

MODELS OF ACHIEVMENT

EP 1 SEG 2 MICHAEL V12

ANNETTE SHUN WAH: Welcome back. In his native Iran a teenage maths whiz was facing a potential death sentence by simply staying true to his faith. So Michael's parents were faced with a life-changing decision.

MICHAEL: My name is Michael and this is my story. I grew up in Iran, a city called Ahvaz. It was a very warm city, a lot warmer than Sydney, I would say.

The city's located very close to Iraq. A lot of people in that city pretty much speak Arabic and Farsi. Growing up I started learning a bit of both.

I went to primary school and high school while I was there but never finished high school. The majority of people do follow Islam and then there are 2% of Christians, Jews and everyone else. But I was following a religion that is not sort of recognised by Iranian Government and that causes a problem because to Iran you either believe in God or you don't. You believe in God if you follow these religions, if you follow any other religion you don't believe in God so that's a big problem that you face.

My religion is called Sabian Mandaean. It's similar to Christianity but it's not the same. We follow John the Baptist as our prophet and that religion is sort of not recognised by the Government of Iran.

When you go to high school they give you a form and it says what is your religion and there are boxes and you are going to have to pick one of them. I can't pick I'm following this religion because hey, this religion doesn't exist. So it's pretty much was in hiding. No-one really knows what religion you follow.

It's tough to start with but after a while you just learn to live with it and just continuously be sort of live in hiding. I mean it's not quite easy because your surname sort of carries your religion in it. It's Ascharsobi and the sobi part is the religion. But you sort of try to say, you know, Ascharsavi and savi means something else in Arabic so it's like, yeah, just mask it quite well.

Yeah, I heard there was this mathematics Olympia that was coming up. It's a worldwide mathematics competition. A lot of countries' top students get together and pretty much sit through this 5-hour exam. I applied and, yeah, I was accepted. I was told I'm going to go to Tehran, which is the capital of Iran, for a 3-month sort of prep work, which never happened.

So at that point in time when you're one of the five students being selected in the whole country questions start coming up like who is this guy? And it wasn't long before they found out that hey, I'm not Muslim, I lied, so the option is whether you convert or you die, pretty much, yeah.

You get told we're going to kill you so you're like alright, I'll convert, I'll become a Muslim, what's wrong with that? But once I went through the whole process they, you know, they said that you can't go back to your parents because your parents aren't Muslims so we have to find you foster parents. Just before they sort of transitioned me to my foster parents I was like "Alright, at least give me a night to sort of say goodbye because they are my parents." So I went back and I told them, "Look, this is the situation, I never actually made it to Tehran to the mathematics Olympia and this is what has happened in the past month." So as you would imagine everyone started panicking, my parents talked to people smuggler and they said, you know, "Our son is in trouble, we should send him out" and the guy at the time said, "Well, if your son is in trouble your whole family's in trouble, you've got to - we've got to get everyone out." We were given our tickets pretty much like an hour before the flight. I ended up going, I think, through Malaysia into Indonesia and my parents directly flew to Indonesia.

I remember one night it was at 9pm we were told we're going to another hotel, hop on a bus, four hours later we're next to this beach with a guy with a gun in his hand just shouting something in a language we don't understand, it's like "Get on the boat, get on the boat." What the hell is going on? Don't even know. And yeah, we were on a boat going somewhere, we didn't know where it was.

What I remember is this tiny boat with 250 people, pretty much there isn't even a

space to sit down properly. The boat is just going. Night it's the craziest because these massive waves and any moment we're like is the boat just going to go into pieces because it's a fishing boat that is not worthy even for fishing trip.

And after seven days we got stopped by this police guys and we're like "Yeah, you have been arrested by Australian customs." And we're like, "Where is Australia? We don't even know." They showed us where we were and we're like "Oh, okay, so this is where kangaroos are", that's all we know about Australia.

So from boat then we got transferred to Darwin, we went through all these security things that happen in Darwin, got flew over to Adelaide, six hours drive into Woomera. Once we got there it was like where are we? Where is this place? There's nothing around, it's right in the middle of desert.

