



CHECK THIS OUT

2nd Place

(above)

Adam Ng

*The whole world is out there
waiting for us to explore.*

AT WORK ON INTERNSHIP

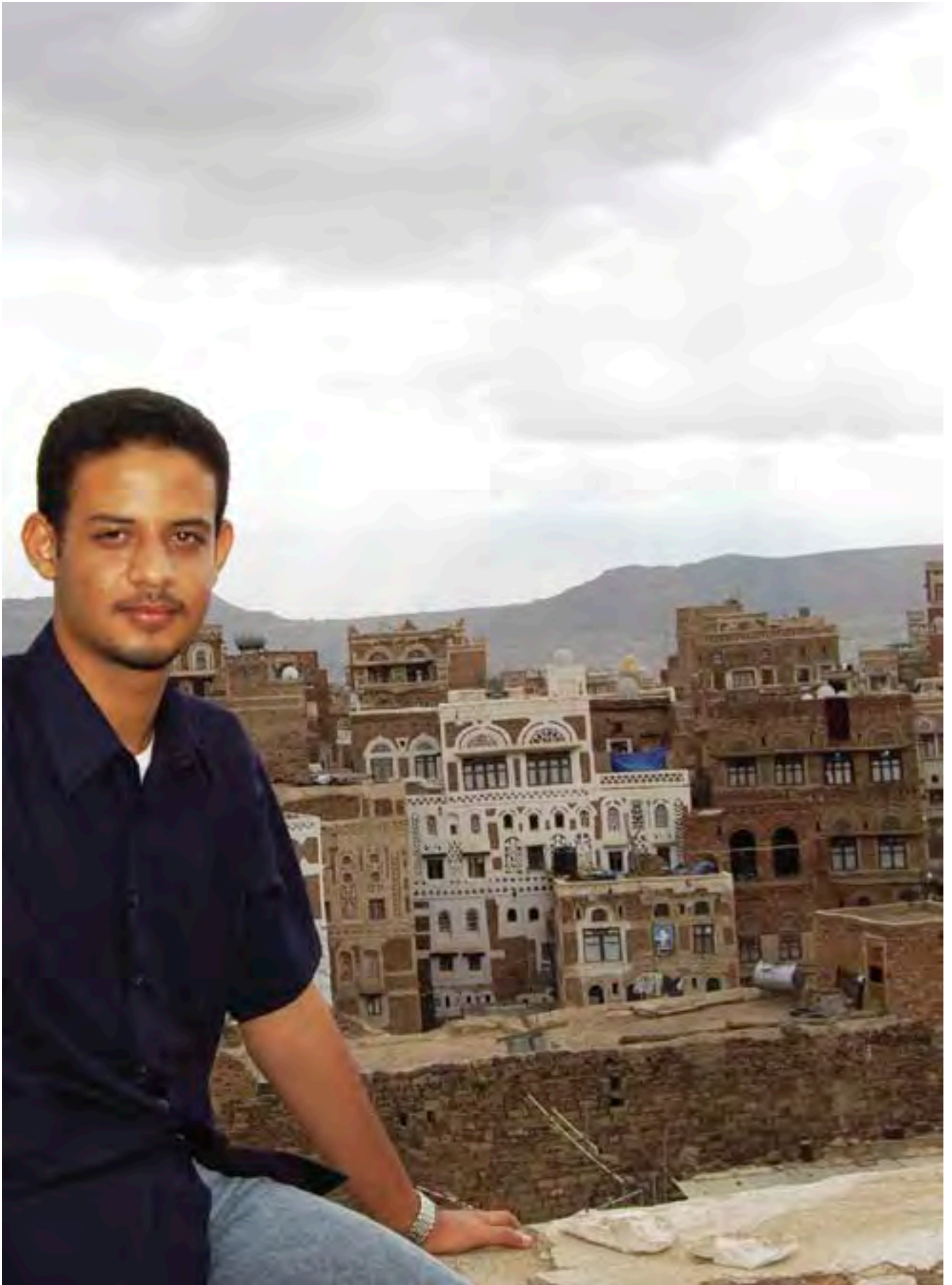
2nd Place

(right)

Anthony Law

*The front entrance canopy of
WestJet's future office facility taking
shape, as seen from below*





PACKING FOR CANADA

Yemen students in Calgary

BY JENNIFER SOWA

COMING TO CANADA CAN BE A TREMENDOUS CULTURE SHOCK. FOOD SEEMS BLAND, THE LEAP FROM ARABIC TO ENGLISH IS HUGE, AND MANY NEWCOMERS ARE ASTONISHED TO SEE MEN AND WOMEN SOCIALIZING ON A REGULAR BASIS.

IT was a real scorcher the day Marwan Ali Obeid Mohamed started packing. Thirty-three degrees Celsius in Aden, Yemen. Nevertheless, Mohamed got out all the warm, heavy clothes he owned. He would need them where he was going.

