

# Brownstein: Alumna Kamala Harris sparks excitement at Westmount High

Suddenly, students are up to speed on the intricacies of the U.S. political process.

BILL BROWNSTEIN, MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/BILLBROWNSTEIN](https://montrealgazette.com/author/billbrownstein)) Updated: February 6, 2019



Leonard Cohen is currently the most famous Westmount High School grad. But that could soon change, now that Kamala Harris has been touted as one of the frontrunners for the Democratic presidential ticket in the 2020 White House race.

Harris, 54, is a U.S. senator from California and a former attorney general of the state, but she spent a good portion of her early life in Montreal and graduated from Westmount High in 1981.

The move to Montreal was precipitated when her mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris, a breast cancer specialist, landed research work at the Jewish General Hospital and a teaching job at McGill University. (Of note, Maya Harris, a civil rights activist like sister Kamala, served as an adviser to Hillary Clinton.)

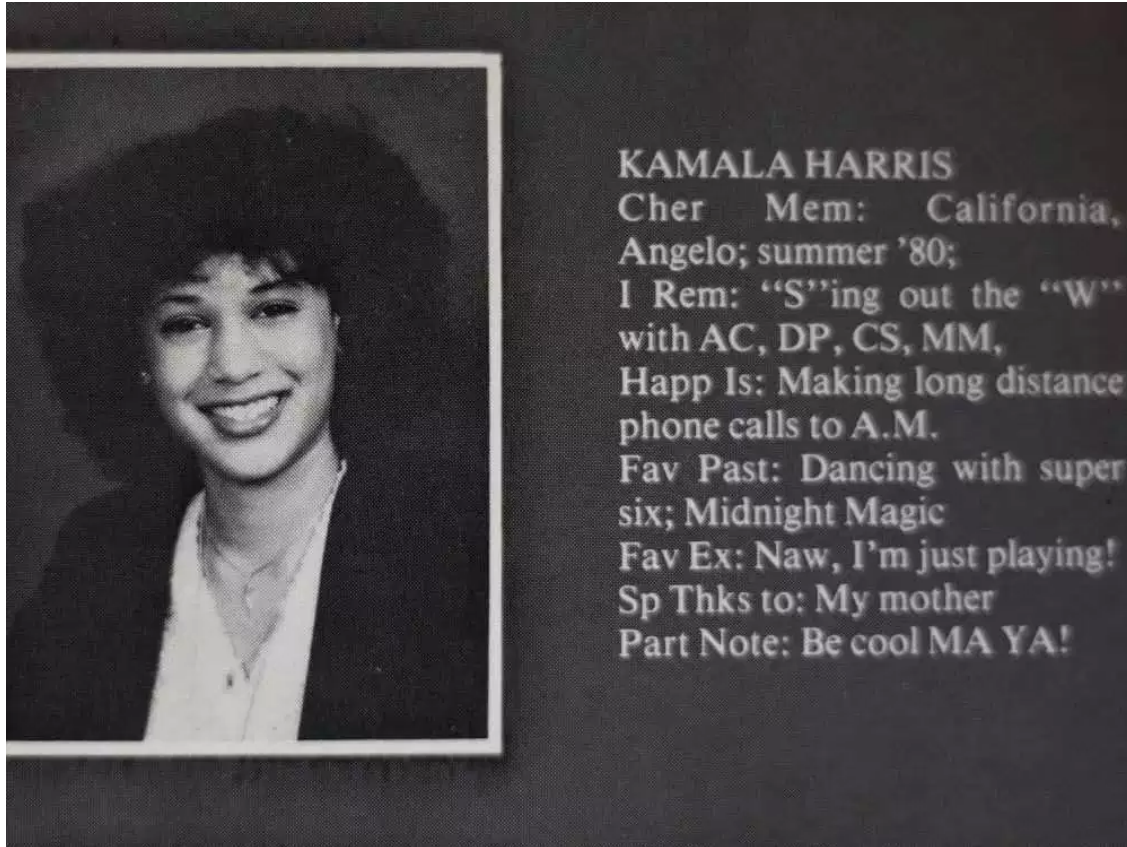
Her entry in the 1981 Westmount High yearbook has little to suggest Harris would reach such lofty heights in U.S. politics. She seemed more pre-occupied with a return to California and “dancing with Super Six,” although she gave props to her mom and advice to her sis: “Be cool, MAYA!”

While many believe young people may be more politically apathetic than ever, such is definitely not the case in Westmount High teacher Robert Green’s Grade 11 Advanced Placement

Comparative Government and Politics class.

Green is leading a spirited exchange with students on the intricacies of the U.S. political process, and they are surprisingly up to speed.

"This class is an enormous challenge for the students," Green says. "By May, my task is to make them all experts in the governments, not only of the U.S., but also of China, the U.K., Russia, Nigeria and Mexico."



Class of 1981: The yearbook entry for Kamala Harris, now touted as a frontrunner for the Democratic presidential ticket in the 2020 White House race. *ALLEN MCINNIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Green acknowledges that Harris's bid for the Democratic nomination has sparked great excitement. "I don't know how it could not. This is such an unusual thing to have someone run for probably the most powerful position in the world who possibly sat in this very class. For many, the name Kamala Harris was probably new to them, but now they're really investigating her. I'm so impressed with their awareness."

Sebastian High, 16, like his classmates, finds it "very inspirational" that a Westmount High grad is making her mark. "I like a lot of the policies she's had in California," he says, though he's "less supportive" of "a couple of others."

Still, High adds, "she has an actual chance to unseat Donald Trump."

There's no doubt in the mind of Merle Ibelings, 16, why she would love to see Harris in the White House: "It would be great to have a woman in the most powerful position in the world. It's about time. Politics have been too dominated by men."

Samuel Farias, 17, sees a sort of pendulum swing in U.S. politics, which could pave the way for a candidate like Harris: "Often when there is a president with a right-wing agenda, it can lead to a

candidate from the left being elected. As has been the case the other way around. So Harris could do well against Trump, but she must focus on health care, the environment and the middle class.”

Matthew Tussman, 16, also opts for Harris over Trump: “It gives me hope that if she could use Westmount High as a base to get into politics, so can I. ... But I really think the next election will be a nail-biter, like the last between Trump and Hillary Clinton.”

Akshay Swaminathan, 16, hopes Harris can trump Trump. “It’s about time for the American mindset to change ... to vote for a black woman. I feel there has been a rise in racism and hatred, and some of Trump’s policies have been erratic.”

Farias is concerned how U.S. trade policies have impacted Canada, especially in the area of tariffs. “Trump doesn’t have a global perspective,” Farias notes. “He picks on the NATO countries, but warms up to (autocratic) regimes. I’m absolutely not optimistic about the future of the U.S. with him in charge. It’s the land of opportunity only for the super-rich.”

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Rafael Stepenberg, 16, is also pessimistic, but it hits home hardest with him, because he is an American: “I’m sad to say I’m sort of ashamed to be an American, because of Trump. It’s such a great nation. Maybe Harris can change things. But politics is such a tricky game, and I feel you can’t trust politicians.”

Mina Stock, 16, is hopeful, particularly because she senses that younger people are becoming more invested in politics. “It’s so important that we are aware of what’s going on in the world, because there is just so much at stake. We must be involved.”

All music to Green’s ears.

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