Wires everywhere, razor wires on top, it's like what is this place? Are we going to jail for something? But yeah, then they told us this is basic procedure, you're going to be here for three months. You know, the first thing that crosses your mind is at least I'm not going to die. I'm actually glad that I'm on land. I don't care where I am, I'm safe hopefully.

So we were told you're going to be in detention three months to six months while we do the processing but that didn't happen to be quite true. At the end of the six months we were told sorry, we didn't find you to be a refugee because we don't believe that Iran does that to this religion. So they rejected our sort of claim for being refugee.

Pretty much at that point in time we were told you are staying in detention indefinitely. Your only options are to either sign this document and go back to Iran or just live here forever.

I remember the funny thing I went to security guard and I was like, "What's your name?" That was my first English sentence ever and the guy said, "You can call me officer." I didn't know what officer meant. So I went to the second one, "What's your name?" And "Officer." And I'm going "Oh, officer must be a very common name in

Australia." If you tell someone you're going to jail for 5 years, 10 years, 20 years at least you know there is a 20-year mark to look forward to but indefinitely, what does that mean? One day I got a letter saying there has been some new facts received and we are giving you another review. We pretty much sat through an hour and at the end of it it was like "Look, I don't care what you just said, I don't care the story, we've got all the facts now, we know what's happening, you are granted refugee status after two and a half years." I cried for half an hour.

It was pretty much just joy for the following 15 days until we were told "Yep, pack your bag, you are leaving in four hours." We were given our visa and it is like "Best of luck." Like for two and a half years I got told what to do and I got fed whatever they wanted us to eat and what am I supposed to do now?

Flew next day to Sydney. There was a couple of families that we knew from detention centre who got released earlier like a year and a half earlier than us and they were nice enough to say, "You can stay with us until you figure out what to do." So now what I want to do? I was told, "Well today's last day of actually applying for TAFE." So I was like "Well, I better get to that before they close the applications." Went to the registration office, I was like well you know, here's my story, I don't even know what I'm going to do here but what do you think? I'd really like to learn IT. Pretty much filled out all the forms and they said, "You start next week." I said, "Great."

It was the end of the year sort of second semester at TAFE and yeah, I checked my email and there was this email saying universities are actually giving scholarship for students who are on temporary protection visas which means that you don't have to cover the cost as an international student.

I studied for a Bachelor of Science in IT. At the end of the three years I knew exactly what I wanted to do so I signed up for a Master of Science in Internetworking. That was something I was really passionate about. At the same time I started looking for a job and I was successful to get a job at Cisco. I think I went to six different interviews, I got five offers and Cisco was the last one to come in and I accepted that one. I started doing security. I helped US military, big banks, big financial hospitals.

At Cisco we had to do this weekend shift and I saw this email saying, "Hey, I'm a recruiter from Google, are you interested to come in for a chat?" I thought it was a spam, I deleted it. And two weeks later I got another email saying, "Hey, I never heard from you" and at that time I was like oh, actually it might be a real person from Google. So I responded quickly saying yeah, I'm very keen to find out what the job is about. I had four very tough interviews, I would say. I got a call a week later saying "You are accepted when can you start?" Working at Google is really exciting. It's every day you wake up and you're like what is the problem that I'm going to solve today? Getting the jobs at Cisco and Google without the university would have been impossible. At the minimum the university degree gave me the confidence to say, "Yes, I can do it. I've done the uni, what else can you throw at me? Let's give it a try." Anything's possible. Your imagination is the only limit. There is plenty of opportunity out there and everyone's capable of doing what they want, you just need to go after it. Going to university or anything else you will get there.

My name is Michael and this is my story. I grew up with my family in Iran. When I was 16 I was forced to change my religion. I spent two and a half years in refugee detention centres. I taught myself English. With the help of a scholarship I attended university and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in IT. I now work for Google.

ANNETTE SHUN WAH: Since graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Information Technology Michael also completed a Master of Science in Internetworking to add to his already impressive resume. If you'd like to learn more about these career pathways and other stories make sure you head to our website at modelsofachievement.com.au. See you next time.

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