He was about to leave behind all the familiarities of life but he never hesitated to jump at the chance. Nineteen-year-old Mohamed was going on an adventure that would take him half a world away and change the course of his future.

Mohamed had been working as a private tutor, helping students with math, physics, chemistry, biology, English and Arabic grammar. Among his many passions including soccer, chess and classical music, science was the one thing that truly fascinated him.

On January 24, 2008, Mohamed got the most important phone call of his life. He had been awarded an all-expenses-paid scholarship to study at the Schulich School of Engineering at the University of Calgary.

Yemen vs. Canada

REPUBLIC OF YEMEN

Population: 23,013,376

Climate: Mostly desert; hot and humid along west coast; temperate in western mountains affected by seasonal monsoon; extraordinarily hot, dry, harsh desert in east.

Median Age: 16.7 years

GDP Per Capita: \$2,300 (USD)

CANADA

Population: 33,212,696

Climate: Varies from temperate in south to subarctic and arctic in north

Median Age: 40.1 years

GDP Per Capita: \$38,400 (USD)

Source: CIA - The World Factbook

"I was so happy it was like I'd won the lottery. It was an unforgettable day," he recalls.

For Mohamed, it was indeed like winning the lottery. This particular scholarship is well-known throughout Yemen, a much-sought-after honour among ambitious students. There are hundreds of applicants every year for just 10 coveted awards. It is an almost unbelievable opportunity for young people in Yemen. Many have never travelled outside their own country. Most never get a shot at a world-class education.

Yemen is a developing nation so the education system is still evolving. Institutions lack qualified professors and modern laboratories. But the cost of sending students away for schooling is simply out of the question for most families.

Without a doubt, this was the chance of a lifetime. Marwan Ali Obeid Mohamed knew it would mean leaving behind his parents, older sister, younger brother and lifelong friends. It would also be a tough transition moving to Canada from a conservative Islamic society. >>

Marwan Ali Obeid Mohamed in Aden, Yemen a week before he left for Canada
Photo courtesy Nexen Inc.



Charlie Fischer (right) arriving in Yemen in 2003 for a tour to celebrate Nexen's tenth anniversary of production in the country Photo courtesy Nexen Inc.

The Republic of Yemen lies on the Arabian Peninsula where Africa, Asia and Europe meet. The country borders Saudi Arabia and Oman. This Middle Eastern region is known for its vast reserves of oil and natural gas.

Calgary-based Nexen Inc. is one of many energy companies operating in Yemen. Nexen began production there in 1993 and runs Masila, the largest oil project in the country. Operations in Yemen make up a significant part of the company's business, accounting for roughly a quarter of Nexen's total production.

Nexen's philosophy centres on the idea of creating a sustainable future. A large component involves social corporate responsibility, according to Charlie Fischer, president and chief executive officer of Nexen from 2001 to 2008.

"It doesn't matter where we are in the world. We look for ways to enhance the opportunities and benefits enjoyed by the people who live near our operations."

Believing that a solid relationship with the Yemeni people is critical to the company's success in the country, Nexen management looked for a way to give back to the community. The goal was to create a lasting bond with the people of Yemen and contribute to the future of the country.

"We work with governments and local communities that are affected by our presence. We listen to what their needs are and try to help them achieve their objectives," Fischer explains. "When we did this, it became clear that one thing that's very important to the Yemeni people is education."

So in 1998, Nexen established its Yemen Scholarship Program. Ten students every year come to Calgary for a post-secondary education and attend the University of Calgary or the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology.



Children playing in a village in Yemen Photo courtesy Nexen Inc.

Calgary was the chosen destination because of Nexen's strong presence in the city. Charlie Fischer also has a personal connection to the University of Calgary: he himself is an alumnus. He graduated in 1971 with a chemical engineering degree and again in 1982 with a master's in business administration.

The awards are based on outstanding academic achievement and performance during an interview process. The program attracts the brightest of the bright and encourages students to work towards their full potential. All 2008 recipients had average marks above 93 percent in their final year of high school.

Each scholarship covers tuition for an undergraduate degree and pays for accommodation, meals and health insurance. There is even money for annual trips back to Yemen to visit family and friends. The whole thing costs Nexen nearly \$1.5 million per year.

While many graduates remain in Canada to get work experience or continue their education, acceptance of these scholarships comes with the expectation that recipients will eventually return home.

"We think they can make a positive difference when they return home, whether that's in public policy or starting new businesses and creating jobs for others," says Fischer. "Whatever they do, it will enhance the overall capability of the country. It's sustainable. It's something that will carry on."

But it's not easy. Coming to Canada can be a tremendous culture shock. Food seems bland, the leap from Arabic to English is huge, and many newcomers are astonished to see men and women socializing on a regular basis. In Yemen, women and men do not attend events or parties together. Even at weddings they celebrate in separate rooms.

