

Richards grad takes world view of helping

By **Cheryl Dangel Bartolini**
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Charbel Bourjas is on a mission to help whomever he can, wherever he can.

Bourjas, 18, who graduated this year from Richards High School in Oak Lawn, was born in Lebanon and visited there about four years ago when the civil war in neighboring Syria was in its early stages.

"Even though we were in Lebanon, the war was spilling over," he said. "You could hear constant bombing. We were 35 minutes from the border and you'd see families living in tents along the road. They had come to Lebanon without a place to stay. It shocked me what the conditions are for the kids my age and younger who are homeless and don't have a place to sleep at night."

The experience gave him the idea to start a charity to aid kids in war-torn countries. Together with his parents, Elias and Ghada Bourjas, of Oak Lawn, and his brother, Dany, 27, who is an attorney, they registered Kids of War as an Illinois charitable organization in January.

"My hope is to host drives for food and other goods and send them to different countries," Bourjas said.

In March, he launched a website, <http://www.kidsofwar.org>, that explains the work of the charity and has a link for donations.

"Hopefully, I can gather, to the best of my ability, resources for the children over there. Hopefully, I can send boxed goods to refugee centers in Lebanon and Turkey, where the people are going," he said.

Helping others comes naturally to Bourjas. As a member of Richards' Interact Club, he became heavily involved with Rotary International, where he was active in dozens of community service efforts.

At school, he earned Honors with Distinction, the highest academic ranking a student in Community High School District 218 can achieve. He also was an AP Scholar, the historian and treasurer for the National Honor Society chapter, and a member of mathletes, Spanish club, varsity tennis, student council and the Spanish Honor Society. He served as a freshmen mentor and a senior leader.

Out of all of the activities, his work with the Rotary and Interact are favorites.

He attended the Rotary Youth Leadership Awards in Lake Geneva, Wis., in the fall for a four-day retreat. Bourjas was nominated and attended with 110 other area kids and 10 exchange students.

"We were really able to get to know one another and become a big family, and I left that trip with a greater sense of pride in my community," he said.

Bourjas volunteers at Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn, usually working three hours a week in the procedure recovery center, helping nurses with administrative duties and transporting patients.

Last summer, he attended Camp Neuro, a weeklong program at Rush University Medical Center, to learn about the brain and get insight into the medical field.

He also is a member of Future Leaders in Planning, attending monthly downtown meetings at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning offices to participate in an urban planning program.

"We learn about regional issues that we face and how we can fix them," Bourjas said. "We also go on field trips to different places to learn about different aspects on how our region works."

His brother Dany is his mentor.

"Ever since I was a kid, I spent most of my time with him and he taught me a lot," Charbel said. "We have very similar hobbies and views on everything. Everything I know is because of him and he supports me in everything I do."

Bourjas plans to attend Northwestern University to study economics, political science and molecular biology.

"I'd like to go to medical school and become a surgeon, though I haven't decided yet," he said. "I really like medicine but until I actually go to college and experience more, I won't be able to decide."

Meanwhile, he is focused on the charity and making his parents proud.

"They gave up a lot for us to have opportunities, and if I waste them and do not do everything I can, I'd be letting down my parents and my own dreams of what I want to accomplish," he said. "I always try to be the best that I can be because that's the only way that I can be content."

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