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## The other Malalas: Shazia Ramzan and Kainat Riaz's incredible journey from Pakistan to Wales

At a school in South Wales, two students are thriving. How they ended up there is a story as extraordinary as that of their old school friend, Malala Yousafzai

- [Etan Smallman](#)
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Kainat and Shazia at Atlantic College, Wales *Clare Hewitt*

'I am not a lone voice. I am many. I am Malala, but I am also Shazia. I am Kainat.'

By the time Malala Yousafzai took to the podium in Oslo in December 2014 to become the youngest Nobel prize winner in history, her story was known around the world.

"It is the story of many girls," she told a rapt audience. Malala was talking in general terms but also specifically about her friends Shazia Ramzan and Kainat Riaz who were sat, proudly, in the audience as their old school pal took her place alongside Mandela, Obama, Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama as a Peace Laureate.

Those two girls were also hit by the shower of Taliban bullets in the back of their school bus as they returned from a morning of exams in Mingora, north-west Pakistan, in October 2012. Like Malala, they survived, but were faced with life-changing consequences.

As they recall the shooting, Shazia and Kainat sit in their new headmaster's office – a sedate room in the corner of a 12th-century Welsh castle, and a world away from the bustling, and perilous, streets of the lush Swat Valley.

Next to Malala was her best friend Moniba (covered in so much of the 15-year-old's blood that she was initially assumed to also have been injured), then Shazia and then Kainat – all clutching their folders to their chests in the cramped Toyota truck.

Kainat explains that she was oblivious to the arrival of the gunman because she was discussing the day's tests with another friend. "I said, 'No, this is not the answer, this is correct', and she said, 'No, yours is wrong'. And when I saw Malala, I saw her falling on the floor in the bus."

"I was looking out of the window, just daydreaming," says Shazia. "Then suddenly the man comes and asks, 'Who is Malala?'. "

Several of the campaigner's classmates instinctively turned to look at the assassin's target, and he opened fire. "He pulled out a gun and shot Malala in the head and then shot me," Shazia recalls haltingly. "He started shooting randomly."



Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, with Shazia Ramzan and Kainat Riaz in Oslo, 2014 (Reuters)

Shazia, who was just 14, was hit in the shoulder and hand, leaving her having to undergo surgery and a month in hospital. Kainat, then 16, was wounded in the upper right arm and fainted.

It was the latest salvo in the Taliban's reign of terror – at the end of 2008, it declared that all female education was forbidden, before destroying hundreds of schools. Malala had been a key voice of protest against that barbaric process. One which reached an epoch less than a week after Malala accepted her Nobel medal with the Taliban murder of 132 schoolchildren in Peshawar on 16 December.

When the bus finally made it to the hospital through heavy traffic, Malala and Shazia were rushed inside. But Kainat ran straight home while gripping her numb arm to stem the flow

of blood – terrified at the prospect of going to hospital for the first time, without her headmaster father and midwife mother, and fearful that the attacker was still after her.

"I didn't realise his target was Malala, not me, I thought he will come again and he will shoot me," she says. "When I got home, I said just two words: 'Malala died'."

Malala was indeed close to death, with splinters of her skull having entered her brain, but she was saved by doctors in a military hospital in Peshawar and then medics at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham – while her injuries and progress were garnering headlines around the world.

Kainat and Shazia, meanwhile, were left behind in Swat Valley, desperate to return to their studies, but still fearing for their lives.



Atlantic College in South Wales, where the two girls now study (Clare Hewitt)

A doctor who visited Kainat during this time described her as "wedged in no man's land" and criticised the world for abandoning "a vulnerable, unwavering young woman in a place that, at best, mutes her aspirations and at worst will kill her".

Police and soldiers were posted outside their front doors. Nervous bus and taxi drivers refused to take them to school. Neighbours turned on the girls' families – accusing them

of threatening their safety. Kainat, who is the older but shyer of the two and who says she still has nightmares about the attack, explains: "After the Malala incident, there was a bomb blast behind the neighbour's house and one girl like me and her grandmother died.

"So that's why, in my town, lots of neighbours said, 'Next time, we will die because of you, please can you leave this city, please!' I was crying, because I was like, this is not my mistake, what can I do? How can you leave your house and move to another city?"

