

The Power to Make Change

An interview with Shiza Shahid, cofounder of the Malala Fund

GROWING UP in a prominent, progressive family in Islamabad, Shiza Shahid had big dreams about what path she might follow, possibly into journalism, public service, or even acting. She wanted to make an impact on the deplorable conditions she saw around her, especially the difficulties and traumas faced by girls and women in Pakistan's patriarchal society. She became an activist at an early age, going inside a women's prison as a 14-year-old to help children incarcerated with their mothers. She did volunteer work at counseling centers for Afghan women refugees and engaged in relief efforts after Pakistan's devastating 2005 earthquake. She snuck out of the house to join protests against the rule of then-President Pervez Musharraf. Shahid won a scholarship to Stanford University and was a sophomore there in 2009 when she first learned through a New York Times documentary about the brave 11-year-old schoolgirl named Malala Yousafzai who was defying the Taliban's efforts to shut down schools for girls throughout the Swat Valley. She organized a summer camp to provide respite, workshops, and mentoring for Malala and 26 other girls from Swat and to draw attention to their plight from movers and shakers in the capital. She remained close to the family even as she embarked on a high-flying career as a McKinsey & Company consultant in the Middle East. Days after the October 2012 attempt on Malala's life, Shahid flew to the girl's bedside in a Birmingham, England, hospital and stayed to help the family deal with the worldwide attention focused on their daughter. She took a leave and later relinquished her consulting job to become the cofounder and full-time CEO of the Malala Fund, the nonprofit created to advance Malala's work on behalf of girls' education on a global scale. She helped find a coauthor and arrange a deal for Malala's autobiography, *I Am Malala*, and accompanied her on speaking engagements around the world, including at the United Nations on her 16th birthday, in Nigeria on behalf of the missing girls on her 17th birthday, and in Oslo, Norway, last October when Malala accepted the Nobel Peace Prize that she shared with Indian child rights activist Kailash Satyarthi. Now Shahid has stepped back from running the Malala Fund to expand her own work as an organizer and social entrepreneur. *Time* named her to its list of 30 young people who are changing the world and she made a *Forbes'* list of the brightest young social entrepreneurs.

IE: What was your dream growing up?

SHAHID: I did well in school, but mainly did a lot of social impact work on my own. That was my passion. At one time I wanted to be a journalist and thought leader ... or be in government and create change through direct public service. As I got older, I became more intrigued

by entrepreneurship and business as a means to bring social change.

IE: Your father is a retired rear admiral and your mother runs an orphanage. What was your upbringing like?



Shiza Shahid

Shiza Shahid will speak about the struggle to educate all girls at the NAFSA Annual Conference in Boston on May 27, 2015.

SHAHID: Well, it was the public service sphere, which meant that it was a respectable life My father and mother wanted the very best for us in terms of our education so they always sent us to top private schools. I was raised like my brother was raised. There weren't a lot of gender differences. My family was always very supportive when I would go out and try things on my own. That is something a lot of girls in Pakistan and around the world don't have, so I was very fortunate.

IE: How did a 14-year-old get to volunteer inside a prison in Pakistan?

SHAHID: I always had interesting friends with interesting parents. I spent a lot of time with one who was very active in the women's space. She became my mentor and got me that internship. I always gravitated toward interesting adults—artists, writers, lawyers, political organizers. I grew up in the capital city in turbulent times. When [then-Pres-

ident Pervez] Musharraf removed the judiciary, I protested with them on the streets. Actually, since my father was in the Navy and serving the government, legally we were not allowed to protest. So, I'd tell my father to drop me at my friend's house and sneak out. There were one or two occasions when my face ended up in the newspaper. I'd hide the newspaper but my parents would find out. Luckily, they would just sort of smile so I figured I wasn't in too much trouble.

IE: How did you wind up at Stanford?

SHAHID: When I decided to apply internationally I thought, "Okay, let's just Google the top 10 U.S. schools and apply to all of them." I couldn't afford tuition, and most U.S. schools aren't

need-blind for international students, but Stanford and Brown offered me full scholarships. It was really a stroke of luck. Stanford was a big opportunity, and I wouldn't be here without it. On the other hand, it was also an isolating and difficult time. College in the United States is very care-free; I was very serious. I had grown up wanting to change the world. Things were still really bad

in Pakistan and so I'd read the news all the time and speak on the phone daily with people about what was going on back home. I gravitated more towards doing things on my own outside of school. I studied international relations and developed some great relationships with my professors—again, always intrigued by the world of adults.

IE: What made you think you could do something significant so young?

SHAHID: I've always felt I could create things I put my mind to. I've never felt paralyzed or incapable or that something was too big or difficult. I learned later in life when I became a consultant that if you asked the right questions, you could figure out pretty much anything. Nothing was rocket science. I didn't know that at the time. Maybe what I did know was that there was a lot of madness where I had grown up, a lot of people with conservative, radical, nonsensical views and ideas. There

were suicide attacks, acid attacks on women, complete inefficiencies in the government, poverty, and a lack of opportunity and ambition among young people. I felt, “Okay, if I can make sense of all this insanity, then I must have something going for me, because the ideas that I have in my head seem a lot more progressive and humane than a lot of what I’m hearing around me.”

IE: How did you hear about Malala’s struggle to stay in school?

