

# The Most Powerful Weapon

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*We are thrilled to continue #humansoftheworld, a series of tales we can both relate to and marvel at. Following our Giving Season stories, here is another story of appreciation, self-reliance, and strength by those impacted by your donations. **Aleem Mawji** is a graduate of the Aga Khan Academy, Mombasa currently in his final year of study at the University of British Columbia.*

## **A Hand Up at the Aga Khan Academy**

I was born in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where I went through Aga Khan Nursery, Primary and Secondary schools. When I was approaching my last two years of secondary education, I started considering a move away from home to prepare for life in university, and the Aga Khan Academy, Mombasa came to mind. I had visited the campus in seventh grade for a soccer tournament, and was left amazed by the beauty of the facility.

To be perfectly frank, my family's financial circumstances would have made it very difficult to attend the Academy; some form of financial assistance was crucial. I was thrilled when AKA saw past the financial difficulty, recognized my accomplishments and potential to excel, and accepted me with a scholarship. I gratefully accepted the scholarship, knowing I had a responsibility to make full use of this immense opportunity. So at age 16 I set out for Mombasa and started with the International Baccalaureate (IB) program!

## **Learning a New Mode of Thinking; Meeting a New Community**

Every day at AKA was challenging, as anyone that has experience with the IB program can certainly attest! Even mathematics presented a new language; I remember having to read a paper on mathematics with the date of publication and page numbers being the only numbers in the entire document! However, my most valuable academic experience was studying the Theory of Knowledge. This course focused very strongly on making one critically examine what it is that we "know." To this day it has me questioning a lot of premises I would otherwise accept.

While the academic environment was fairly rigorous, it only enforced the already-strong sense of community one would experience in the residential program. One moment, we were scratching our heads over a physics lab report due that evening, and the next, we were plotting ways to sneak into the AstroTurf to kick the soccer ball around! In my opinion, this type of learning environment truly makes the Academy a unique and fulfilling experience. To this day, I still regard many of my dorm-mates as extended family rather than school colleagues.

## **Path to British Columbia**

At the end of my two-year stay in Mombasa, I was honored to receive the Academy's Medal of Honor for highest academic standing, and Award of Excellence; an all-round award for academics, sports, extracurricular, leadership, and volunteering. I was also nominated by the Academy for the International Leader of Tomorrow Award from the University of British Columbia (UBC). I received this award in the form of a full scholarship to study the program of my choice at UBC's campus in Vancouver, Canada. While I left the compound of the Academy with immense joy knowing I had fulfilled some expectations placed on me, I felt an even greater sense of responsibility to myself, my family and the Academy given my opportunity to study in British Columbia.

The program I decided to study was Mechanical Engineering. Coming from a family of engineers certainly played a role in this decision, but I most appreciated the versatility of the degree and how the applications of mechanical engineering design spanned a range of industries. Over the course of my degree, I have worked on projects ranging from micro-controller-based autonomous vehicles, to a drip-irrigation system for optimizing use of a limited water supply. I have also spent eight months in the maintenance engineering department of a large copper mine, and have worked on the design of a device to prevent excessive bleeding from an injured limb.

I attribute my desire to work on this wide range of projects to two things: an unwillingness to be satisfied with the knowledge that I possess at any time, and a desire to have a larger positive impact on as many fronts as I can, when I have the capacity to do so. While these are arguably generic traits, my belief in them has been strongly enforced by the people I met at the Academy, and the Aga Khan Academy Learner's Profile that the institution so strongly stands for and promotes in its students.

## **Working Together**

During my third-year in university, I found myself at a cross-roads. While I enjoyed the versatility of the engineering degree, a part of me knew that becoming a professional engineer may not have been best-suited to my aspirations.

When I was in London visiting my cousin in the summer of 2015, he introduced me to the world of management consulting. Initially, it brought to mind an image of a team in suits, working in isolation, preparing a PowerPoint deck instructing a company on changes to be made to achieve X. I later discovered how out-of-date this impression is. Management consulting, I have found, is all about solving complicated problems that have a large impact on the clients and the community around them. More often than not, this is achieved while working hand-in-hand with the client companies to implement a proposed solution.

I learned more about this industry during a recent internship with McKinsey & Company. During this time, I got to work with a large coal mine that was seeking to reduce its maintenance costs. What was truly unique about this experience was how we were in the field, working with the tradesmen, foremen and managers, asking ourselves questions like "How do we know when best to replace this \$300,000 piece of equipment? What actionable change can we make to our maintenance practice? How can we track the effect of this change?" We would draw on the strengths of each other's backgrounds and figure out practical solutions together! I really appreciate this idea. I don't want my work to be just theoretical or conceptual. I want to be on the front line, working with the people in question to make these changes tangible.

## **Harnessing Potential**

One project that grew during my undergraduate study was a company that my brother, Naeem, and I co-founded. The company's goal (to increase the access to electricity for people in Tanzania) was strongly based on values my family instilled, and that were prevalent at my time at the Academy. First, it applied the idea of giving back when one has the capacity to do so – not because we have to, but because we can. Second, it focused on the notion of sustainability and building capacity; not a one-time handout, but an activity that helps people harness their own potential to thrive.

In some ways, I see parallels in the role that the Aga Khan Academy has played in my story. As I approach the end of my undergraduate studies and begin my transition into a professional career, I reflect on the events that have taken place, and the individuals that have played a role to get me to the position I am in. While I owe an unparalleled amount of credit to my parents and two siblings for instilling the right foundation, I cannot overestimate the role the Academy played in my development. I came into the Academy with a scholarship, viewed as a student with potential, and have since become an individual with a stronger belief in my ability to harness my own potential, and that of people around me. That, I believe, is the most powerful weapon.

*Photo at top: Students at the Aga Khan Academy, Mombasa listen to a lesson conducted by the teacher. At the Senior School, the Academy is incorporating the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (DP) for students aged 16-19. This is a two-year course study that prepares students for university. AKDN/Jean-Luc Ray*