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Shelburne teen wins Dufferin County Law Association?s 2025 Gillian Shute Award

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A local Shelburne student took on a challenging debate within Canada's legal system ? the ?Right to be Forgotten? and the question of reintegration into society. Her essay on the topic ultimately won her the Gillian Shute Award, a yearly bursary named in memory of Gillian Schute, a passionate and dedicated local lawyer, and awarded by the Dufferin County Law Association (DCLA).

Harnoor Bhogal, a Grade 12 student from Centre Dufferin District High School (CDDHS) said that sometimes, individuals who have an embarrassing or compromising past ?? or criminal record ?? can face harsh judgment as they try to change their ways and reintegrate into society.

Bhogal set out to discuss the pros and cons of Canada taking legal steps to erase people's pasts to help them get back into society with a fresh start.

She said that while she believes in second chances, there are risks to weigh as well.

?I felt this scholarship was an opportunity to express my legal thinking,? said Bhogal.

?In the digital age, past mistakes ?? like a regrettable social media post or a criminal record ?? can permanently impact an individual's life,? she said in her essay.

Bhogal said that with the rise of social media, it can be extremely difficult for individuals to wipe the slate clean. Old pictures, videos and can be dug up at random, and can completely reshape how that person is seen in the present, whether they've made an effort to change or not.

Beyond this, those who have exited the prison system are often weighed down by the ghosts of their past.

?Individuals that have served their sentences may still face stigma from their criminal records, which can hinder their reintegration into society,? she said in her essay. ?Similarly, past social media activity can lead to discrimination during job applications. Allowing people to delete or hide digital history could help them rebuild their lives.?

On the contrary, however, Bhogal acknowledges that not every situation can be simply forgotten. Context matters, and so does the field that the individual is trying to enter.

?Advocates argue that digital histories must remain accessible for accountability,? she said in her essay. ?In professional fields like law and medicine, past misconduct should not be hidden if it poses risks to the public. Transparency helps ensure that individuals in positions of trust are held accountable.?

This topic and Bhogal's approach caught the attention of the judges evaluating the essays, and it ultimately won her the prize.

In a ceremony inside the Orangeville Court (10 Louisa Street), Bhogal received her certificate and prize from the DCLA and two Justices from the Court.

?It was very overwhelming,? Bhogal said. ?It was my first time being in a courtroom, but despite that, I feel great about it, I feel pretty smart.?

The essay was a gamble that paid off, coming in at roughly half the word count that was asked for. Bhogal argued that in the legal

world, getting to the point and not wasting time with bloated writing is key.

?Rather than just dragging the topic out, it was very concise and straightforward,? she said. ?I think last year when I wrote this piece, I was pretty much over the limit, around two pages. But in this essay, I only had 395 words, and the judges agreed with me, it was very concise,?

?At the same time, though, I wanted to make sure my point gets across, rather than not having enough information.?

Now with this award under her belt, what comes next for Bhogal is simple - going to university for law.

?I plan on going to Brock University for critical criminology, it's a four year program,? she said. ?I chose Brock because when I went there, it felt like home, it felt like comfort. I don't think I would be able to feel that at any other school.?

Bhogal has also secured herself an extremely exclusive program beyond critical criminology.

?Brock actually is very unique in their law field, because they offer a Law Plus program to students,? she said. ?It helps you kind of go more in depth of what law and the legal field is. It's actually offered to 30 students, and I got accepted.?

With a thoughtful approach to justice, accountability, and reintegration, Bhogal's award-winning essay not only earned her a scholarship ? it showcased a legal mind already grappling with the nuances of modern rights and responsibilities.