

News > Politics • News

Why some of Kamala Harris' biggest fans are in Canada



Presidential hopeful spent high school years in Montreal

By **CASEY TOLAN** | ctolan@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: May 7, 2019 at 7:00 am | UPDATED: May 8, 2019 at 5:07 am

MONTREAL — As snow started to fall outside the windows of Westmount High School on a Tuesday morning last month, a debate about the U.S. presidential election was heating up indoors among the 11th grade comparative government class. The students tossed around remarkably well-informed discussions of Kamala Harris' record, from her policies on truancy and police body cameras to her chances of defeating President Trump.

The reason behind their interest: Harris may have sat in this very classroom.

The future California senator spent her high school years here in Montreal, where her mother worked as a cancer researcher. As she runs for president four decades later, she's got an excited fanbase in America's northern neighbor, both among her former classmates as well as current students who are closely following her campaign with an appreciation of the roots they share with a White House contender.

"It's really inspiring that someone who started at our level at the same institution has gone to such a height — and it shows that one of us could do that too," said Akshay Swaminathan, a student in the government class.

Harris hasn't spoken much about her time in Canada — it covered just two pages in her recent memoir. A Canadian personal connection has been used against presidential candidates in the past, most recently when Trump bashed Sen. Ted

But Harris was born in Oakland, not Canada, and moved from the Bay Area to Montreal after her mother got a job teaching at McGill University's medical department and researching cancer at Jewish General Hospital.

Old friends say Harris' formative years in the city of snow and poutine included some of her first activism and helped her learn how to connect with people from a wide range of backgrounds.

"She's always been a fighter, even from those early days," said Wanda Kagan, a close high school classmate who started an amateur dance troupe with Harris called Midnight Magic. "She always was sticking up for other people."

One example: When she was 13, Harris and her younger sister Maya — now her presidential campaign chair — held a demonstration in front of their apartment building to protest a policy that banned kids from playing on the lawn, they recounted in a 2012 interview. The protest was successful.

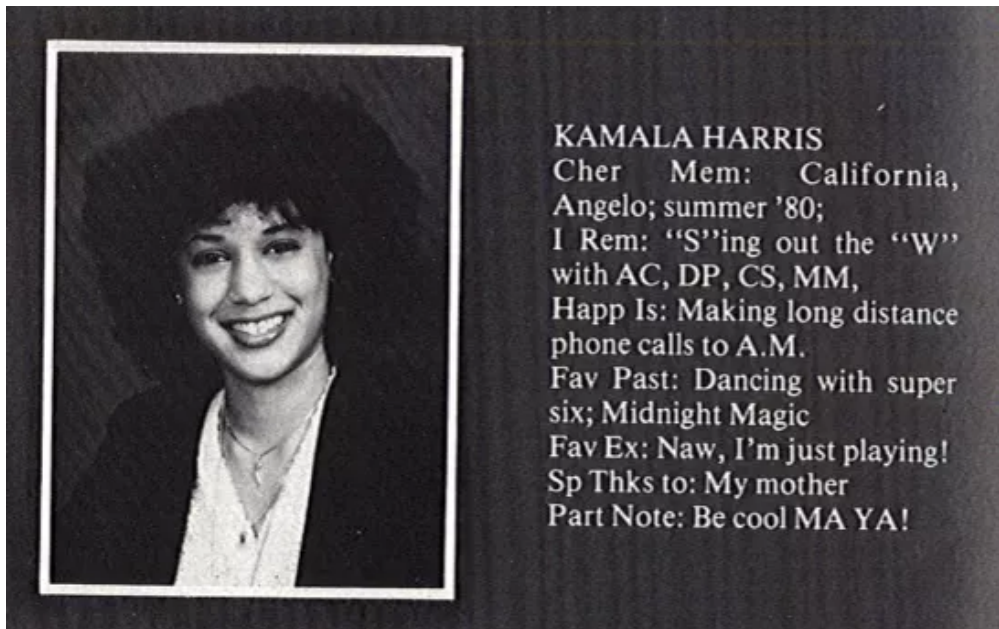
Harris had already gotten a taste of the world beyond the U.S. by the time she moved to Montreal, with trips to her parents' native India and Jamaica as a young girl. But the impending move north was a shock to the 12-year-old.

"The thought of moving away from sunny California in February, in the middle of the school year, to a French-speaking foreign city covered in twelve feet of snow was distressing, to say the least," she wrote in her book, recounting her trip to buy her first down jacket and mittens.