Into this hopeless situation stepped a boarding school in South Wales.

UWC Atlantic College – whose 350 students hail from 90 countries, almost two-thirds of whom receive some kind of bursary – offered a full scholarship to Malala. She politely declined, explaining that she was settled in the Midlands, and requested that her two injured friends be brought over instead. Gordon Brown, now UN special envoy for global education, helped with visa issues.

However, unlike Malala, who has her mother, father and brothers with her in Birmingham, Shazia and Kainat had to come to Britain alone.

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Last year, they arrived in the UK separately and still traumatised. Neither of them, nor any of their parents, had ever left Pakistan. Both remember the lonely experience of negotiating British airport security by themselves and with the most basic of English.

But their overriding memory is being reunited with the friend they had last seen slumped and bleeding in the back of the school bus. "When I first saw Malala in the airport, I couldn't believe this, like, Malala survived," says Shazia, the daughter of a bakery owner and housewife, and one of nine children.

Their new principal, John Walmsley, was blown away by their "delight in experiencing new things".

"When Shazia came to my office with Malala and her father on the very first day, I said, 'You'll be going on a camp soon and so tomorrow you're going to have a swimming test'.

"She couldn't swim – it wasn't the thing for young girls to do in the Swat Valley. But she learnt to swim in one day, and was surfing a week or so later."

The girls' English teacher, Adrian Rainbow, describes them as model students. He has been most impressed, though, by how two teenagers who could barely converse in English a year ago are now launching themselves into public speaking.

They tried out a draft speech that they would deliver to 400 people at a Rotary Club conference on their classmates, most of whom had previously had no idea of their story.

"They're almost sometimes apologetic about their role in this," says Mr Rainbow. "They were sort of caught in the crossfire and had they not been hit by a bullet, they probably wouldn't be here at Atlantic College. I think they're very aware of that, but I'm amazed at how well they deal with it all. They know that the issues are, for them, far more important than themselves.



Shazia says: 'I think, if we speak up, then other people will follow us' (Clare Hewitt)

"They're not egotistical kids who want to be in the limelight – they're very humble girls. But it wouldn't surprise me if in the next couple of years, people do hear much more about them."



Although they are still little known by the general public, VIPs have been clamouring to meet them. So far, they can tick off the Queen, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and the Pakistani President, Mamnoon Hussain.

Then there is their mentor, Gordon Brown, whose in-laws have had them to stay in their home just outside Weymouth during the school holidays. His office still pays for the girls' travel to and from Pakistan, as well as providing them with pocket money, while Mr Brown has given them speech-making lessons and travelled with them to Washington.

"For me, his talking is very attractive," says Shazia. "He gives me advice – don't be afraid of anything, just keep going on. He just said, 'Go there and speak like me!'."

Malala was unable to contribute to this article as she was focusing on her exams (little surprise for a teenager who responded to news she had become the youngest-ever Nobel laureate by insisting she return to her chemistry lesson). But her father – and the girls' former headmaster – Ziauddin, told *The Independent*: "Both girls are amazing, and they are part of the same struggle as Malala. We were very excited to have them at the peace prize ceremony in Norway with us.

"We say charity begins at home. If they had still been in Pakistan, always crowded with policemen, I think we would never have been at peace. They really suffered with her. Malala has a great satisfaction that the girls are at a world-class school, they are secure and are in peace. They are very brave girls. We are very proud of them."

Shazia and Kainat are just the latest distinguished additions to a school with an illustrious history. Opened in 1962, in the middle of the Cold War, the sixth-form college was intended to promote international peace by uniting youngsters from around the world in St Donat's Castle (which was once owned by William Randolph Hearst, who > used the pile to host parties for the likes of Charlie Chaplin, John F Kennedy and Frank Sinatra).

The brainchild of renowned German educationalist Kurt Hahn, who set up Gordonstoun, the alma mater of the Duke of Edinburgh and Prince of Wales, Atlantic College prides itself on offering far more than just an academic education. Its students were responsible for creating the Rigid-Hulled Inflatable Lifeboat, which has saved more than 5,000 lives since its patent – worth an estimated £15 million a year – was given to the RNLI for £1.

