

THE JOURNEY OF AZIFA KIRAN

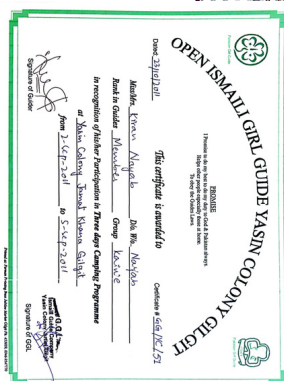
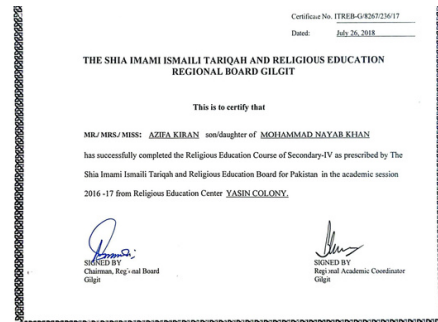
A Story of Dreams,
Struggles, and
Triumph



By Azifa Kiran

I come from a small, breathtaking city in Pakistan – Gilgit-Baltistan. A place wrapped in the arms of mountains, yet full of dreams waiting to take flight. I completed my higher secondary education there, and little did I know – that moment would become a turning point in my life.

I was a young girl, full of dreams, passion, and a burning desire to create. Designing was always close to my heart – it was my first love. At a young age, I had already experienced many things: from volunteering in community projects to excelling in academics. I wasn't someone who believed in chasing only one path. Instead, I made multiple options for my future – Option A, B, and C. Designing was Option A.



Computer Science was Option B. I believed in myself enough to prepare for more than one direction.

After finishing Grade 12, the next step was university. I applied to NCA (National College of Arts) and passed both the entry tests – for Product Design and Architecture. But during the interview stage, I wasn't selected. That rejection broke something inside me. I tried other universities like Iqra. I applied to another university, but it only offered a degree in Computer Architecture – something I wasn't interested in. I felt stuck, overwhelmed, and completely lost. My mind was full of stress. My brother – my biggest support – tried his best, but nothing seemed to work.

Eventually, my brother and I decided to enroll in a small local university, just so I wouldn't miss out on education entirely. But my sadness was visible — it was so heavy that it affected my entire family. That moment made me realize something powerful: words truly matter. The way we speak to ourselves and to others can either break or build us.

One day, while I was silently crying, my mother sat beside me, deeply saddened. Suddenly, my father and elder sister entered the room. They asked what was wrong, and as soon as they heard, my sister said something that changed everything:



"If luck didn't work in Pakistan, maybe it's waiting for her abroad."



That single sentence awakened something in me. It felt like light breaking through darkness. I stood up that day with new hope. I began searching online, trying to find opportunities abroad — this time with my second option: Computer Science.

I didn't give up. I kept pushing forward.

One day, I heard about the Shams Family Foundation (SFF) and the scholarships they offer. I applied. After completing the application, I was invited for an interview – a life-changing conversation with Sir Shams and the incredible SFF team.

They gave me a challenge: to earn a full scholarship, I needed to complete two courses – CS50: Introduction to Computer Science and Business Analytics. It was tough, but I poured my heart into it. I completed both. It was a fun, challenging, and empowering experience.

Then came another email – I had been shortlisted for an interview with a second foundation for another scholarship opportunity. That foundation was Education Focus Foundation (EFF) – an amazing team full of kind, supportive people who truly want to uplift students like me.

After a warm and inspiring interview, a few weeks later, I received the email that changed everything. One morning it was a month of August

I opened my inbox and there it was.

I was awarded a full scholarship to study abroad.

Can you imagine the joy? After a year full of trials, effort, and prayers – everything came together. I couldn't wait to share the news with my family. We cried again – but this time, with tears of happiness.

That day, I learned something I'll carry forever:

"Push the universe with all your effort, and it will push back with results. Things will work – if you do."



After that moment, my entire life changed.

A new chapter had begun – my journey to North Macedonia was finally in motion.

I had been manifesting a life full of learning, freedom, and adventure – and now, SFF and EFF made that dream real. They didn't just believe in me – they pushed me forward. They lifted me when the path seemed impossible.

I started sending them all the required documents, and they began my visa process. But the road wasn't easy. There was no Macedonian embassy in Pakistan at the time, which could have ended the journey right there.

But SFF and EFF taught me something life-changing:

"If there's no way to your dream – we will build the way for you."

With their support, we began preparing in Karachi for the next steps. It took a lot of effort, paperwork, time, and patience. But finally, the day came.

