

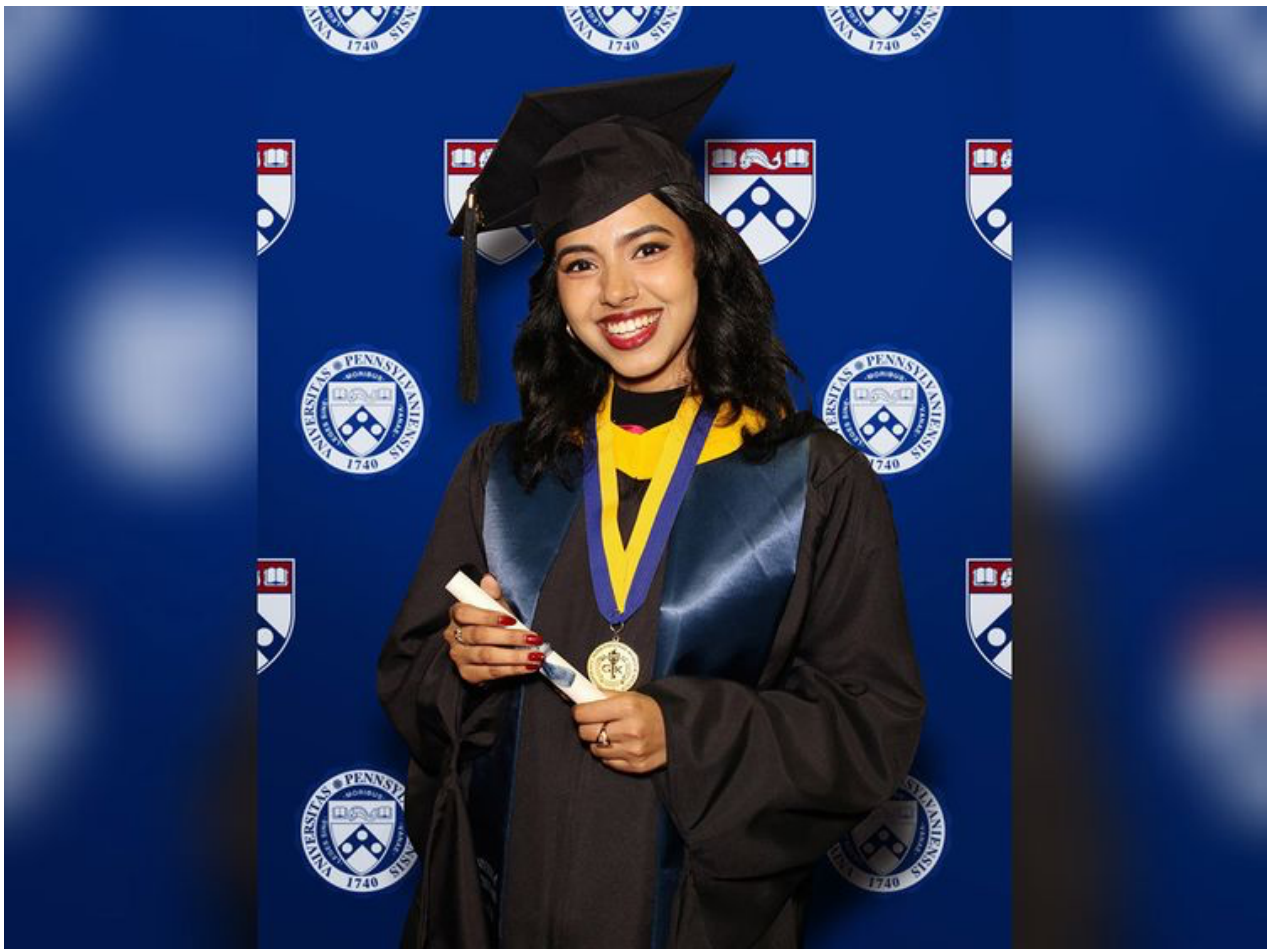
## Homeschooled girl from Dubai wins top award at Ivy League university in the US

Indian student withdrew from regular classes in Grade 2, yet went on to make a global mark

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Dubai student Dorothy Jane Thomas who won the Richard J. Estes Global Citizenship Award from the University of Pennsylvania in the US.

Image Credit: Supplied

Dubai: Dorothy Jane Thomas was homeschooled in Dubai at a time when the concept was not very popular in this region. Yet, she recently completed her masters in non-profit leadership with a 4.0 GPA and won a top award from an Ivy League university in the US.

