

From Afar, MLK Winner Exults

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University President William P. Leahy, SJ, with finalists (L-R) Patrick Williamson, Kayla Mendonca, Natali Soto and Steven Jefferson. (Photo by Caitlin Cunningham)

By MELISSA BEECHER | CHRONICLE STAFF

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It was a moment Philip McHarris '14 didn't want to miss – not even from South Africa.

When University President William P. Leahy, SJ, took the stage in Robsham Theater last week to announce the winner of the 31st annual Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Scholarship, McHarris followed along via Skype streaming through his friend's laptop.

Even from thousands of miles away in the midst of a study-abroad experience, McHarris said he felt his anticipation building throughout the evening.

"I closed my eyes before the winner's name was announced. When Fr. Leahy said my name I opened my eyes, exhaled, and smiled – It was a really joyous moment," said McHarris. "I continued to smile for the rest of the ceremony. It was about 2 a.m. here so I had to contain my excitement as I didn't want to wake any of my housemates up.

"When my friends, family, and mentors congratulated me, it made the moment even more special. I was truly excited and after a while I just made sure to remind myself that the work only continues," he said.

A Bronx, NY, native and long-time New Jersey resident, McHarris was one of five candidates for the Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship, which recognizes a Boston College junior who embodies King's philosophy in their life and work.

McHarris is a double major in sociology and English with a minor in African and African Diaspora Studies. Recently accepted into the

BC Honors Program and a member of the Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program, McHarris has an impressive scholarly record at BC: He has traveled to India through an [Amanda V. Houston Traveling Fellowship](#), where he took a creative writing course and researched the South Asian Desi Hip-Hop cultural movement; worked with Sociology Professor C. Shawn McGuffey on racial development in school-aged children; studied various aspects of rhetoric with English Professor Paula Mathieu; and been involved with BC's Institute for the Study and Promotion of Race and Culture.

In addition to his scholarly and research activities, McHarris has balanced student leadership with service throughout his years at BC. Among other activities, he has participated in the Honduras Education and Leadership Project, STEP, and the International Justice Project.

A former participant in the AHANA Leadership Academy, McHarris is co-president of United Front, an umbrella student organization for all the black culture clubs at BC. He is a trainer of the Bystander Education program and is a member of DIOP, a character-building group for men of color on campus.

McHarris said his research experiences at BC have led him to a vocation, but also a commitment to service.



Philip McHarris '14

“After graduation, I want to move on to a PhD program in sociology — I want to be a professor, a researcher, and a writer,” he said. “In the long run, I also want to start schools, community centers and programs in under-resourced and underserved communities. I plan to travel as much as I can. My overall plan is to continue learning and growing.”

McHarris attributes his drive directly to his family.

“Without a doubt, my family has the biggest influence on me. Throughout my life, they have showed me unconditional love and patience. My parents have always supported me and kept me in places where I would grow and develop. My older twin sisters have been incredibly important ideological influences, as I thank them for exposing me to books, ideas, theories, and thinkers at such an early age.

“Without the support structure created by my parents and sisters, I would not be where I am today.”

During the Feb. 4 King Scholarship ceremony, Camalae Thomas – McHarris’ friend who manned the laptop – read a statement from McHarris in which he asked his peers and those in attendance to remember the slain civil rights leader’s legacy through actions of the everyday.

“As we enter a month designated for the reflection and appreciation of black history, I call us all to reflect on the visions and ideas that King and other freedom fighters of the civil rights movement graced us with. As we continue to commit ourselves to service, I hope that we also seek to understand and dismantle the very roots of the inequality we see amongst us today — for as King said, ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’”

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