment from reading Barack Obama's Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance.

Griffin called Kirori "the leader" of the group. A poised student with a reserved demeanor, he was the one the others naturally followed.

"He had a presence that commanded the room and he excelled in his ability to lead," Griffin said. "He was the voice of reason to which the rest of the group turned to for direction."

Patel was always the first to volunteer, said Griffin: walking in the Heart Walk in the rain, working parade patrol for the City of Lights parade and volunteering at the upcoming MCC Celebrity Forum.

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"He went over and above to get the full community-volunteer experience," she said, calling him the "lifeline" of the group. "His enthusiasm was second to none."

Kaczynska admitted that landing in Lowell was a bit of a culture shock, one that gave her a new perspective on the world.

"In Poland, all you see are Polish people, it is all one culture," she said. "Lowell really is such a potluck -- just look at this table. We have people from Poland, Kenya and India. I love it, and the exposure to different cultures has really opened my eyes to the world."

After graduation, she is headed to China as part of MCC's international Fellowship program, then she plans to move to California to live with her sister for a year and figure out her next step, which she expects will lead to attending a college to earn her bachelor's degree in journalism, communications or international relations.

"She soaked it all in and then gave back to the fullest," Griffin said of Kaczynska, calling her the "beacon" of the group. "She always contributed, yet never looked to steal the spotlight."

"I believe I did everything a student can take advantage of when going to Middlesex," said Kaczynska. "Middlesex is the best experience an international student can have and am planning to give back as an alumnus. I will be back."

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