First place, Somayya Upal

In her final public statement, Susan B. Anthony told a crowd that “failure is impossible.” She was 86 years old, had dedicated her life to fighting for women’s suffrage and didn’t get to live to see the passage of the 19th amendment, yet, she had a sense of conviction that conveyed hope. I believe she left the movement with this message because she understood that what they’d accomplished thus far meant success and she was confident that justice would prevail. She was also making a statement about how the way that we typically think about failure is completely wrong. Failure is actually an important and necessary part of attaining success. While the suffragists hadn’t met their ultimate goal at this point, they’d raised awareness regarding the injustices against women. And from the struggle, from every setback or failed attempt toward the goal of suffrage, there were lessons learned and progress made.

Her message resonates with me in many ways. One cause that is important to me is the struggle for education for girls worldwide. If you surveyed me in elementary school, middle school, and present-day on my favorite song and food, it would vary greatly. However, if you asked me: “where is your favorite place to be?” There would be one answer - school.

I remember vividly in 2012 when I learned that Malala Yousafzai was shot on a bus on the way from school by the Taliban. At only 15 years old, Malala began speaking out against the extremists in Pakistan who had taken away her and other girls’ ability to receive an education.

From my home in America, I saw Malala as more than a role model, almost like an older sister. I read her autobiography in middle school and presented a report dressing up as her for a fair. I even raised over $200 for her nonprofit by asking my friends to donate money instead of giving me birthday presents.

Coming from a Pakistani immigrant household, I’ve grown up acutely aware of the privilege I have, and grateful for the resources and the support I’ve received. In Islam, we are taught that education is a incumbent upon every male and female. And yet, the reality is much different. According to a report from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics, today young girls are twice as likely as boys to never have the chance to learn to read or write in primary school. In certain regions, like South and West Asia, the disparity is even more striking. Eighty percent of out-of-school girls will never enter formal education compared to 16 percent of out-of-school boys. I need only look at the history of my family bloodline to see the strong, curious women before me who’ve struggled to obtain their education.

My father’s mother (*dadojani*) achieved a tenth grade education in Pakistan, after which she had to leave school to take care of her handicapped parents. She had an arranged marriage with my grandfather, who was a missionary sent abroad for long periods of time. Because his stipend was not enough to support the family, she needed an income to help their situation.

After having her first child, she studied on her own and wrote exams to become certified as a primary school teacher. Through her own doing she was able to support her family and eventually teach in an all-girls’ school.

My mother’s mother (*nano*) completed her twelfth grade education in Pakistan, after which she had an arranged marriage, despite wanting to continue her studies. She had a child immediately after marrying my grandfather. Finally, in her late thirties, my grandmother persevered and went back to school where she studied cosmetology, becoming a hairdresser.

My mother was born here, but she also faced similar struggles. She married when she was nineteen years old and became pregnant with me when she was senior in college. She worked hard to graduate, and carried me across the stage when she finally got her diploma. Her plans to continue to graduate school were put on hold for a few years, and when she obtained admission to law school, she discovered she was pregnant again. She decided to pursue law school anyway and my sister was born during her winter break. My mom was adamant that she would complete her education, and she did.

Education is such a fundamental aspect of life; the ability to read and write can drastically change lives and a lack of education has equally incredible ramifications. For example, studies show that a child born to a mother who can read is 50 per cent more likely to survive past the age 5. Education also allows for informed decisions. Throughout history, denying education has been a way to control others. By not allowing women to attend school or pressuring women into skipping out on their education to fall into traditional domestic roles, not only do women lose out, but so does the world. Women who are educated can better care for their families, and they can form their own opinions, opinions not controlled by misinformation selected by others.

Failure is impossible here. Just like Susan B. Anthony said in regards to the right to vote, when it comes to the education of women and girls, the only way we can go is up. As another generation of women are educated, they can support the education of their own daughters. Just as my mother broke the education barrier by continuing to pursue her studies alongside motherhood, she is now an inspiration to me and my sister. My dream is to continue my education and one day become an emergency physician. I’m grateful for my grandmothers’ and my mother’s struggles that allow me to have such dreams. While it sometimes seems embarrassing that my dadojani already calls me “Dr. Upal”, since this is a dream that hasn’t materialized yet, I know that she is just showing her excitement in having a well-educated granddaughter. For her, failure is impossible.