

SHORT STORIES OF SUCCESS

Four students from the UAE, who achieved significant successes in their chosen fields, tell **Anand Raj OK** how they climbed the ladder, and offer plenty of tips to youngsters who are keen to make a mark



Rashida Ali

An alumna of The Indian High School, Dubai, Rashida Ali is a student of medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), a premier medical institute in India. She is a recipient of the Kishore Vaigyanik Protsahan Yojana, a programme of fellowship in basic sciences, initiated and funded by the Indian government's Department of Science and Technology, to attract exceptionally highly motivated students for pursuing basic science courses and research career in science. Rashida cleared the NEET, JIPMER and AIIMS exams securing an All-India rank of 503 in AIIMS. She is currently preparing for the United States Medical Licensing Examination to pursue postgraduate studies in the US.

Were you always a topper at school?

Yes. I was either a topper of the class or within the top four. However, the motto of my studies was always concepts first. Position in the class was not something I took too seriously.

At what age/grade did you decide to follow the career path you have chosen?

I always wanted to become a doctor. But there were two incidents that I remember vividly that made me decide on my career path. First, my mother used to take me regularly to the public library in Jayanagar, in Bangalore, my home town and where I grew up. There I'd mostly read books on the human body.

Second was when in grade 8, my mother and I accompanied my father for a routine check-up to a hospital. There I saw an invitation for the public to attend short

Getting a place at AIIMS was a dream come true for Rashida. Top: At her school convocation



Rashida with her parents Murtaza and Arva Ali

lectures by eminent doctors on common topics about our body and how it functions. My mother and I became regulars to these lectures. These two incidents hugely influenced my choice of becoming a doctor.

What steps did you/your parents take to shape your education/career plans?

My parents gave me the freedom to choose subjects and the field I wanted to pursue. My father was clear that whatever field I chose, I had to get into the best college in India to study in that field. He always encouraged me to aim for higher goals. He



also made me participate in KVPY entrance exam in grade 11. That was a good precursor for me to prepare for tougher exams like NEET and AIIMS.

What extra curricular activities did you pursue while in school and how useful were they when it came to making a career choice/earn a seat in the college of your choice?

I used to be regular in sports and activities such as debating, public speaking, emceeing... These didn't exactly help me pick my field but definitely helped me perform better in college competitions.

Who were your mentors while in school?

I came to Dubai after my Grade 10 and enrolled in The Indian High School. In school, I had some very good teachers for biology, physics, chemistry and math and that helped me a great deal. My parents and I chose PACE [part of Ascentria, a test-prep centre based in Dubai] as we felt it was one

of the best institutes for training for professional courses. The teachers there helped me tremendously, making it easier for me to grasp subject concepts. They were available to help at any time and encouraged me to better my performance.

I used to ask a lot of questions to clear my doubts and regularly went for additional help. It was exhausting but each day I learned something more and felt a step closer to my goal.

Five pieces of advice your teachers/mentors gave you that you think helped you achieve success.

- ◆ Have a clear idea of concepts. Memorising is easy but will not be enough to take you to your goal. Refer good books.
- ◆ Be focused on the task at hand. Concentration is key. Regular studies alone will not help, You need to put in extra effort.
- ◆ Never leave your school exam preparations in the lurch for the competitive exams. Prepare for the former well and you are 50 per cent ready for competitive exams.
- ◆ Hard work, there is no alternative to that.
- ◆ Be consistent on what you are doing. Don't give up even if you face a hurdle.

Five pieces of advice you can give students

- ◆ Enjoy what you are doing. If you are not enjoying your studies, take a short break, do something you like, then return to studies.
- ◆ Have like-minded friends. They are key to keeping you motivated.
- ◆ Clear your concepts and regularly revise subjects.
- ◆ Find a balance between study and relaxation hours. I believe that tailoring the study routine to your highest efficiency hours will give you best results.
- ◆ Remember, breaks are as important as are study hours. Give your brain time to breathe.
- ◆ Never compromise on sleep. It is essential for memory consolidation. You may believe that you can learn more by sacrificing a few hours of sleep but the result will be the complete opposite.

Something you miss not having done while at school?

No. Honestly, after you get into your dream college, nothing matters.

Your ambition/dreams?

I want to pursue higher studies in the United States for which I am preparing. I haven't decided my field of choice yet but I have a strong inclination towards neuroscience.



Shreyas Neelakantan Sharma

The 16-year-old, grade 11/IB1 student of Gems Modern Academy is an award-winning public speaker, member of the UAE National Debate Development Squad, a TEDx Youth event speaker, a world champion in individual debate at the World Scholar's Cup's Tournament of Champions, and the winner of the Dubai Debate League, an inter-school debate competition in which the country's top schools participated. Shreyas also set up the Emirates Debate Society, the region's first independent student-led debating society where students from across the country come together to debate, discuss and learn.

At what age/grade did you decide on the Emirates Debate Society initiative?

The planning for this began when I was in Grade 9. The principal and a core team of my school who saw my draft early last year loved the idea and approved the initiative. They gave me valuable feedback after which I presented the project to teachers from other schools. In April 2020, the pilot session of the Emirates Debate Society took place with 50 students from four schools. Today members include over 400 students from more than 45 schools from six emirates.

What led you to set up the Emirates Debate Society?

Ever since middle-school, debating has had a huge impact on me. It was the lens through which I viewed the world. It led to me constantly challenging my own beliefs and engaging meaningfully with opposing viewpoints. Academics taught me what to think. Debate taught me how to think creatively and critically.

I had many friends who shared my interests and we found confidence and our sense of self within this pursuit. We wanted to develop into effective communicators and critical thinkers. I realised that there was a need for a centralised platform that can connect students and form a debate community where students can meet to discuss topics, learn from each other and hone their skills.

Tell us a little about the initiative.

Emirates Debate Society is the region's first independent student-led debating society of its kind. Students across the UAE come together to debate, discuss, and learn on our platform.

We conduct free weekly sessions where, among other things, students learn through discussions on philosophy, economics, policies, and ethics; develop untapped talent by training students in competitive debate sessions adjudicated by experienced debaters; organise large debating tournaments; and help students hone their public speaking and advocacy skills in a safe learning environment. EDS's mission is to make critical thinking and communication skills accessible to the youth.

What help/support did you receive from your school and at home?

My school's Senior Leadership Team was very supportive – be it their critique of the first proposal or their guidance and words of encouragement all through. At home, I could bounce ideas off my 11-year-old sister and my parents. They put up with the long and noisy online sessions and late-night calls, took care of my frequent hunger pangs and helped me when I sought any help with troubleshooting.

Who were your mentors?

Apart from my school principal, Nargish Khambatta, and my Debate Mentor Sumana Chatterjee, many teachers and

