

# Barred from college in Iran, Moorpark resident excels at studies in the U.S.

## Putting his faith in education

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Photo by Joseph A. Garcia

Sattar Khoshkhoo was accepted to the Amgen Scholars Program this summer. Khoshkhoo is majoring in bioengineering at UCLA, where he is researching in what area of the brain epileptic seizures start.



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"I came here determined, focused on what I wanted to do." **Sattar Khoshkhoo**, Iranian native who came to the United States because of religious descrimination.

Sattar Khoshkhoo came to the United States from Iran four years ago, escaping a government that would not allow him to attend college because of his Baha'i faith.

His family had been living a comfortable life in Iran, his dad working as a dentist, his mom as a homemaker. But they realized that if their older child was going to get a college education, they had to leave.

"The Muslim majority does not recognize my religion as an official religion," Khoshkhoo said. "They can take away your rights, make it difficult to get jobs. I could not go to a university."

After spending nine months in Turkey waiting to be granted refugee status, Khoshkhoo and his family settled in Moorpark, where an uncle already lived. Two days after moving here, Khoshkhoo started classes at Moorpark High School, speaking only conversational English.

From the start, Khoshkhoo flourished in math and science classes, which rely more on numbers than language. Then, over the following summer, he took two English classes so he could keep up in English and history.

"I came here determined, focused on what I wanted to do," he said. Within a year, Khoshkhoo had joined the school's highly successful Academic Decathlon team, where students compete in speech, interviews, essays and multiple-choice tests. The experience, he said, helped him develop his language skills and learn American culture.

"Spending all that time with the team, I learned what they liked, what they did," he said. "It made me assimilate a lot easier."

Now, Khoshkhoo, 21, is a junior at UCLA, majoring in bioengineering and neuroscience, and this summer, he's one of 250 college students nationwide participating in the Amgen Scholars Program.

The program, funded by the Amgen Foundation, allows students to do research at 10 top research universities around the country, including UCLA, California Institute of Technology, UC San Diego and Stanford University.

This year, about 2,300 students applied. Of the 250 who were accepted, 56 percent are women and 44 percent are men.

Each student works for eight to 10 weeks, doing research under the guidance of a faculty member.

"If we're going to get students excited about pursuing a career in science, about getting their doctorate, we need to give them a chance to do this hands-on research," said Scott Heimlich, senior manager of corporate contributions for Amgen Foundation.

Another Ventura County resident is also in the program. Milana PeBenito, who attended Westlake High School and is now at UC Santa Cruz, is working at Stanford this summer. PeBenito is researching a bacterium that causes food poisoning.

At UCLA this summer, Khoshkhoo is trying to determine where in the brain epileptic seizures start. If he can determine that, he figures, he might be able to figure out how to stop them.

"Epilepsy is one of those diseases that could be cured, unlike diseases where you can never stop it," he said. "If it doesn't start in the first place, it can't spread."

Khoshkhoo got interested in epilepsy while paired with a UCLA faculty mentor doing research in the field.

At this point, he is unsure what he wants to do in the future. His Baha'i faith teaches that he is, above all, a citizen of the world. So he wants to work where the world most needs him.

"I am Iranian," he said. "I love my country and my culture. Every once in a while, I still miss my country. But I want to go where I can be of best use."