

Soroptimists deliver scholarships to 4 l

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WRITER

Four local seniors received some financial assistance for college from Soroptimist International of San Jacinto-Hemet Valley because of their dedication to community service. Celina Abushawish of Tahquitz High School, Mariam Mekhael of Western Center Academy, Kennedy Perry of Hemet High School and Diana Sagastume of Hemet High School were chosen among 35 applicants to receive scholarships from the nonprofit, which is a branch of Soroptimist International of the Americas.

Blind judging was done via Zoom, a first in the organization's long history of awarding scholarships. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, Traci Sanchez, the group's president, and Linda Burke, co-chair of the scholarship committee, recognized the recipients with lawn signs, baskets of treats and award certificates which were delivered to their homes.

Perry received \$1,000 and said it was a "huge blessing" that will help with tuition and other expenses as she pursues her political science degree at Humboldt State University in Northern California.

"Kennedy is a brilliant student who has taken many AP, honors and dual enrollment college classes," school counselor Dawn Sonnier said. "She has always been polite, kind and respectful. She is definitely a hard worker who had to overcome adversity during high school but has come out even stronger."

As a Key Club member, Perry helped fundraise for various charities and took on leadership roles to organize service events whenever possible.

"My passion for serving this community and the world around me is unmatched," she said in her application statement. "I love everything about helping others and hope to be the change I wish to see in this world one day."

Abushawish will attend University of California San Diego in the fall. She plans to major in biology and enter a pre-med program. Her



Kennedy Perry receives a visit by Soroptimist International of San Jacinto-Hemet Valley members who deliver a \$1,000 scholarship as well as a gift basket and lawn sign.

favorite subject in high school was biology, and she enjoyed her time, volunteering to educate younger people in science and religion at museums, elementary schools and her mosque. She said the \$500 scholarship will help her with tuition.

"What fuels my passion for service is bettering my community in every way I can," she said in her application. "Serving gave me an amazing feeling and a role model who always influenced me to do better and become a part of something greater is my mom."

Mekhael also received \$500 and said the award will allow her to be focused on her studies while attending Chapman University's Freshman Early Assurance Pharmacy Program in the fall.

"This program is a five-year high school to Pharm.D. program, but I have been offered to finish it in four years since I have completed over half of the graduate pharmacy school prerequisites during high school through dual and concurrent college enrollment," Mekhael said.

She spent many volunteer hours at the Hemet Valley Medical Center serving in different departments as well as at the Hemet Public Library, helping during its teen summer reading program.

"Everywhere I volunteered was one puzzle piece that shaped who



Celina Abushawish receives a \$500 scholarship from Soroptimist International of San Jacinto-Hemet Valley during a visit to her home by members of the nonprofit.

I am today," Mekhael said. "I enjoyed all the volunteering opportunities I was presented with."

She said deciding on a career wasn't hard as her mother is a clinical pharmacist, and Mekhael became her friends go-to medical adviser by doing research on their behalf, which they could then take to their doctors.

"I owe all that I am to my mother, who enlightened my vision to see what I am passionate about: helping people," Mekhael said. "Her love, knowledge and experience was the light that guided me and will guide me forever past the obstacles that I will be faced with. Knowing that she is always here for me, supporting me in all that I do, is what kindles my life."

Sagastume received a \$500 scholarship. She said she wanted to be of service to others as a direct result of compassionate people who helped her through some tough and emotional distress.

"I hope to be that person to as many people as possible," she said on her application. "At one point or another, we all need some help getting through life. I consider it an honor to serve this valley that has given me so much in such a short time."

Most of Sagastume's volunteerism was spent serving the less fortunate and working with chil-

Local

ocal seniors



Mariam Mekhael is a Western Center Academy graduate and recipient of a \$500 scholarship from Soroptimist International of San Jacinto-Hemet Valley.

Valley News/Soroptimist International of San Jacinto-Hemet Valley photos



Diana Sagastume, a graduate of Hemet High School, receives a \$500 scholarship from Soroptimist International of San Jacinto-Hemet Valley as she plans to study nursing at Mt. San Jacinto College in the fall.

dren. She will start Mt. San Jacinto College's nursing program in the fall. The career choice stems from her personal experiences, including watching her grandma die of lymphoma.

"I saw her in the hospital looking lifeless more times than I can remember, and unfortunately, not many of her nurses were kind to her and it bothered me incredibly to see that she was being ignored," she said. "Her situation encouraged me to be a nurse and work with sick people; be a nurse my patients and their families can trust and rely on."

Sagastume said she is thankful to everyone who has supported and looked out for her, and she extended a special thanks to the Soroptimist Scholarship committee for all their hard work.

"This award is relieving me of a key element in my education: textbooks," she said. "(The books) are essential to my college career and very costly at times, but at least for this first year I don't have to worry about covering the cost."

In recent years, the local SI branch used its annual Lunafest Film Festival platform to announce and present scholarships to the winners. When this event also was canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic, members decided to

acknowledge the recipients' many accomplishments with home visits.

Founded in 1961, Soroptimist International of San Jacinto-Hemet Valley has a mission to improve the lives of women and girls through programs leading to social and economic empowerment. The local club has budgeted for high school scholarships since 2009. Burke said the application has evolved so that with the 2014 award more emphasis was placed on community service.

"Soroptimist is a global organization with over 80,000 volunteers committed to the mission of empowering women and girls through education," she said. "Our impact is through volunteerism and service to the female community and it is personally rewarding to see the impact of the new younger generation with their service to the community and their passion to maintain the spirit of volunteerism. It is particularly nice to hear words of appreciation from the scholarship recipients who often speak of the monies making it possible for them to pursue their dreams and how they will 'pay it forward' with their future service."

For more information, visit <http://sisjhv.org> or <http://soroptimist.org>.

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