SHAHID: The *New York Times* did a short documentary when she was 11. Essentially no one had been talking about what was going on in Swat and this journalist managed to get Malala and her dad to agree to be interviewed. They were very brave. I was taken aback. This hit home. I remembered writing in my college essays how, if I could just get an education, I’d pass it on to other girls in my community. But nobody was writing or talking about what was happening in Swat except this little schoolgirl.

I called up her father. He was very happy that I called. Mostly when people see stuff on the news, they don’t act. I asked what I could do. At this point, I have incredible networks and resources. I was in [former U.S. Secretary of State] Condoleezza Rice’s first class after she left office. I thought if I was in Swat, what could I have done to change the situation? If I could [share those resources] and pass all of that on to Malala and these other incredible girls in her city, how much more effective could their voices be? He said it was too dangerous to do anything in Swat right now. I said, “Okay. What if we organize a summer camp in Islamabad?”

I went back to Pakistan over spring break and invited the family to stay with us in Islamabad then. I got to know them. I started talking with the adults whom I had always looked up to and told them, “I want to do this summer camp and bring these girls here.” There were a lot of concerns about security. A lot of people said, “Don’t do it.” I started to think about smart ways to do it and what I wanted these girls to learn. They had been through a lot. First, let’s do things that are

fun and give them a break. Next, let’s give them the tools and ideas they need to continue to speak up in ways that are safe. The third and most important part to me was how do we tell their stories to people of influence to get them to act—the military, journalists, thought leaders? We invited them to the closing event where each girl came forward and told her story. By the end there wasn’t a dry eye in the audience.

IE: How did you learn of the assassination attempt on Malala?

SHAHID: I had just landed in Egypt and a friend texted me. It took the wind out of me. My mother drove to the hospital and spent the next couple of days there. The government cordons off the hospital, but my mother’s inside. I feel like I’m in *Grey’s Anatomy*, getting firsthand information on her medical condition and sending it across to the McKinsey health care practice: “Here’s what’s happening. Do you think this is right?” Gabby Gifford’s surgeon wants to fly in and people are calling me up. I had nothing to do with the actual medical recovery; the doctors were great. But I’m passing information back and forth, doing my part to make sure things were in order.

Then she’s airlifted to Birmingham and we think her parents have gone with her, but it turns out they were actually taken to a safe house. A couple of days in her dad calls my mother and says, “We’re still here. There was an issue with passports.” My mother gets him to call the president [of Pakistan] and gets them on the next flight.

At this point, they are overwhelmed. I’m on the phone with them and they say, “Can you come and be there?” So I book the next ticket to Birmingham. There were a lot of things to do. I’d go back to Dubai later to finish the project I was working on, but McKinsey gave me their blessings to take a



Shiza Shahid with girls’ education activist Malala Yousafzai.

leave to help Malala, and eventually I left to build up the movement.

There was a lot of excitement around Malala’s story, but I knew that excitement was not going to last. To do meaningful work this needs to move from the story of a victim to a story of hope and leadership. We needed a platform that takes the story and creates impact. I tell the family this and they say, “This sounds great. We want you to set it up.”

Our strategy was two-pronged. The first is advocacy. Malala has a great voice. She can push governments to make policy (and funding) decisions in favor of education. And then the fund itself can raise money to distribute to local organizations in select countries for education projects.

IE: What advice do you have for students who want to tackle challenges like the ones that you took on at a young age? How do they find a cause

**Believe that there's nobody else but you with the power to make change.
Find a local organization and get involved in a hands-on way.
Give your time and be dedicated. You will learn incredible things.**

worth pursuing and do something meaningful?

SHAHID: Start in your community. There may be something that you are deeply passionate about, or something you are simply curious about. For example, you may see a lot of homelessness where you live, but perhaps you never thought it was your place to ask why. Well, it definitely is. Believe that there's nobody else but you with the power to make change. Find a local organization and get involved in a hands-on way. Give your time and be dedicated. You will learn incredible things.

IE: Did studying abroad make a difference in who you are and what you've accomplished?

SHAHID: Absolutely. I believe the most important thing we can do to understand ourselves and others is expand our perspectives by interacting with different cultures and exploring different realities. That is something I will never stop doing.

IE: You switched from being an international business consultant to a social entrepreneur. Is this your true calling?

SHAHID: This has been one incredible adventure. The reason I wanted to step away from the organization but still be involved at a high level is to allow myself to support a wider number of entrepreneurs, leaders, and activists on the ground. I've always been in the impact space. So I'm looking now to become more active as an investor in social entrepreneurs as a mentor—someone who finds people of promise—and helps them succeed, going from one project to a number [of them]. **IE**

CHRISTOPHER CONNELL is a veteran Washington, D.C., education writer and author of NAFSA's annual *Internationalizing the Campus* reports.

“Insuring the Health of Tomorrow’s Leaders”SM

For more than 30 years, the insurance professionals at The Harbour Group have served NAFSA and the International Education community with comprehensive medical insurance, innovative benefits and responsive customer service.

- ACA Compliant Plans Available
- Individual Plans for International Students and Scholars
- Custom Group Plans
- Study Abroad Plans
- Medical Evacuation and Repatriation Plan
- Online enrollment at hginsurance.com

Visit our web site or call us today:

800.252.8160
hginsurance.com