To help with the transition, Nexen provides cross-cultural training, English classes, and a must-have in Canada: money for winter clothing. After living in a hot and humid climate, winter in Calgary comes as a bone-chilling surprise.

Charlie Fischer says the students demonstrate flexibility and persistence as they adjust to life in Canada. He thinks it is one of the best initiatives his company has ever undertaken in terms of corporate social responsibility.>>



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My goal for now is to work and build my skills and experience so when I go back to Yemen I will be a very effective member of society.

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Workers at Nexen's terminal in Yemen
Photo courtesy Nexen Inc.



"It's been very good in terms of raising awareness in Yemen about who we are and what we do. We're also building a relationship because they can see that we're investing in their future and not just exploiting their assets."

The year 2008 marked the tenth anniversary of the program. Nexen has handed out 100 scholarships to date. Thirty went to Yemeni women. One of them was Orjuwan Al-Wadeai.

"I felt like a gate had opened for me," she says about the day in 2003 when she left Sana'a, the capital of Yemen. It was her very first trip on an airplane. Studying in Canada is particularly exciting for Yemeni women, since their priorities after high school are typically helping out in the home, getting married and starting families.

Al-Wadeai graduated in the spring of 2008 with a degree in software engineering from the Schulich School of Engineering. She works for a Calgary firm that designs software for wireless devices. Women are generally under-represented in the engineering profession, especially in the field of information technology. Al-Wadeai is proud to be a woman who is bucking the trend. She is the only female in her company.

"I don't feel out of place at all. I was always good at math in school. Software engineering involves numbers and problem solving. I love it," she says.

She recently found out there will be another female engineer in the family. Al-Wadeai's younger sister is among the latest batch of Nexen scholarship winners who arrived in September 2008.

"We were given the opportunity to receive a better education and be successful in our careers," says Al-Wadeai. "This initiative has changed our lives."

While coming to the University of Calgary is a big adjustment, religious traditions do not have to change. Muslims pray five times per day. The university offers a multi-faith prayer space. Al-Wadeai was able to fit in all her prayers without missing any classes. >>



Schulich School of Engineering graduate Orjuwan Al-Wadeai
Photo by David Moll

“There is a lot of diversity within Canadian society,” she says. “There is space and freedom for everybody to keep their own cultural customs. That is what I love about Canada.”

She also loves the Canadian outdoors. She spends the summers biking, hiking and canoeing. Al-Wadeai has even gone sightseeing in Ontario and British Columbia. She has done it all with her husband, Yaser Noman, by her side. They met each other in high school and got engaged back home. Noman came to Canada on a Nexen scholarship the year before Al-Wadeai. He also studied at the Schulich School of Engineering and currently works as a mechanical engineer in Calgary.

“Yemen lacks people with life experience,” Al-Wadeai says. “My goal for now is to work and build my skills and experience so when I go back to Yemen I will be a very effective member of society.”

Charlie Fischer believes the Yemen Scholarship Program is valuable in several ways.

“They learn not only the technical skills like you have in engineering but they learn social skills, cultural skills and they understand the differences between our two societies. When you look at all the problems in the world, I think it takes people who understand those differences to ultimately come up with solutions that will bridge them.”

“

There is a lot of diversity within Canadian society. There is space and freedom for everybody to keep their own cultural customs. That is what I love about Canada.

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Marwan Ali Obeid Mohamed settled in nicely at the student residence at the University of Calgary and immediately became absorbed in his studies.

“It’s exciting to be at the Schulich School of Engineering because I know its curriculum and professors are among the best in the world,” he says. “Nexen gave me the chance to discover a new culture and make new friends, but the most important thing was the opportunity to study here. Otherwise, I wouldn’t get such a chance.”

Mohamed even got to meet up with two friends from back home. Wael Mohamed and Wael Hasan had already been studying at the University of Calgary for a year before Mohamed arrived. They both won Nexen scholarships in 2007.

The dozens of scholarship winners have become a tightly knit community. Many close friendships have blossomed and the veterans on campus are always there to show the newcomers around.

Marwan Ali Obeid Mohamed is well on his way to achieving his dream of becoming a chemical engineer. It is hard to say what he will do after graduation. He is already hoping to pursue a master’s degree and a PhD.

“My family and friends are very happy and they support me. I miss them all very much,” Mohamed says. “They wish me the best and want me to get a good education. It’s my responsibility to never let them down.”

When he does go back to Yemen, he will return home brimming with the expertise of a talented engineer. He will also be enriched with the kind of knowledge that cannot be taught: the wisdom that only comes from being immersed in another culture. ■

Jennifer Sowa is the managing editor of Schulich Engineer and the media relations officer for the Schulich School of Engineering. She is a former print and broadcast journalist.