Speaking to Gulf News, Dorothy said her winning the prestigious Richard J. Estes Global Citizenship Award from the University of Pennsylvania in the US is “a reminder that our efforts to make a difference - no matter where we come from—have the power to challenge the status quo and bring about transformation to communities, societies and economies.”

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According to the university, the award is presented to a graduating international student in the non-profit leadership programme who embodies a commitment to social impact, who has a record of academic excellence, and who is committed to using their talents and knowledge to make a difference in the world.

“It is a recognition that fuels my commitment to foster positive change across the globe,” she said.

## **Homeschooling journey**

Dorothy, along with her two sisters, Stefanie Danielle Thomas and Darianne Thomas, was homeschooled by their parents, Ashish and Rekha Thomas, both of whom hold PhDs.

The parents’ decision to withdraw their children from traditional schooling when Dorothy was in grade two stemmed from concerns about the impact of conventional education on their personalities and well-being. Despite excelling academically and athletically in regular school, Dorothy said the two elder sisters faced challenges that led their parents to opt for homeschooling for them. The youngest one was never sent to a regular school.

She pointed out that many people are concerned about discipline when they think of homeschooling.

“My parents were very strict...They were strict about us waking up at a certain time, making sure we got dressed up, and kept the standard that we had to follow. We had to act as if we were going to school. So, we had to show up on time, we had to present our homework and all of that. My mom had these timetables that she set up, we had to always show reports to my father. We had a system in place even when we were travelling.”

## **Disciplined foundation**

Reflecting on her unique educational path, Dorothy attributed her success to the strong foundation laid by her parents. “The discipline instilled by our parents was crucial. They set high standards and ensured we met them,” she said. This disciplined approach, coupled with diverse extracurricular activities and global exposure, has equipped the Thomas sisters with skills and experiences that extend far beyond traditional academics.

“So, when we ended up becoming independent, we had to figure out our universities by ourselves, without their [parents’] direct involvement...That feeling of wanting to excel and do our best was given to us.”

The homeschooling journey began with a South African curriculum, later transitioning to an American curriculum to better align with their goal of pursuing higher education in the United States. Despite the initial risks and uncertainties, the Thomas sisters thrived academically, thanks to the disciplined and structured environment their parents created with the support of private tutors.

## **Extracurricular activities**

Dorothy said they were engaged in various extracurricular activities, from horse riding and swimming to baking and painting, which helped them develop well-rounded personalities. “Through our church, we also got connected to communities of various age groups and it ensured we had very good social connections.”

Dorothy's eldest sister, Stefanie, attended Arizona State University for her undergraduate studies before moving on to Harvard for her master's degree. Dorothy herself graduated from Pennsylvania State University with a 3.96 GPA for her undergraduate degree prior to joining the University of Pennsylvania. Their younger sister, Darianne, is currently pursuing her undergraduate degree at the University of Pennsylvania. "Both my sisters have also won awards including the US president's award for academic excellence."

Dorothy said their academic achievements were complemented by extensive travel, which enriched their educational experience. "We've travelled to at least 76 countries, which has allowed us to mix with different cultures and gain exposure to various perspectives."

This global exposure has been instrumental in shaping their worldview and enhancing their academic pursuits.

## **Why she won**

The award from UPenn recognised her significant contributions to global citizenship, particularly her research and collaborative efforts in the nonprofit sector across various countries, focusing on poverty alleviation, disease control, sustainability, and community empowerment.

In Kenya, she researched and presented findings on social innovation organisations, leading to investor actions. In India, she advised Atmashakti Trust on volunteer management and advocacy. Her research in Taiwan covered volunteer management in the religious sector, while in the UAE, she shared insights on the public sector with Penn.

In Madagascar and Switzerland, she assisted ADES Solaire with market research and branding. In Amsterdam, her CSR recommendations to ING Bank were implemented. In the UK and France, she connected Penn with public sector leaders and contributed to research on the Paris Olympics' security challenges.

In Costa Rica, she supported sustainable tourism efforts, and in the US, Dorothy collaborated on improving board governance and volunteer engagement for several organisations. Her work with MANNA in Philadelphia focused on enhancing health through nutrition.

Dorothy is now all set to do her MPhil in Organisational Dynamics in her alma mater which has also invited her to work in alumni relations.

“So, I’ll be back in UPenn as a student and a student worker as well from August,” she added.