Her mother, [Shyamala Gopalan](#), wanted Harris and her sister to learn French, so she first enrolled them at a Francophone school, Notre-Dame-des-Neiges ("Our Lady of the Snows"). The only French words Harris knew when she first arrived came from her ballet class.

"I used to joke that I felt like a duck, because all day long at our new school I'd be saying, 'Quoi? Quoi? Quoi?'" — "What What? What?" — Harris remembered.

She later went to a fine arts middle school, where she played violin, French horn and kettle drum, before arriving at Westmount, one of the oldest English-language schools in Montreal, whose other most famous alumni is the singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen.



Kamala Harris' high school yearbook entry. (Courtesy Westmount High School)

While Westmount is located in a relatively wealthy neighborhood, it was highly diverse even in the 70s and early 80s, attracting English-speaking students from around the city. The school "was a very racially segregated school when we attended, not in a hostile way, but more because of socio-economic divisions," Paul Olioff, a high school friend, told the Toronto Star. "Ms. Harris transcended this, as there were few students she didn't get along with."

Harris was part of the pep club, according to her yearbook, and dreamed of becoming a lawyer. Her five-person dance troupe was born out of a variety show act, and they ended up performing for local community centers and senior centers, dancing to Prince and other tunes.

In their last year of high school, Kagan remembered, Harris helped organize a large group of girls to go together to grad — the Canadian version of prom — in an attempt to prevent others from feeling left out.

"She wanted to make sure girls weren't outcasts, and didn't feel that pressure if they never got asked to go by a guy," Kagan said.

Harris stayed connected to California — in the summers, she and her sister would go back to Palo Alto to stay with their father, a Stanford professor who was divorced from their mother. She knew she wanted to return to the U.S. for college, Kagan said, and eventually decided on Howard University, the alma mater of Thurgood Marshall, one of her heroes.

Since Harris announced her presidential bid in January, the buzz about her campaign has been building among alumni from her 1981 graduating class of about 250 people. Many said in interviews they were shocked to hear that one of their schoolmates was running for the most powerful job in the world.

“We’re all very proud of her, and we hope she goes far,” said Hugh Kwok, who is pictured next to Harris in their class photo and now runs a car shop in Montreal. He remembered her as a sunny personality who made him smile when they passed in the hallway.



Kamala Harris' high school class photo. She's near the middle, just right of center. (Courtesy Westmount High School)

“I opened my yearbook, and there she is,” marveled Jeremy Elbourne, who’s now the director of an arts center in rural Alberta. “If I’d have foreseen her coming fame, I would have paid her more attention.”

Back at her old stomping grounds, excited Westmount students are also closely following Harris’ candidacy. The school still has a strong activist streak, with students and teachers [forming a human chain](#) around the school last month to protest a proposed provincial law preventing public employees from wearing religious garb like hijabs.

During the discussion in the 11th grade AP comparative government class last month, the roughly 20 students in white polo shirts and school sweatshirts betted around the policies and campaign finance stances of Harris and her rivals.

“The fact she went to a Canadian school could make the relationship between Canada and the U.S. better if she wins,” predicted Merle Ibelings. “She could form a connection that Trump and (Canadian Prime Minister Justin) Trudeau just don’t have.”

But others voiced specific critiques of Harris and her record, including her policy as San Francisco district attorney to prosecute some parents of chronically truant children, which she has argued helped raise school attendance rates and improved outcomes for students.

“It really targeted poor families in California and in no way actually helps them,” argued Sebastian High, who said he thought criminal justice reform was long overdue in the U.S.

Over the course of 45 minutes, the class debated Harris’ chances against other presidential prospects, including Beto O’Rourke, who students thought could draw a strong contrast with Trump, and Pete Buttigieg, whose social media presence won plaudits. “Bernie Sanders has always been my man,” said Mina Stock. Several questioned whether Harris would be able to consolidate enough support to win the Democratic nomination.

Teachers are planning to hold debate-watching events for later in the year, especially if Harris continues to perform well in the race.

“What’s captured the students’ imagination is the sense that they’re sitting in the same classroom as somebody who could be president,” said Jennifer LeHuquet, a vice principal at the school. “If she’s ever in Montreal, she has a standing invitation to come back here, for sure.”

[Report an error](#)

[Policies and Standards](#)

[Contact Us](#)



The Trust Project



SPONSORED CONTENT

**28th Annual Livermore
Downtown Street Fest; In
Historic Downtown
Livermore!**