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Senior Class Portrait

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Senior Class Portrait

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Tuesday May 5, 2020

By Eric F. Spina

The Class of 2020 will always hold an extra special place in my heart because we started our University of Dayton journey together.

Four years ago, as I looked out over a sea of hopeful, anxious faces in the University of Dayton Arena at New Student Orientation, I remember feeling — truth be told — a little nervous, too, before these brand-new students as a brand-new president. Yet, it was an exhilarating moment for all of us as the days ahead promised to unfold with unimagined possibilities.

And oh, what a four years it has been for the graduating students (and for me)! Lots of hard work. Successes and failures. New experiences. Lifelong friendships established. Community built.

We did **not** imagine a pandemic four years ago, but the way this class has rebounded to finish their courses over Zoom in their childhood bedrooms and collaborate over the miles on group projects from the kitchen table shows true character, resolve — and heart.

While I could have literally chosen hundreds of students, I'm offering portraits of four graduating seniors whose paths have crossed mine and whose stories inspire me. They embody the Flyer spirit our world needs, and their lived experiences at UD nourish my soul.

Ummya Chaudhary may call herself an introvert, but she will leave a bold exclamation mark at UD. As a civil engineer, she's a builder of bridges — between people. Ummya started "Middle Ground," bringing students together to converse civilly, face to face, about gun control, climate change, and other issues that splinter people. She's a steward of the Earth, who encouraged classmates to live more sustainable lives. A commuter student, she became an orientation leader because she wanted "to make sure new students felt welcomed on campus and experienced the same energy and belonging" she found. The people of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base just think they employed a great civil engineer, but they will find that they have been blessed to hire a thoughtful, socially conscious leader who will build community around her.

I first spotted **Adam Roman** doing what he does best — adeptly walking backwards, talking up the UD experience to prospective students and their families during a campus tour. Today, as an admission office intern, he stars in a newly created virtual campus tour, trains student ambassadors, and moderates chats with the Class of 2024 over Zoom. On his way to earning a degree in communication, he studied in Australia, wrote pieces for the *Flyer News*, led a retreat, and served as a president's emissary in my office. I love his poise, exemplary interpersonal skills — and confidence in whatever the future holds. "I've built relationships on this campus that will last a lifetime," says Adam, who's weighing job offers in marketing and sales.

Political science major **Delali Nenonene** asks keen questions and works tirelessly for justice. He's a changemaker. As director of campus unity for the Student Government Association, he created "Tough Talks," a series of conversations about difficult topics including race and the political climate. He was one of only two students on UD's task force for diversity and inclusion, and as a Dayton Civic Scholar, he worked on programs to forge a deeper connection between the University and the Dayton community. It didn't surprise me last spring when Delali was named a Newman Civic Fellow, a national honor, for his leadership potential and his civic engagement. Time and again, I've seen Delali in action and know he will thrive in law school and beyond. "I'm a lifelong Flyer. I'll always be a Flyer," he says.

Music performance major and president's emissary **Alaina Saliba** sadly didn't get a chance to take a final bow as nightclub singer Velma Kelly in UD's now-cancelled spring production of *Chicago*, but I'll never forget her chill-up-the-spine rendition of the "National Anthem" at a Flyers game or her powerful performances on stages on campus and in the community. She treasured her time as an undergraduate music minister in the residence halls and the chapel. "To me, music is such an elevated form of prayer. Sharing that prayer in community with

others every week has been such a joy,” says Alaina, who will study opera at the Cleveland Institute of Music. “UD has prepared me very, very well,” she says. “I hold the Flyer spirit so deeply in my heart — and will bring it wherever I go.”

We won’t be physically together this weekend as the University confers more than 2,000 undergraduate, graduate, and law degrees in virtual ceremonies that, *I want to emphasize*, will not replace a joyful future commencement. The thought of that special —and surely emotional — day in the future makes my heart soar.

Until then, Class of 2020, hold the Flyer spirit deeply in your hearts.

(Virtual degree-conferral ceremonies for undergraduate, graduate and law students will be held May 9-10. Photo: Top row, l to r: Adam Roman and Ummyia Chaudhary; Bottom row, l to r: Alaina Saliba and Delali Nennonene)