

Go for Gold symbolizes a journey.

For some, this is purely an individual while for others it is a more social journey. For me, Go for Gold symbolizes an individual as well as a social journey.

I would like to share with you my experiences which I strongly hope will highlight some aspects of this journey.

I was born in Afghanistan during the Afghan war against the Soviet Union. I also experienced the Afghan civil war in the early 1990s and finally saw the brutality and oppression of the Taliban regime. My family used to live in a remote village and my mother passed away when I was at a very young age while giving birth to my youngest sister because there was no doctor and health facilities. I did my first years of schooling in the local mosque and sometime under the tents. In other words, I was born in poverty and lived most of my life in poverty.

Being poor, however, never was an excuse for me to do nothing. In the contrary, it provided me the incentive and courage to work harder and to use the given opportunities effectively. When I was at primary school, I always worked hard to attain the highest possible grade. I realized from the very beginning that my education will be a central force to change my life and to help others around me. While my realization at early stage was important, it was the hunger and support of my parent for education that proved to be more important. They helped me in every stage of my schooling with whatever resource they could. In fact, it was my mother who dreamed of having educated children and it was my father who worked extra hours per day in a bakery to ensure that my siblings and I get the best possible education.

I was happy when I finished primary school. However, I could not continue my study to secondary school without challenges. First, there was the lack of teachers in the village who could not teach science subjects beyond year six. For this reason, I always repeated learning addition, subtraction, division and fraction. The highest topic in maths, for example, was fraction because there was no single teacher in school to teach beyond fraction!

Second, there was the intensifying war condition which damaged the entire country and took away the opportunity to continue our schooling. When the Taliban regime came into the area in early 2000s, things got so worse that most families had to escape their villages. My family, like many others, escaped the country and took refuge in Pakistan.

My brother, took the risk, and made his way to Australia. His arrival in Australia brought a hope but it was not without challenges. The hope became materialized when my family was granted the humanitarian visa and we all reunited again in Australian in 2005. However, the challenges began as we entered a new phase of our life: living in a different society and with little ability to communicate in English. Everything was strange and fearful. I looked lost for the first few weeks physically, mentally and psychologically!!!

Being lost in a new country was proved to be a good thing. It became the catalyst for change. I began to realize that to find myself and my place in this new society, I had to do something. I enrolled in English language centre in Marsden Intensive English Centre. I worked hard and got ready to enroll in Year 11 at the beginning of 2006. While I was in school, I always took the opportunities and received enormous help from my teachers. There are not enough words to describe the impact of my teachers' help on those early days.

One of such an opportunity was MUNA in 2006. It was funded by the Rotary Clubs and provided an opportunity for me to learn about the value of collective actions; research, working in a group and make new friends. It was also a place to represent a country in a UN-like forum which taught me so many new things about the responsibility of influential leaders who use those forums and bring changes to the entire world. Of such lessons, I can name social harmony and tolerance while pursuing one's own interests.

When I went to Year 12 in 2007, I was given the opportunity to represent my school as a vice-captain. I participated in so many leadership forums and had the privilege to represent my school in the Northern Sydney Regional Equity Committee in which I learnt that youth's voice is important and central to social change regardless of the nature of social change. It was my academic record in school and involvement in the wider community that helped me to gain an enormous opportunity at the beginning of 2008.

Again a support from Rotary Clubs but this time it was not MUNA but a bigger and much more important forum: RYLA. In RYLA, I had the privilege to meet 70 young leaders from different walks of life. They were amazing people and we shared our experiences in a week time. We learnt leadership lessons from current Australian leaders. The week ended with an important lesson for me: "be the change you want to see" as the great leader of our time, Nelson Mandela, taught us.

In RYLA, I also learnt that leadership is not only having a good vision or a great idea. It also is having the right resource at the right time. In my speech at the Ryde Rotary Club, I materialized this new dimension of leadership. I told them that I have a vision to build a new school in a remote village in Ghazni Province of Afghanistan for 1000 students. However, I need your help and support. The Club was very happy about my idea and asked me to write a formal proposal to request fund for this school building but also to provide them with concrete social structure of the village including the village commitment to sustain the school building.

When I wrote the proposal, things did not go as smooth as I thought. I was asked to open an organization or introduce another organization who were at the time working in Afghanistan. I decided to find an organization. I came, through a friend, across the the work of indigo foundation in Ghazni Province. I saw the mutual interests between tow organizations and initiated a partnership which led to an amazing school project in 2009.

Though the partnership, Ryde Rotary funded a school building which now provides education for 1000 students both girls and boys. It also assisted with school furniture and teacher training classes in subsequent years.

At the moment, I work as project advisor for indigo foundation and a liaison officer for indigo and Ryde Rotary. The partnership of these two organization have grown so strongly that this year both organizations decided to build another new school building and to continue help another eight schools in the region. Overall, indigo with the support of Rotary is helping around 5000 students and it aims to help 15000 students in Afghanistan before 2020.

While I was working as a volunteer with indigo foundation and Ryde Rotary Club, I never gave up on my study. I finished my Honours degree in IR last year. In addition, i worked as a volunteer tutor in Auburn Diversity Services and Parramatta MRC. During my university, I

was awarded a scholarship from Sydney Uni and a scholarship from Smith Family. For that reason, I always was actively engaged in university as well as with the Smith Family.

Recently, I was appointed as a People of Australia Ambassador by the Australian Multicultural Council which I feel really honored and privileged.

I hope my experiences has reflected an example of Go for Gold journey which often involves challenges and opportunities. I hope you can have a look at the indigo website for further details of our work and help us to build more bridges between Australian society with the rest of the world.

Thanks a lot for listening.