

SOARING ON A WING AND A PRAYER



Shannon
Newman

SHANNON NEWMAN DEFYING THE ODDS

HER STORY might mirror ones that you've read before – neglected by her father, raised by a financially challenged single mother and struggles to secure guarantors for a student loan.

But 21-year-old Shannon Newman's story goes deeper, just like the rural community of Moravia, Clarendon, that she grew up in, and she knows the true meaning of defying the odds.

Shannon, a final-year student at the University of the West



... No stopping university dream

ATTENDING UNIVERSITY was a conversation she regularly had with her mother, and Shannon said her mom was very passionate about the idea. But with her mother barely able to finance her subsidised high-school education, getting there seemed impossible.

"My mom called me to have this conversation and said, 'I think you might have to sit out the year because there's no way of going'," said Shannon.

Her response: "No, I don't think I'll make it if I actually sit out the year. I am going to go to

possible. It was not an easy transition. It was very difficult – not just the learning material, but the whole environment that you're coming into after high school," said Shannon.

But when you have been riding rough seas and jumping hurdles the way she had, challenges no longer faze you.

At the end of her first semester at **UWI**, her grade point average (GPA) was 3.59; it increased the following semester to 3.72. Her level of consistency remained the same and, for her, the second year in

Two weeks later, she received an email indicating that she was the successful applicant.

"I read it five times and then I sent it to my mother and sister and said, 'Am I reading this correctly?' It was unbelievable," said Shannon.

The scholarship was from the National Baking Company Foundation and was valued at \$276,000. It was initiated this year and offered through the **UWI** Development & Endowment Fund.

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Shannon, a final-year student at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, who is reading for a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry, has faced and hurdled many obstacles over the years.

Her parents separated when she was a year old. Being the last of 10 children for her mother, Shannon said while growing up in the Moravia community, she didn't know how "less fortunate" she was until she got older and started high school.

Her mom, a cook at the Moravia Primary School, was well respected, and that level of respect was passed on to her.

"I was seen as one of the top students in the primary school. Nobody really disrespected me or anything due to the fact that my mother was a cook there," said Shannon noted.

Describing her childhood as "really good", the gloom came when her father started neglecting his financial responsibilities and her mother's meagre salary was barely able to stretch to meet the needs of the family.

TESTING TIMES

According to Shannon, each year at Bishop Gibson High School for Girls became



CONTRIBUTED
PHOTOS
Shannon Newman

'I'm always surprised to see how, from her salary, she would buy my textbooks and she would do everything to get what I needed ... I didn't go to school as the worst, so you couldn't look at me and know that all was not well financially.'

seemed impossible.

"My mom called me to have this conversation and said, 'I think you might have to sit out the year because there's no way of going'," said Shannon.

Her response: "No, I don't think I'll make it if I actually sit out the year. I am going to go to university and I'm not going to stop. I'm not going take a break until I get a degree."

Her idea was to seek funding through the Students' Loan Bureau, but with every loan requiring two guarantors and other documents, including proof of identification, Shannon was in trouble. She had one confirmed guarantor, an older sister, and no official proof of identification.

"I didn't have an ID at the time. The next step was to get a passport because that would come faster than the ID, but we had no idea where we would get the money to get the passport."

GOOD SAMARITAN

She found a Good Samaritan in her neighbour, who loaned her the money to get it done. After the back and forth of trying to secure a second guarantor, she eventually found one and was granted the loan to study.

In August 2015, Shannon moved to Kingston to live with relatives, leaving the safe space that her mother had provided.

"Coming to UWI, first-year affected me in every way

hurdles the way she had, challenges no longer faze you."

At the end of her first semester at UWI, her grade point average (GPA) was 3.59; it increased the following semester to 3.72. Her level of consistency remained the same and, for her, the second year in her programme, her GPA remained a steady 3.66.

LEAP OF FAITH

In an act of faith, Shannon decided not to seek a student loan for her final year as her mother did not want her to be in a lot of debt after university.

"It was just faith. We are strong believers. She would just tell me to do things and God would work it out," said Shannon.

Her option was to apply for a scholarship, and in August, her mother received a call that she was shortlisted for one. Even after doing an interview, Shannon said she was doubtful as she assumed another shortlisted candidate would be selected.

The scholarship was from the National Baking Company Foundation and was valued at \$276,000. It was initiated this year and offered through the UWI Development & Endowment Fund.

The award is partly based on academic performance, with a minimum GPA requirement of 3.5 and verifiable financial need. An additional contribution of \$74,000 was made to Shannon through the National Baking Company Foundation.

"How can I really find the words to convince National how grateful I am? I just can't find the words because honestly, it's so unbelievable. I have never ever been favoured like this before in my life. I'm beyond grateful. I'm just praying that whatever words come out of my mouth, God will allow it to be very convincing."

She will graduate in October 2018 with a BSc in Biochemistry. She hopes to pursue an MSc in Forensics after.

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