

MODELS OF ACHIEVEMENT

EP 6 SEG 2 NAJEEBA

ANNETTE SHUN WAH: As a member of an ethnic minority in Afghanistan, Najeeba has unhappy memories from a childhood marred by persecution and death. Leaving those sad days far behind she's now determined to help improve the lives of her fellow refugees.

NAJEEBA: My name is Najeeba and this is my story. My childhood in Afghanistan has been miserable. I do not have a single good memory from my childhood other than being afraid of being killed or persecuted. I did not have access to education and basically I was not known as a human being in my own country.

I am from an ethnic minority named Hazara. Not only because I was a Hazara I was under the persecution of Taliban but also because I'm a Hazara Shia Muslim which put me and my other family members under a greater risk of being killed by not only by the Taliban at that time but also by the other ethnic minorities, other ethnicities as well. I was about 12 years old when my family decided we had no other choice but leaving and escaping my country. When we got to Pakistan we thought we were going to settle in that country.

We never knew that our future life is going to end up in Australia because we didn't have any clue as to where Australia was. The first time I heard I thought it was a street name, to be honest.

In Pakistan we realised that a lot of the weapons and resources that were provided to Taliban in Afghanistan were supported by the Pakistani people or by the government in there. So my father started to feel the risk that was coming to my family in Pakistan and then he decided to leave and that's the time that he was introduced to a smuggler and that's how we got to Australia.

Getting from Pakistan to Indonesia itself wasn't very easy but we made it. We made it to Indonesia and when we got to Indonesia the journey in the boat it was scary, it was dreadful.

So the boat was leaving the water and we were actually running towards the water screaming to our smuggler, "Is this what we're going to get into? Is this what's going to take us to Australia? You said it's going to be a very long trip. Are we going to stay well in this leaky fishing boat?" The smuggler was saying, "Get on, there is a bigger boat which is on the way which will get you on. You just have to get out of this water." So we actually jumped into the boat and that was it, there was no other ship, that was the only boat that we were going to come to Australia.

There were approximately about 150 people in the boat. Many of us did not have any meal or any food to survive on. Many of us did not even have the education as to what we could have brought on the boat to help us survive during those 10 days but basically that was the only way of survival.

Every one of us in the boat, every family member thought that there's no chance of us living in Afghanistan. We were going to get killed anyways. But looking towards Australia we had hope of a good future. We had a hope of safety, we had a hope of security and we actually had a hope of being welcomed and that's the reason that we didn't give up and we wanted to come.

I always used to hear that Australia's one of those best multicultural country that welcomes asylum seekers and helps them to stop seeking refuge. We found ourselves in the middle of desert in an isolated area, detached from the outer world and it was called detention centre.

As a child I remember that I hold my father's hand and when I see the security guards coming towards us with all their weapons and guns I was pretty afraid, to be honest. I and my family were one of the most luckiest family who stayed in detention centre,

Curtin Detention Centre for two months. Without any notice one day they came and told us "Okay, you're getting released" and we didn't even know where we're going to be sent.

And we realised that Sydney is a place where my parents are going to be able to find some connection with their own community so that's how we decided to come in the late 2001.

Living in Australia has given me the freedom to walk without being worried that one is going to attack me. You know, living in Australia has given me the opportunity to wear what I want to wear. Living in Australia has given me the freedom not to cover myself, you know, not to cover my face.

I never forget the first day that I went to school and sat next to a boy. I did not know any English at all back then. I couldn't read or write. I did not have any access to education in my own country other than just religion. So I actually had to do a lot to catch up with very basic information but then it was given me power because I wanted to become empowered.

During high school I really wanted to do legal studies I was very interested in regards to law because we've always had inequality about woman and men in my country, we've always had a lot of women being denied from access to education, employment, freedom, the most basic human rights, but - and I was thinking that if I become, if I understand what law exists around me, if I can understand what's going around me I'd be able to help a lot of other people.

The first degree at university for me was medical science. Getting into medical science for me was not easy. I never forget when I sat for HSC, I was panicking, I never knew if I'm going to make it or not. I did make it into university and I did my Bachelor of Medical Science. But then at the same time living at uni and studying and getting education at university gives you a different angle of life. It actually helped me to complete myself as

a human being.

I did my second degree at the university and nursing because I just love education. I think the only way that anyone can do anything in their life, in their country, in their community is to have education first. Because if you're not going to be completed yourself, if you're not going to be wise yourself you cannot help others.

I'm currently still continuing my studies at university which is a very related to law and that has brought me into a self-realisation that now that I have skills, now that I have received education in Australia I have to put that into use.

Hi, girls.

You have no idea what a great difference it makes when a person can come and offer you help. One smile from one Australian woman made a great change in my own life. She smiled and she welcomed me to Australia and she said, "I'm here to help you, I do not know what happened to you in detention centre, I do not know what you went through in your country but there I am and I'm Australian and I'm going to do what I need to do as a human being and there I am to help you."

So I have started my work in SSI, Settlement Service International as a case manager. I have started to work in this field because I have been a refugee myself and this organisation is mainly dealing with clients or people who have come from war-torn countries. Either they have been in detention centre or they have lived in a war-torn country as a woman at risk or they have lived as a young humanitarian minor without any parents because when a new migrant or newly arrived refugee that comes to Australia Settlement Services International helps to empower those clients to become independent.

I am hoping that in five years time I am actually working in a legal firm, that's where I'm wanting to aim and that's what I want to do basically.

I think if I did not have education I would have been no-one today. Education is what opens your mind to the outer world. It opens you to a whole new thing that you did not know. Today I'm no longer a prisoner of my own sex the way I was in my country. I am respected because I'm an educated woman.

I just think 12 years of my life in Afghanistan have gone so I need to get that back and I'm not going to let it go easy.

My name is Najeeba and this is my story. My early childhood was spent in Afghanistan. I came to Australia when I was 12 as a refugee. I did not have the opportunity to go to school in Afghanistan. I'm a graduate of medical science and still studying. I am the president of Hazara Woman of Australia Organisation.

ANNETTE SHUN WAH: After completing her studies in both medical science and nursing, Najeeba is currently studying for her juris doctor, a graduate law degree. If you'd like to learn more about these and other stories make sure you head to our website at modelsofachievement.com.au. See you next time.

END OF TRANSCRIPT