

Haafizah's Story



Hello, my name is Haafizah and I am 12 years old. My story is about changes and how so many things can change in a blink of an eye. For example, if you had told me five years ago that I'd be living in a country far from my own, I would never have believed you. But here I am, thousands of miles from the country I was born in.

I was born in Pakistan, like the rest of my family. It is a beautiful country of snow-capped mountains, green highlands and mysterious deserts that stretch as far as the eye can see. It's hard to believe that anyone would want to leave this place. I surely didn't want to leave. In fact, none of us wanted to leave.

But we were forced to do just that. There were so many reasons we had to flee. The town we were living in was not like how it was before. It used to be a peaceful place but it had turned into a nightmare. People felt unsafe even in their homes. Guns were fired for unimaginable reasons and the sounds made it hard for us to rest or sleep. Even when we did have to step outside to run errands, a million questions buzzed in our heads: "Will there be shootings? Will we come back alive?" Sometimes, explosions from a distance would leave us cowering in fear.

My parents knew that it was not a good place to raise my brother and me. At that time, it felt like it was no place to live. They knew they had to do something fast. So they decided that the best thing to do was to raise enough money to leave Pakistan. So we sold all our

things: mattresses, chairs, plates and everything that used to make our home. But the money was only enough to send my father out of the country. I can imagine how hard it was for him to leave us but he knew he had to go. He had to choose a country where he could find a job and save enough money to get all of us out of harm's way.

My father chose Malaysia.

Malaysia wasn't easy for him at first. He spent his first year struggling to find a job here. He was even evicted by his friend because he couldn't get enough money to pay for his lodgings. So my father, who is an educated man, had to take up labour work on construction sites. Although he now had a place to sleep and money to eat, the job didn't pay enough for him to save up for us. Still, my father remained hopeful.

People say that life-changing opportunities knock when you least expect it. This certainly happened to my father. He still tells us the story of how it all happened. One day, he was walking in a park when he met a man, who offered him a job as a clerk. It was an offer he couldn't refuse. Elated, he accepted it and never had to go back to hard labour again. This was how he could save money for us, every single day. 365 days later, we were all reunited with our father.

You wouldn't believe this but when I first came to Malaysia, I didn't go to school for a whole year! It's not that I didn't want to go to school. I have always loved learning new things. But I just couldn't go because no school wanted me. They told me that my refugee status made it difficult for me to be accepted into their schools. So I stayed at home. Trust me, it was not fun at all.

After about a year, there were kind people who tried to put me into a good school. My father's friend found a school but it turned out to be an orphanage. There, I was taught basic things like ABC. Truth be told, I already knew my alphabet so I felt like a kindergarten student! To make it worse, my brother and I were bullied by the other students because we are not locals. They teased us and

made us feel bad just because we are not like them.

That was why I was relieved when my father told me about Dignity. Apparently, a friend of his boss' wife found out about the centre and told him all about it. After checking out the place, he said that the fees were affordable and asked us if we wanted to change schools. It felt like we couldn't say YES fast enough!

That was three years ago. Now, I'm a third-year Dignity student and I have never been happier. I have learnt so many things like netball, which is a sport I have never heard of before but I think I am getting pretty good at it! I am also doing well in my studies. I think this year will be the year for me to get first place in my class. I am studying really hard. I want to make my family proud. We have come such a long way and after all the things that have happened, I know that change is inevitable.

That is why I tell my story about how so many things can change in seconds. For example, if you had told me five years ago that I'd be happy and safe, I would never have believed you.

But here I am, with a big smile on my face.

