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Brownstein: Westmount High students inspired by grad Kamala Harris

The Montreal school has had its share of renowned graduates — Leonard Cohen for starters — but Harris brings the school's notoriety to another level.

Bill Brownstein · Montreal Gazette
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Students at Westmount High School watch the inauguration of U.S. President Joe Biden on Jan. 20, 2021. PHOTO BY COURTESY OF WESTMOUNT HIGH SCHOOL

A brand new day is upon us, and as much as that is being joyously greeted by a majority of the American electorate who voted in President Joe Biden, so it is around much of the world, including at the high school attended by Kamala Harris, the first woman and first person of colour to become vice-president.

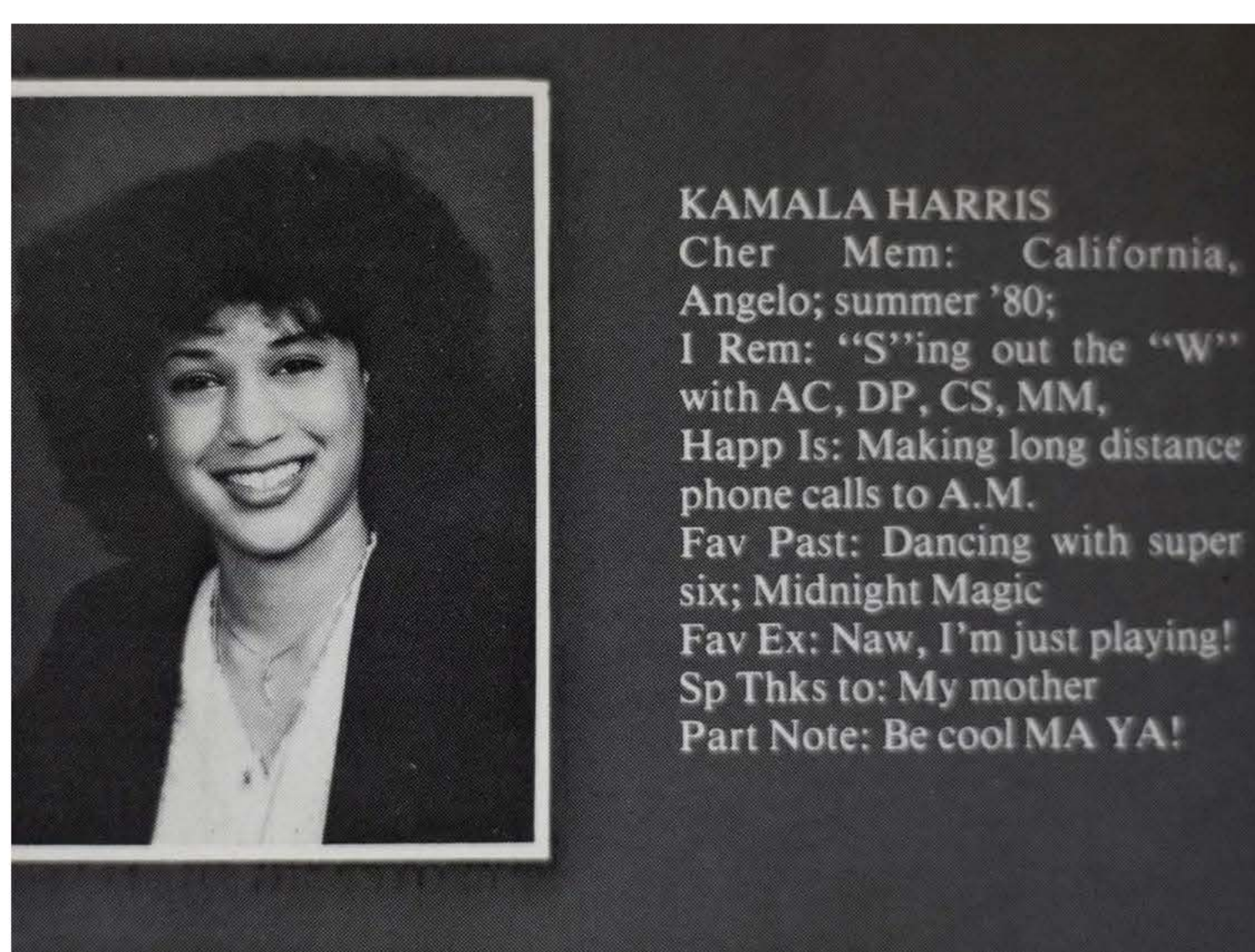
Westmount High School has had its share of renowned graduates — Leonard Cohen for starters — but Harris brings the school's notoriety to another level. Harris, a 1981 grad, spent a good portion of her early life in Montreal after her mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris, a breast cancer specialist, landed research work at the Jewish General Hospital and a teaching job at McGill University.