A day of October my flight was booked from Karachi, Pakistan to Skopje, North Macedonia.

We were a group of 10 students – all filled with nervous excitement and wild hopes. We left Karachi, stopped in Dubai, and spent two unforgettable days there. From Dubai, we flew to Istanbul. And finally...

we arrived at our destination: the heart of the Balkans – North Macedonia.

The day I reached this beautiful country, my heart skipped a beat. The air, the streets, the vibe – it was breathtaking. I stood there, silently soaking in the moment I had worked, cried, and prayed for.

I was excited – and yes, a little nervous too. A life full of unknowns, adventures, challenges, and growth was waiting for me in a country that felt both strange and magical.

And in that moment, I knew – this was the beginning of something extraordinary. The culture, the people – everything about North Macedonia was beautiful.

The experience was unforgettable.

The life that SFF and EFF gave me was a gift beyond just education – it was a deep journey of personal growth, independence, and transformation.

This wasn't just about studying in a foreign land. It was about facing real-life challenges – learning patience, managing time, working hard, and adjusting to a completely different environment.

At a young age, I was learning things that would shape the rest of my life.

I learned how to adapt.

How to face problems when no one around looked, spoke, or thought like me.

I learned how to manage money – not just earn it, but use it wisely.

I learned what freedom really means – and how to carry it with responsibility.

How to keep the trust of my family even while living far away from them.

Because yes – life abroad is not easy, especially when your heart misses home every single day.

One of the hardest parts was the language barrier.

Mostly people only speak Macedonian and Albanian.

Because of it, I wasn't hired at most companies.

But I didn't stop. I found other jobs – small, joyful ones – that taught me real-life lessons:

How to deal with people, how to adapt, and how to learn new languages through experience.

I never looked at it as a weakness of the country. Instead, I saw it as an opportunity to grow.

I held onto one belief throughout it all:

"If you have rice on your plate, enjoy it fully. Don't waste time dreaming of pizza or burgers. In that wishful thinking, you'll lose the taste of what you already have – and might miss the joy in your hands."



So I learned to enjoy what I had, to embrace every opportunity, no matter how small.

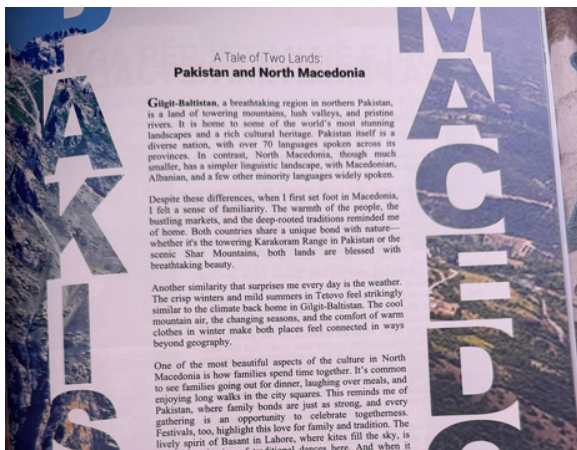
Even a simple job taught me more than scrolling through reels ever could. Life was fun too.

We introduced our culture to the local people – and they loved it!

In March 2025, I was given a chance to write an article for the university magazine. It got published – and appreciated deeply by students and faculty. That moment reminded me:



My voice matters. My journey matters.



From giving exams and attending classes, to working side jobs and exploring local streets – it was a full, dynamic life. I loved watching people enjoy their coffees at street cafés, spending time with families in restaurants, walking the city with laughter and peace.

I loved going out with my friends, sharing stories about my homeland, Pakistan – and building bridges across cultures. Then came the moment I'd dreamed about for years.

June 7, 2025 – Graduation Day.

With everything I had gone through – every tear, every laugh, every struggle – I stood proudly, wearing my cap and gown. I missed my family that day, of course. But I celebrated with the friends who had become my family.

And in my heart, I knew:

Hard work, discipline, and a positive mindset can turn dreams into reality. Today, I bow my head with gratitude — First, to Allah, for guiding every step. Then, to my family, who showed unwavering faith in me.

And finally, to the two life-changing foundations — SFF and EFF — whose work and vision transformed not just my life, but the lives of thousands of students like me.

They are helping students from underrepresented cities — places where opportunities are rare — to rise, to shine, and to build a future. Saying "thank you" will never be enough. What they've done for me is priceless.



To every young person out there:

Believe in your dream.

Don't wait for the perfect moment — create it.

Help others when you rise.

And remember — hard work, faith, and a kind heart will never betray you.

This is not just my story.

This is a message of hope.

And I promise — it's just the beginning.