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## Meet the 'other Malalas' - the Nobel Peace Prize winner's friends now heading to Edinburgh University



Malala's friends Shazia Ramzan (left) and Kainat Riaz (right) were also shot by the Taliban CREDIT: JAY WILLIAMS

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We have all heard of 'the girl who was shot by the Taliban'. But the phrase – used as shorthand for Malala Yousafzai, Nobel Peace Prize winner, youngest ever UN Ambassador of Peace and the most famous schoolgirl in the world – only tells half the story of that fateful Tuesday in October 2012. Well, a third, to be precise.

For two other teenagers were victims of the attack that injured Malala. They too were caught up in that shower of bullets.

Kainat Riaz, then 15, and Shazia Ramzan, 14, were Malala's fellow pupils at Khushal Public School. They were sitting on benches alongside the 15-year-old education campaigner in a converted Toyota truck, clasping their books, as they travelled home after a chemistry exam in Mingora, north-west Pakistan.

**“I could not sleep because whenever I closed my eyes I thought that guy was going to come and shoot me again”**

Kainat remembers excitedly discussing the answers. Shazia was staring out of the window, daydreaming – when the lives of the three girls changed forever.

“The Taliban stopped us, two boys – or men,” says Shazia. “One was in the front and the other one came to the back. He said: 'Who is Malala?' We had our faces covered [with niqabs], but Malala didn't.

“We were looking at him and then he shot Malala in the forehead. He shot me on my hand and shoulder, and Kainat's shoulder as well. Then he started shooting randomly.”



Kainat recalls seeing Malala fall to the floor and hearing her classmates' screams, before she fainted. Shazia says she was one of those screaming.

Eventually the bus, winding through heavy traffic, arrived at the local hospital. Malala and Shazia were rushed inside, but Kainat was terrified so ran home, gripping her arm all the way. When she reached her headmaster father and midwife mother, she uttered just two words: "Malala died."

"I was lost," she says softly. "I could not sleep because whenever I closed my eyes I thought that guy was going to come and shoot me again."

Kainat was taken by her family to the local hospital, while Shazia spent a month in military hospital in regional capital Peshawar. Malala's injuries were so complex that she was flown to the UK for life-saving treatment at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. She had splinters of skull in her brain, and her heart and kidneys were failing. The Peshawar intensive care unit was so basic that it had only one sink - and that didn't work.

["They call us Kainat and Shazia, not Malala's friends. We are famous in Pakistan. Here, we are not special"](#)

While Malala, within hours of the attack, had been elevated to the status of international heroine, Shazia and Kainat suffered in obscurity. They returned to recuperate at home in Pakistan's Swat Valley, but were treated as pariahs. Neighbours turned on Kainat's family, telling them to leave because she was seen as a Taliban target; bus and taxi drivers refused to take her to school.

Five thousand miles away, Malala was the focus of increasing global attention, as the world watched her recovery. Tens of thousands of people signed a petition calling for her to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. By July 2013, on her 16th birthday, she was addressing the United Nations.

She was also inundated with offers to continue her education. One of these came from the prestigious international boarding school UWC Atlantic College in the Vale of Glamorgan, South Wales. Malala replied that she was settled in Birmingham, enrolled at the private Edgbaston High School for Girls – but she had not forgotten her two friends and asked if the invitation could be extended to them instead.



At Atlantic College, St Donat's, on the Glamorgan coast of Wales where they have been studying. CREDIT: JAY WILLIAMS

Shazia and Kainat were given full scholarships (more than half of students receive a bursary to cover fees that would otherwise cost £58,000 for two years), while Gordon Brown, UN special envoy on global education, helped with visas.

The girls arrived in 2013, leaving their families behind.

Atlantic College, set in a 12th-century castle, could not be further from their modest homes in rural Pakistan. Instead of lush green mountains, the girls are surrounded by sheep farms. Sitting in the cold principal's office today, they describe their initial feelings of disorientation - and freedom.

“Back home, you have to go anywhere with your father, mother or brother, because you are a girl,” explains Shazia, daughter of a bakery owner, and one of nine children. The girls relished being able to visit the shops alone and learnt to swim (“we don’t have pools for girls in Swat”).

British food, however, demanded more adjustment.

“Now I think about all girls. I want to stand up for them”

“Now I can eat pasta and pizza, which I couldn’t even look at before,” says Kainat. They order Indian take-aways to create a home away from home. Is our biryani as good? “They try their best,” says Shazia diplomatically.

The girls' fellow pupils were unfazed by their arrival. Many did not even know their story for several months, until they gave a speech at a student conference.

“Everyone treats us normally,” says Kainat. “They call us Kainat and Shazia, not Malala's friends. We are famous in Pakistan. Here, we are not special.”

While Malala was surrounded by family in Birmingham, her two friends had only each other, visiting to Swat just twice a year – a place to which Malala has not been able to return due to the ongoing threats.



Now, both 19, any homesickness has faded, replaced by soul-searching about how to fit into two radically different worlds. Says Kainat: “If I’m wearing jeans and my friends [in Pakistan] see pictures online, they say, 'you forgot your culture'.

Her family, however, are adamant they did the right thing. Kainat relays a conversation in which her father told her to ignore others. “Now if people say, 'don't wear nail polish', I want to know why,” she adds, tapping her leopard-print trainers with maroon-painted fingers.

Though Malala was the trailblazer – aged 11, she had written a BBC blog and appeared on Pakistani TV to promote her campaign for girls’ education – the three are now united behind the same cause.

Kainat, once shy, is confident about her mission. “Before, my mind was closed,” she says. “I thought about education just related to my family. But now I think about all girls. I want to stand up for them.”

“We are really proud. We follow her and we will follow her in the future”

Her outlook is global. Though her parents have never left Pakistan, she shares a dorm with roommates from Brazil, Lebanon and Bermuda. And while Malala has dominated, her friends have travelled to conferences in Paris and Washington – not to mention the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo.

To their amazement, Malala mentioned them in her speech when she became the youngest Nobel laureate, aged 17 in 2014. “I am not a lone voice. I am many. I am Malala, but I am also Shazia. I am Kainat,” she told a spellbound audience.

“We are really proud,” says Shazia, “we follow her and we will follow her in the future.”

The three still chat online and met up in Birmingham to celebrate Eid, though they admit these get-togethers are increasingly rare. They have witnessed first-hand their friend’s celebrity – Shazia says Malala struggles to go shopping without being mobbed.

Back in Wales, the girls say teachers have dubbed them the “Pakistani twins” because they are inseparable. Both erupt into giggles.



Kainat and Shazia are still in touch with their famous friend CREDIT: JAY WILLIAMS

They rise at 5.30am to pray before lessons. When not studying, they can be found dancing, kayaking and surfing on the Welsh coast. The nightmares they still suffered when they arrived are behind them – now the only daily reminders are their scars and the shoulder pain they get in cold weather.

But both are aware of how different life might have been. “Some of my friends are married and have children,” explains Kainat.

The duo's sights are set on university. While Malala has received an offer from a top institution – understood to be Oxford – her friends were last month both given offers to study nursing at Edinburgh (“Inshallah, we get the grades”). Gordon Brown, who has become a mentor, is helping find sources of funding.

They are keen to restart campaigning. And both see their futures in Pakistan. Shazia – who remembers when girls' schools were shut down under Taliban tyranny – insists things are improving. “In some areas, girls and boys are now even being taught in the same classroom.”

“I believe I should go back to my country and try to make change there,” Kainat insists.

Adds Shazia, “However we can help, we will.”