Unlike most college students, who can hang out at home for the holidays or summer break and then head back to UNH, Shadi Zamani ’20 lives in limbo. Sure, she has her room in Mills Hall, where she supports fellow students as their resident assistant, talking them through troubles and planning fun events. And she has her second homes with members of the campus community who have offered her support, housing, funding, food, a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on when things turned tough.

But if Shadi returns to her neighborhood in Andisheh, just 30 minutes northwest of Tehran, Iran, she might not be able to re-enter the U.S. and complete her degree at UNH. And her family — her parents and two younger sisters — cannot come to see her here. This is the result of the federal travel ban enacted in 2017 that targets predominately Muslim countries. Executive Order 13780 suspended entry of all Iranian nationals to the U.S. except for those with student visas, who may be subject to enhanced screening.

“I knew that the path I chose would be emotionally difficult,” says Shadi of her decision to earn a college degree in the U.S. She couldn’t have known exactly how difficult it would be. Soon after she completed UNH’s Navitas program for international students, where she honed her English speaking and writing skills, she started taking Discovery courses, and set her academic plan in place to become a neurosurgeon.

But one day during an exam, an email popped up on her phone. It was from UNH saying she was overdue on her payments, and she had a limited time to come up with the funds. Because of the federal economic sanctions imposed on Iran, Shadi’s family was no longer able to support her financially. The first person she called was her father, then she sought guidance from the UNH Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS), which advised her to also talk with the Rev. Larry Brickner-Wood, chaplain and executive director of the Waysmeet Center. He helped her create an online fundraising page so people could donate to help pay her tuition and room and board.

“I remember sitting up at night, not sleeping, watching the website, and each time someone would donate even $5, it would make me so happy.”

Shadi did what she could to make ends meet. She covered shifts in her professor’s lab, applied for an RA position and began thinking about selling off her phone, her laptop, whatever she could sell that would give her a boost in money. She started to panic. Her coursework started to suffer. “I wasn’t focused on my degree, I was focused on work, getting a job, fundraising... those were my life, not my schooling,” says the chemical engineering major. But soon, guardian angels came through. She was offered a free place to stay by a staff member’s family, and received funding through a coalition of organizations, groups, individuals, and UNH, pulled together by Waysmeet. Added into that was a large gift from an anonymous donor to her fundraising page, and her senior year was covered.

While balancing all this, Shadi has been heavily involved in campus life, as well. She volunteers at the Waysmeet Center regularly, presents and attends Cultural Connections, hosted by OISS each week, and has been called the ‘epitome of a student leader’ by Mills Hall Director Brittany Cotton. As another nominator wrote: “Shadi is a caring and generous friend, a serious scholar, an ethical and hard-working employee, and a thoughtful and caring person,” as evidenced by her close relationships with her floor residents in Mills, which is made up of mostly upperclassmen — traditionally a difficult scenario to build community in a dorm.

Shadi says her last few years of college might not be the typical undergrad experience, but they’ve taught her valuable lessons. “I feel much more grown up and mature than I was when I first came here. I’m not scared of anything anymore, because I experienced so much struggle,” she says. A strong advocate for herself, Shadi also talked about her financial hardships with President James Dean, whom she had met two years ago at a welcome event during his first year at UNH’s helm. He, too, quickly became an ally — impressed, as Brickner-Wood and others were, by Shadi’s strength and perseverance. She knows she is lucky to have had helping hands when she needed them. “If any one of them wasn’t there for me at any point, I would not be able to finish my degree and graduate in May.”

She believes those late nights tallying up five-dollar gifts taught her a lesson too. “I learned to have hope until the very last moment, never give up. You never know where help is going to come from. Never lose your hope.”