

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

## Truman Scholars Aspire To Be Public Advocates

BY JAMES ROMOSER

*Spectator Associate News Editor*

■ The \$30,000 graduate school scholarships are given to students who plan to study public policy or service.

Columbia's two recipients of the 2002 Truman Scholarship award are talented students, passionate speakers, and, perhaps, future policymakers. And they also happen to be good friends.

Cyrus Habib and Robbie Majzner, both CC '03, have each received the \$30,000 scholarship for graduate school from the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation. The scholarships go to outstanding college juniors who plan to enter the fields of public policy or public service. Seventy-seven students from 65 United States colleges won Truman scholarships this year.

Those who know Habib and Majzner describe them as intense and dedicated. "These are people who are very focused and very passionate," said Lavinia Lorch, an assistant dean in the scholars and fellowships office. "They have a good sense of self," she continued, "and that does not mean they are arrogant—on the contrary."

But despite their similarities, Habib and Majzner are far from the same person. Habib, though small in stature, is "very noisy; he's got this booming voice" and a good



sense of humor, Lorch said. Majzner, on the other hand, is six feet tall but “soft-spoken and gentle,” she added.

### **A Vision of Advocacy**

Habib, who is blind, hopes to attend law school and work as an advocate for the disabled. He is majoring in English and concentrating in Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures and computer science—an area that has allowed him to examine the role of computers in the lives of the disabled. Habib initiated a student organization called Columbians Organized for Disability Advocacy, a “liaison organization between disabled students and the administration that’s still in the baby stage right now,” according to Habib.

But while he cares about disabled-related issues, Habib does not like to focus on his own disability and does not see himself as a spokesman for the disabled. He deflects all questions about his blindness, saying he has known fewer than three blind people in his life. “I hate to be a representative for the blind community; I’m not involved in the blind community,” he said.

Indeed, Habib lives his life as if he had no disability at all. In addition to founding advocacy groups, winning scholarships, and dealing with the rigors of Columbia classes, Habib also serves on the junior class council and works as an intern for Democratic New York Senator Hillary Clinton (he previously worked for another senator, Maria Cantwell, a Democrat from Habib’s home state of Washington).

Habib enjoys skiing, has played piano professionally, and recently had an original photograph, entitled



“Sightseeing,” published in a book called *Speck*. He also has a good “vision” for movies, according to Professor Hamid Dabashi, who teaches a class called Sociology of Middle Eastern Cinema in which Habib is enrolled.

“I am so absolutely fascinated by his courage and his imagination and his steadfastness,” Dabashi said. “He has in fact become a great resource for me for his extraordinary ability to visualize. ... Never have I been instructed by a student more than I have from Cyrus.”

Just as Habib seems to disregard the limits of his disability, he also seems oblivious of the great strides he has made. “I feel like my experience as a blind person is, by necessity, so different than any other blind people,” Habib said mildly of his achievements.

### **Admiring Dedication**

Majzner has achievements of his own. A computer science major and an aspiring physician from New Jersey, he works as a pre-HIV test counselor for Columbia Health Services, and last summer, he worked in a pediatric HIV clinic at Bellevue Hospital in lower

Manhattan. These experiences, Majzner said, inspired him to pursue the area of international HIV/AIDS policy.

“One of the best things about doing [the Truman Scholarship] application was that it helped me solidify what I wanted to go into,” said Majzner, who used the policy proposal that was part of the application to focus on programs that could prevent the perinatal transmission of HIV in South Africa.

Majzner admires devotion to a cause in the face of adversity. He named former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin as one of his role models, “because he pushed mainstream Israeli society to consider for the first time that peace would be the most advantageous [option]. ... He went against what was commonly accepted to help push his society toward an eventual goal of peace.”

Majzner’s former Literature Humanities professor, Rachel



Adams, sees some of that same dedication in Majzner. Even when he was only a first-year, “I saw signs that he was a leader and was going to very successful,” Adams said. “He’s an excellent student, but he was also the kind of person [who] brought a very infectious enthusiasm to class discussions,” she said.

Last semester, Majzner co-founded Columbia’s chapter of Habitat for Humanity, which has allowed him “to meet and greet interesting people,” he said. And he is meeting many more this semester studying abroad in Prague.

“Studying abroad has two big advantages,” Majzner said. “One, it’s a lot easier and a lot less stressful. Two, you get to learn more about yourself and get more perspective.”

### **The People Behind the Scenes**

At a school often criticized for its red tape, it might come as a surprise that both Habib and Majzner were quick to attribute their winning the scholarship to the help they receiving from the administration, which Majzner called “amazing.” “Everyone should pay attention to the e-mails you get,” he said, because Columbia offers an array of scholarship opportunities.

Both students named two deans in particular—Lorch and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs Kathleen McDermott—who assisted them in completing the long applications.

McDermott said she and Lorch selected four Columbia nominees

for the Truman scholarship and guided their application process by conducting mock interviews, reviewing their essays, and keeping track of deadlines. “I’ve especially been the one who has hounded them,” McDermott said, comparing herself to Attila the Hun.

Despite the involved application process, it was a valuable experience, McDermott said. “It’s a process where they learn so much because they’re made to articulate what their values are, what is it they really want to do, and what they care about,” she said.

Lorch agreed, calling the application process a Socratic moment, a way of “figuring out who you are.” “Everything you say [on the application] ideally has to make sense and has to be connected and has to be well-integrated in depicting a complete person,” she said. “The reason that these guys won ... is that they were truly and genuinely passionate about their subject.”

**‘I am so absolutely fascinated by his courage and his imagination and his steadfastness.’**

—Prof. Hamid Dabashi on Habib





DEREK NARENDRA—SENIOR STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Cyrus Habib, CC '03, plans to go to law school and become an advocate for the disabled.



CORY BRONSON—PHOTO EDITOR

Robbie Majzner, CC '03, plans to pursue the area of international HIV/AIDS policy.