

UC SANTA BARBARA

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The Girl Who Lived

Malala Yousafzai is, in many respects, a typical high-schooler. She has to study for chemistry class. She looks forward to getting into university. She occasionally struggles to find time to do homework, sometimes getting distracted by Candy Crush.

It's what she has endured in her young life to become that typical schoolkid that makes her extraordinary — shot in the head by members of the militantly religious Taliban, targeted for speaking out against, and defying, their efforts to deny access to education to in her native Swat Valley in Pakistan.

She had a choice, Yousafzai told the audience that packed the Arlington Theater and overflowed to nearby Victoria Hall in downtown Santa Barbara: "We were either going to remain silent and wait to be killed ... or speak out, and then be killed," the 17-year-old said of the increasing oppression toward women and girls mounted by the Taliban almost 10 years ago.

Nearly three years after the attack, following a whirlwind that included fleeing the country for treatment and recovery, increasing media attention and a slew of awards — a 2014 Nobel Peace Prize among them — Yousafzai remains untiring in her campaign for quality education for women and girls. She uses her high profile — and skills developed in her earlier years as an orator and pseudonymous blogger with the world's toughest audience — to speak to large groups, or to persuade heads of state to prioritize education for girls.

Drawing on her own experiences, with her equally unconventional educator father, Ziauddin, who has ignored the patriarchal leanings of Pakistani society to encourage his own daughter's education and advocacy, Yousafzai said that not much has to be done to assist girls in excelling in school and becoming high achievers and contributors to their societies.

"Just don't clip their wings," she said to the lecture's attendees, many of whom were families and students of local Santa Barbara schools, including UC Santa Barbara.

In a Q&A with Susan McCaw, event sponsor and founding board member of the Malala Fund, Yousafzai revealed more intimate details of her life and struggle: the nights spent listening to gunfire and bomb blasts as Taliban engaged in conflict, and waiting with dread to hear news of executions or additional rules imposed by the militant Islamic group to further prevent women and girls from participating in society.

She was watching her dream of becoming a doctor fade as the Taliban's occupation became stronger. Malala and her cohort, young girls who were being taught to express themselves and reach for the highest goals, were being forced to accept only very narrow roles identifying them solely in relation to the men in their society.

Nonetheless, for her, the prioritization of girls' education remained the way out of the prison that would have been imposed on girls in her society. And it continues to be her central message — for everyone, from the children in well-off countries like the U.S. that still have relatively high dropout rates, to the president of Nigeria, whom she recently asked point-blank about the hundreds of schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram, a militant jihadist group in sub-Saharan Africa.

"What have you done for them so far?" she recalled asking him.

During the hour-and-a-half-long conversation, Yousafzai fielded questions about how parents, particularly fathers, should encourage their children; how she views Islam, given that her own biggest detractors and villains in her struggle tended to be militant Muslims; and about life in her adopted community of Birmingham in the U.K. By her own accounts, she is just another girl trying to navigate school, adapt to a country "with only one season" — winter — and trying to get along with others.

Upon learning that she won the Nobel, the veteran orator, who had already spoken to world leaders and at the U.N., said she was faced with one of the scariest

speeches she ever had to give: to her own classmates. “They said it would be better to give a speech,” she said, instead of speaking to every girl she encountered who would soon learn the news that their classmate had become the Nobel’s youngest winner.

Despite that, as she joked with Jon Stewart on a recent appearance on the Daily Show, Yousafzai is still trying to beef up her C.V. with “work experience” in between school and speaking engagements through which she has the world’s attention. Her eye is on Oxford University.

And should she accomplish her goal of free, compulsory, quality education for all girls everywhere, Yousafzai said she has one additional but very important task:

“Once I make sure that every child is going to school and the schools are good, I’m going to go on to make sure that school does not start too early.”

The Malala Yousafzai lecture was presented by UCSB Arts & Lectures.

About UC Santa Barbara

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