The college also helped create the International Baccalaureate, was the first school in the UK to abandon A-levels in its favour and counts the King of the Netherlands, and two serving members of the Chinese Communist Central Committee, among its alumni.

The BBC's Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen, who was visiting on the day of our interview as part of the college's student-organised Middle East conference, secured a place for an impoverished boy he met in Kosovo while reporting there. Bob Geldof has made similar recommendations.

Before the shooting, Kainat and Shazia had already had their epiphanies about the importance of girls' schooling, as they struggled against the Taliban oppression that had forced both families to flee their homes as "internally displaced people" for three months.



The BBC's Jeremy Bowen speaking at Atlantic College (Clare Hewitt)

Shazia remembers leaving with little more than the clothes on her back. She also speaks of how her brother was injured in a bomb blast near her home and how the regular curfews – which had prevented them even going out for food – left her waiting for four days to visit him in hospital. Kainat recalls how gun-toting Taliban members stopped her parents' car before smashing the CDs inside it.

The battle to educate the 58 million children worldwide, predominantly girls, who aren't at school is one they see as a lifetime's work – alongside qualifying and practising as doctors.

"I think this is the very best way for us to help other people," says Kainat. "I want to become a gynaecologist, because in our society there are lots of male doctors, but not female doctors, and in our religion the women can't show their bodies to men.

"But I also want to join other charity groups, especially focusing on girls' and boys' education. For me, education is like light – without light you can't see anything."

"I think, if we speak up, then other people will follow us," says Shazia. "They will think, look, they went out of the country but still they're getting an education. Still, they're going to be doctors. They're still doing their job."

Their message to girls desperate to learn – and parents unsure about sending them to school – is: "Don't stop your education for any situation," and to take heart that, in Pakistan – policy-wise at least – things have been going in the right direction since the attack in 2012. There are more girls' schools and the country has announced it is to double its spending on education to 4 per cent of GDP by 2018.

Shazia insists their story has changed attitudes, inspiring parents to think that if they send their daughter to lessons, "one day she will become also like Malala". Of the criticism that has been levelled by some Pakistanis at their friend and at them for speaking out – and for moving to Britain – they are resolute.

"If they are talking about me or Kainat, it's fine. But Malala – she was injured and she raised her voice in a situation where nobody was allowed. I think they have some misunderstanding. One day they will be reminded, they were wrong and she was right."

But until that day, while Shazia and Kainat can travel freely to the Swat Valley, aka the 'Switzerland of Pakistan', Malala and her family are still not safe to return to their beloved homeland.

"Me and Kainat, we just put ourselves in Malala's shoes: how do I feel, that my family members are in Pakistan, my friends, my school and my home, everything I left behind.

We feel bad." But Kainat quickly interjects: "I hope the Swat situation will be very good inshallah, like, very soon, and Malala will be there."



Kainat says: 'For me, education is like light - without light you can't see anything.' (Clare Hewitt)

As for the girls dubbed "the Pakistani twins" by their new teachers ("because we are always together"), they are still taking time to adjust to the quirks of British life.

Both loathe cheese; Kainat, who is yearning for snow, likes fish and chips; and Shazia is coming round to pizza. Kainat is pleasantly surprised by the effect the addition of boys has on the class, saying they help her with her studies more than girls. Both still wake up at 5am to pray and are grateful to steal an hour away from their books to catch up with their old friends on Facebook – while Shazia says she enjoys listening to Indian music on her pink Apple laptop, "and One Direction is also quite nice".

Both are relishing the opportunities and liberties that life in the Vale of Glamorgan affords them.

"You can feel freedom here," says Shazia. "You can not be worried about anything, you can just go outside by yourself, you can go to the shops to buy something."

Nevertheless, Pakistan is where their hearts are – and where both girls plan to return. They just need to ace their IGCSEs and then International Baccalaureates at Atlantic College first, before pursuing degrees in Britain.

"Sometimes I feel lonely," reflects Shazia. "My friends are not here and my family are not here.

"But then I just tell myself: it's fine, we are here for education, keep going. If I feel lonely, I think about how I can support other people, for their rights, for their ambitions and for their voices.

"You have to raise their voices. And you want all of them to be able to go to school. Every single child".