Political science major Tenzin Thargay has only been at the University of Massachusetts for two semesters, but has already made a name for himself on campus and beyond.

Thargay, who is from West Roxbury, Mass., is the child of Tibetan immigrants. In 1951 the Chinese invaded Tibet, and after a failed Tibetan uprising in 1959, hundreds fled Tibet due to the oppressive invasion. Thargay’s grandparents, who were affluent merchants in Tibet, fled to India where they became foster parents to newly orphaned Tibetan children. Thargay’s maternal grandparents raised over 100 children in addition to their four children.

Both of Thargay’s parents were born in India, where they attended university. Their lives were changed when the U.S. passed the Immigration Act of 1990 which allowed for Tibetans to apply for a visa in America. His parents, who were dating at the time, were both approved for a visa, immigrating to the U.S. in 1992 and 1993.

Thargay, who was born in Boston in 1995, lives with all four of his grandparents, who are all currently naturalized citizens of the U.S.

“I get to keep my culture alive not only from the Tibetan food that we make but from the history they tell me,” he said. “It has absolutely shaped me. I definitely have a high regard for the elderly. I have a strong affinity for not only my grandparents but older people.”

Thargay’s respect for the elderly manifested in high school with a community service program called Connective Living, which he participated in for four years. In the program, Thargay taught senior citizens how to use computers.

“I was able to teach my grandfather how to listen to Tibetan radio on his iPad, and by that same token I was able to help these elderly people learn how to navigate the Internet. That desire to help people really stemmed from my grandparents and my Tibetan/Buddhist upbringing. In Tibetan Buddhism there is always a strong desire to help other people, and to benefit other people than yourself. I’m kind of imbued with this commitment to service above self.”

Thargay attended a coed middle school, but switched to an academically intense all-boys school for high school at Roxbury Latin School. His high school was made up of 297 boys from grades 7 to 12, and he said the tight-knit, academically rigorous community helped prepare him for college.

“We had two axioms or beliefs that the school really pillared itself on as a moral philosophy that we kind of breathed. The first is that every boy is known and loved, and the second is that asking for help is a sign of strength, not a sign of weakness.”

With a maximum of 16 students per classroom, Thargay said his high school experience was a very nice, brotherly community of learned scholars.

“We all understood where we had been and where we were going to go in that school. Everyone was very academically astute and driven, and it’s easy to be
intimidated by your peers in that environment, but we learned that it’s best to swallow your pride and seek help when you truly need it because people are very willing to help you. Coming from that school taught me to be very proactive.”

Thargay said he expected to feel swallowed up and intimidated at a college as large as UMass, but has managed to shrink down UMass considerably in his first year. In his first semester none of his classes had more than 30 students, and he joined a RAP program. He also became House Council President for Webster Hall, as well as the Tibetan tutor for the Five College Center for the Study of World Languages. He works as the hitting partner manager for the varsity women’s tennis team, and is a part of Students for Free Tibet to raise awareness about Tibetan plight.

“This all wouldn’t be possible if it weren’t for that academically intense high school, but more so I came to a very quick realization in my first couple of weeks here that this is a huge school and there are a lot of resources. I realized what separates the average students who coast through their four years and the truly extraordinary ones are the ones who seek out the plethora of resources that this top research university has to offer. There are a lot of opportunities here and everything is in front of you. There are people who really want to help you but you have to take the first step.”

Thargay was recently selected as one of the fellows for the Catherine Davis Fellowship for Peace through Middlebury College Language School. He will be studying Chinese in Vermont for eight weeks during the program.

“It’s very validating of what I want to do in the future, which is hopefully to work in diplomacy with the goal to advance Chinese/Tibetan and U.S. relations.”

Thargay speaks five languages – English, Tibetan, Chinese, Spanish, and French.

“My mind has been wired for languages and language acquisition. It’s what I like to do.”

Thargay said that one of his biggest motivations to go into diplomacy is knowing that hundreds of Tibetans, including people his own age, are protesting the harsh Chinese-imposed living conditions by self-immolating, or setting themselves on fire.

“They gave up everything – going to college, being married, having children – they forewent that, and I felt like I can’t go through my four years or my whole life without doing something impactful in their honor, in their memory. That really compels me to use my time here and devote my life and academia to somehow improving relations between China and Tibet.”

“I carry this torch of my culture and people to conserve our customs and our heritage in this melting pot that is America, and not to just homogenize but to keep the identity well and alive while acclimating to the American society as well.”

Thargay believes that success cannot be judged by numbers or letters, but personal achievement.

“When you’re personally satisfied with yourself and you push yourself and work towards something and can finally see the fruits of your hard labor, then you can really enjoy that – you may be exhausted but it’s what you wanted and you got it and you’re happy and satisfied. That’s success to me.”
During high school, Thargay was introduced to a South African proverb that reads, 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.'

“Sometimes we can be caught up with the definition of what success means and real success is being able to go with other people. A good group of friends or a good support system will take you far. If you go alone you can go fast and accelerate in front of everyone, but to what cost? If you do crash and burn it’s going to be pretty bad. If you’re with people that support you, love you, push you, and understand you, you’re almost set-up for success.”