"It's such a very proud moment for her and those who knew her then," said Trevor Williams, a fellow grad from that era and then-friend of both Kamala and her sister Maya. "With what's going on in the U.S., I'm just so happy for Kamala, to have become the first woman and first person of colour to make it to vice-president. It's awesome."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

To curb the spread, let's comply with the lockdown.



A copy of Kamala Harris from the Westmount High School class of '81 yearbook. PHOTO BY ALLEN MGINNIS /Montreal Gazette

Williams, an elementary school teacher and coach of the Dawson College Lady Blues women's basketball team, had a sense even back then that Kamala and Maya — a civil rights activist who was an advisor to Hillary Clinton — were destined for big things in life.

"I can't say I'm really surprised by what both Kamala and Maya have accomplished," said Williams, whose high-school prom date was Maya. "They really stood out as being so kind and smart. We haven't been in touch for a while, but I am so very honoured to have had the chance to go to school and be friends with them. Hopefully, they can come back again."

Also offering hearty congratulations and wishing for Harris to visit the city in the future were Quebec Premier François Legault and Montreal Mayor Valérie Plante.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Take self-isolation seriously.

And a group of current Westmount High students and staff have put together a video which could hopefully entice Vice-President Harris to return to the city and connect with her past.

"I think it's super inspiring that someone who was in the same position, as I'm in now in Grade 11, can move on to do such an amazing thing, to become the first female vice-president," Cyarra Chase marvelled in the video. "It really makes me think there are so many great things that can happen after high school and that there's so much out there."

Added student Julia Ibelings: "It makes me feel a little bit more empowered to know I can get somewhere when teenagers, especially now, can feel so hopeless."



Kamala Harris is sworn in as vice-president as her spouse, Doug Emhoff, holds a bible during the 59th Presidential Inauguration in Washington on Jan. 20, 2021. PHOTO BY SAUL LOEB/POOL /REUTERS

Westmount High teacher Robert Green was particularly pleased to see that Vice-President Harris was adorned in purple for the inauguration. The school's colours are purple and white. But he is even more pleased that his students have become so involved with events taking place outside school.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Now more than ever, simple gestures are our best protection to fight the virus.

"I wasn't sure if some of my students were excited at first," Green said. "They are, but the impression I got from them is they definitely understand there is a



Kamala Harris, with her husband, Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff, is sworn in by Justice Sonia Sotomayor as the 49th U.S. vice-president on Wednesday. PHOTO BY ANDREW HARNIK /POOL/AFP via Getty Images

"The students are rattled about the polarization going on in the States, the violence and the conspiracy theories being spread. I think a lot of them are quite happy to be living in this country that hasn't become that unhinged."

But at least there's hope now that a new regime can change the narrative in the U.S.

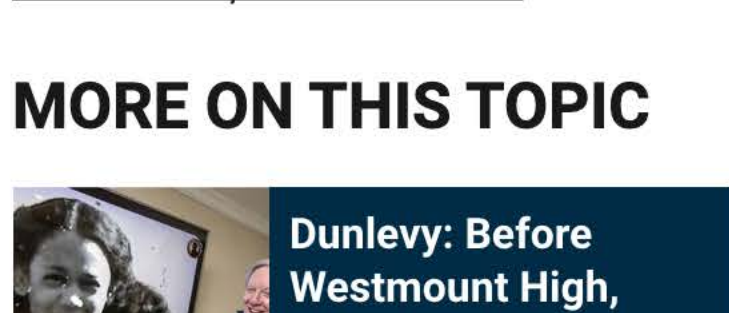
"We all have to be feeling a little more encouraged," Green added. "Indeed, a great time for Westmount High and the world."

Westmount High principal Demetra Droutsas put out a simple two-word mantra for students, one clearly followed by the new vice-president: "Dream big!"

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