

Muhammed Ziauddin – Disadvantaged Essay

Growing up as an “orphan” by Bangladeshi standard, I have faced serious socio-psychological and financial hardships. When I was six months old, my father passed away. Although, I have never seen to him consciously, I felt his absence at every moment in my life, especially in our strictly patriarchal society, where the oldest male is the sole earner and protector of a family. The psychological and financial severity that I experienced following his death tremendously shaped my childhood experiences.

The emotional vulnerability that arose with losing my father was enormous on its own, but was aggravated by the attitudes I faced because of it at school. As a poor orphan, I was never allowed to sit in the front row. My classmates would ignore me as their parents had told them not to “hang out” with an orphan as it was considered unlucky. I was seldom invited to events like weddings, which are considered joyous moments.

With no paternal figure, I was defenseless and susceptible to dangerous events. I am still haunted by the memories of when I was six. A male neighbor enticed me with buying lozenges and took me to his room and started molesting me! After a few such incidents, I gathered the courage to tell my mother but we could not file a police report because of his more affluent status and the corrupt bribe-ridden police department. He threatened to kidnap and sell me to the traffickers if my mother did not keep her mouth shut. Every few nights we would receive phone calls from strangers threatening us to leave the neighborhood. So, we left the neighborhood silently, as my mother feared for my safety. The psychological trauma associated with this event never left me.

Along with psychosocial vulnerabilities, severe financial distress constantly threatened to halt my education. My mother’s extremely limited income was barely enough to bring food to the table. I was allowed to study in primary school for free with the condition that I would sweep the classrooms, and bring teachers’ lunch from cafeteria everyday. In high school (6th-10th grade), I started working at a neighborhood grocery store to pay my school fees. During these days, most of my studies were done at the store, between serving different customers.

With my limited savings from the job, my mother continued to apply for Diversity Visa lottery year after year – a gateway to the “land of opportunity” – America. Finally, on our ninth try, we won. However, migration meant borrowing loans on heavy interest from moneylenders.

After immigrating to Brooklyn, I began working at a T-shirt factory, situated in the unventilated Chinatown basement to pay off our loans. As I worked there, intense heat coming from three heat-press machines sometimes suffocated me. At times, my nose would bleed from the temperature. Other times, I thought of quitting, but immediately the face of my helpless mother would appear in my mind. However, every night as my mother, brother and I sat to eat dinner on the floor of our basement room, the difficulties of the day would be suddenly seem worthwhile.

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During my public high school years in Brooklyn, witnessing the fate faced by many immigrant students who dropped out of high school to support their families, I began to work harder. With the encouragement of an immigrant teacher at my school, I took the SAT and applied for private colleges. To finance the process, I started working full time while in high school. As I did not have a computer or Internet at home, most of my studies and applications were done in the school and public library or on the subway. Ultimately, a generous Dean's scholarship at Syracuse University (SU) allowed me to receive education at a private school.

At Syracuse, I realized that I could become someone. I got involved on the issues of minority and immigrant rights within the campus. During my time as a leader at the Multicultural Empowerment Network (MEN) and as a mentor for the Somali Refugee students, I found my passion. To eradicate financial, racial, and sexual struggle among communities and to become leaders, I joined in solidarity with other members of color on campus.

Although SU exposed me to many of my passions, I wanted to transfer to a college that would provide me opportunities to receive excellent science education as well as to continue working for minority communities. At Penn, I was able to cultivate my interest in science as well as serve immigrant Bangladeshi population in Philadelphia extensively. Although a generous Penn Grant allowed me continue my education smoothly, I had to constantly work no less than the maximum of 20 hours both at Syracuse and at Penn to help my mother and pay for my health insurance.

Being an orphan in Bangladesh has shaped who I am today. My passion and interest for working with deprived immigrant and minority community has allowed me to use my previous experiences to help others in distress. Ultimately, as a dentist from disadvantaged background, I want to work toward improving the health of underprivileged populations.