

Technically, he's a hero in Lebanon

A narrow escape from Beirut inspired a U freshman to offer tech support to raise money for refugees.

By Allie Shah
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It's the memories that drive Danny Chahla to help his ancestral home.

Memories of that day, two years ago, when his father received an urgent call on his cell phone instructing him to bring his family to the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. It was their only chance to get out of Lebanon, where war had suddenly broken out.

Chahla didn't do anything heroic that day, but the reaction it sparked in him has recently earned him national recognition as one of 10 winners of the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes.

Now 18, Chahla, of St. Paul, remembers everything about that day. The taxi driver racing 80 miles per hour to the embassy. The armed men standing guard outside. The huge, iron doors that opened. Guards rifling through his belongings. The damp, polluted air in Beirut.

He and his sister, along with his mother, boarded a large helicopter and landed on a military ship in the Mediterranean Sea. They sailed to Cyprus, then flew to France, New York and back to their St. Paul home, ending their odyssey that began as a routine visit to Lebanon to see relatives.

The escape left an indelible mark on Chahla.

"I felt bad, almost guilty, because I was a U.S. citizen and so I got a free ticket out of there," he said.

He wanted to do something to help the Lebanese who couldn't escape—the ones whose homes were destroyed, whose frantic faces he still remembers.

"You see all of these people fleeing in opposite directions. A lot of people don't have places to go. I wanted to do something about it when I got home," he said.

A wiz with computers, he used his skills to start a charitable organization, offering people tech support in exchange for donations to help Lebanese refugees. To date, Chahla has raised \$20,000 for the HEAL Foundation through his organization, called First-VM.

As part of his "Young Heroes" award, Chahla will receive \$2,500 for higher education or for his service project.

Chahla, a graduate of St. Paul Central High School and a first-year student at the University of Minnesota, says he plans to donate the money to the HEAL Foundation.

“I’d like to see that number go up,” he said of his decision to donate the money.

Barbara Ann Richman, executive director of the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, said Chahla was selected from nearly 300 applicants across the United States and Canada.

“We were so impressed and inspired by his desire to help Lebanese refugees, and by the way in which he put his own talent and passion for computers to work for that cause,” she said in an email. “He has demonstrated commitment, compassion, and courage—qualities that we deem heroic and that we feel are important to honor in young people.”

As for Chahla, his goals include going abroad next year to Dubai to master the Arabic language and to continue his business studies at the U’s Carlson School of Management.

“I’m not in business to make a billion dollars,” he said. “I want to help people. I’ve seen the devastation ... and I’m determined to do something about it.”