Ahed Alhamdan

You are the envy of your 60+ cousins back home in Jordan: the first individual in your extended family to come to the United States to pursue a bachelors degree. But it can be lonely, being so far away from home, in such a cold place. How does someone in this situation survive and thrive? You push yourself to get to know people, recognizing that “everything happens through the people we know,” and throw yourself into classes and extracurricular activities. Suddenly you find yourself with offers for internships from three of the Big Four accounting firms and a very bright future ahead.

This is Ahed Alhamdan’s (Business Administration: Accounting and Information Systems Analysis, ‘17) story. Born in Amman, Jordan to an accountant father and a stay-at-home mother, Ahed recalls visits from his Uncle Abdallah, an engineering manager at Tyco Telecommunications in Newington who has lived in the U.S. for more than 25 years. Having a family member in America emboldened Ahed to move here in 2014 with a goal of studying business at the University of New Hampshire.

Not familiar with the American college application system, he discovered that he had missed the deadline to apply to UNH. Another hurdle was that he hadn’t taken the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam or SATs! Undeterred, Ahed enrolled at Great Bay Community College and set up a meeting with the UNH Admissions Office to discuss how to transfer the following year. From Admissions, he learned that passing a writing intensive class would demonstrate his English language proficiency. Though he had studied English in Jordan in the private schools he attended, he didn’t feel confident with his abilities and especially struggled to express his feelings in English, as well as with understanding slang. To supplement what was being covered in his English class at Great Bay, he watched endless YouTube videos, action movies, and TV shows (Breaking Bad and Game of Thrones), while also asking people to explain terms he didn’t understand. All his hard work paid off when he passed that class with a B+ and transferred successfully to UNH.

Even after transferring to UNH, it wasn’t smooth sailing. He admits he didn’t like it his first semester here. Though the campus was beautiful, he missed the tight connections and relationships he was used to with his family and friends in Jordan where he says he would have ten people willing to help him with any given problem. Sometimes he even wished that he had stayed back home in Jordan. But he remembered all the people he had met in Jordan, people who came to the U.S. for a while and then gave up and returned. “I reminded myself that I was already here and forced myself to think about the outcome,” Ahed recalls: getting an undergraduate degree from an American school. He started to be more proactive in building relationships with his peers and professors. After day one of a new class, he would stay after to introduce himself to the instructor and made sure to go to office hours. He joined the Accounting Students Association, which he found useful for networking. He became a peer advisor for Paul College (relatively rare for a transfer student), joined the Middle Eastern Cultural Association, and started to participate in intramural sports. As he progressed through his degree, he was also learning to love accounting. “I thought it was just crunching numbers all day,” he smirkingly admits. “But the software does a lot of that work!”

What he came to realize is that accounting offers numerous career possibilities: as a tax professional, an FBI agent who might use forensic accounting to catch financial crimes, or as a public accountant. Being able to work with different clients from various industries also appeals to him. Through the Accounting Students Association, Ahed learned about the internships offered by the Big Four accounting firms (Ernst and Young, PricewaterhouseCoopers, KPMG, and Deloitte). He applied for internships with the first three of these firms as a junior, not realizing that, with two years remaining until completing his education (he plans to continue for a masters degree immediately after undergraduate study), he wasn’t yet eligible.

Resilient to the last, Ahed applied the following semester to their leadership programs instead: this time, he was accepted to all three. Through those two day leadership training seminars, his confidence and ability to work on a team grew exponentially. He also came to realize that he had a responsibility to educate others about UNH, to serve as an example of the type of professional that the school is producing.

It’s no wonder that he was selected as a Paul College Dean’s Ambassador through a highly competitive selection process. As a Dean’s Ambassador, Ahed recently traveled to Silicon Valley for an alumni networking event. The highlight of that trip, he enthused, was “dinner with Peter T. Paul, who hosted us for dinner at a super-fancy restaurant that we never would have been able to go to otherwise!”

As both a Dean’s Ambassador and a peer advisor, Ahed frequently interacts with students; one of his CYOS nominators, Tamara Rury, calls him a “building mayor,” who can often be found in Paul College chatting with professors or peers. Now, as he is set to graduate in May (with his parents traveling from Jordan to attend!), Ahed offers the following advice to his fellow students: “You make your own limits.” It’s pretty clear Ahed Alhamdan has set his far, far in the distance.