

Zaiba Tahyya, Alumnus of the Year 2023 oration response

Thank you so much for this opportunity. I am so humbled to have received this award.

Before anything, I would like to note that I am acutely aware of my social position and my privilege that led me to be part of a beautiful family that I call the University of Essex family. I spent three years here in Colchester studying Criminology, and they were the most defining three years of my life, but I started my first year in the university being ashamed of my identity. I was a south Asian immigrant woman with a student visa. I came searching for what I called “new beginnings” but I had no idea where to start looking.

I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do when I was in Essex and struggled to find my place amongst my peers. I carried so many anxieties and stories that I thought nobody else understood, but I knew I wanted to help others who were just like me. As time went on, spending time with my peers and my professors helped me see that the stories (and anxieties) I brought with me made me powerful, and the education that I got was not only a great feature on my CV, but it helped me own my identity. I was proud and confident of the person I was growing into, and it was time for me to go back and help others reclaim their identity. But I didn't ‘hit the ground running’ immediately after graduation.

First, I had to admit defeat from the Home Office because my student visa expired. So I went back to Bangladesh and started with an internship, and worked in various jobs, but nothing seemed satisfying. This was when I started to reflect on my identity again. I thought of the countless women in my country who were facing inequalities and injustices, and those who had their rights were stripped from them. The streets were not safe. We'd hear about women being kidnapped or murdered arbitrarily so frequently that we started to come to expect it whilst listening to the news. ‘Simply existing’ wasn't a safe or viable option for women. I started an organization called the Female

Empowerment Movement. I opened my laptop and wrote proposals and concept notes on how to address this issue. That was it, that was how I first started. There was no magic or secret formula, I saw something that didn't sit right with me, and wanted to do something to fix it. I sent this proposal to different activists and organizations in Bangladesh, but nobody really cared about an organization that had no projects. Except one. And that was it. We only ever need that one — not a whole group or a community to believe in you, but just one was enough. I partnered up with the organization and we carried out a self-defense project for women in urban slums. We wanted to increase mobility and decrease vulnerability. We wanted women to feel confident and be more visible. We started with a pilot project with twenty girls, however only six stayed on. I took that six who stayed on as a success. The six girls that stayed on in our project went on to do wonderful things in their communities, and it worked as a ripple effect. In just a few months, my organization turned into a small social enterprise where we were offering workshops for corporate women, and over the next three years, about 500 women sought out our services. We received national and international acclaim for our widespread positive impact.

The next part... well it isn't the part where I tell you we went on to reach new heights. Sadly, all good things must come to an end. During the pandemic in 2020, I realized that my passion and ambition are great and they are the fuel that allow me to keep going, but I also realized that I valued love. Love for myself and for my friends and for my family. So with this realization, I closed my organization, donated all remaining funds to the beneficiaries, and moved back to the United Kingdom with my partner.

Coming back to the UK, I had a sense of déjà-vu. Soon enough I realized why: I was, once again, a south Asian immigrant woman. But this time, I was ready to reclaim my power. I started working for Ashiana Network — a charity that helped women who faced domestic violence. I am a specialist advocate for women who do not have secure immigration status and have no recourse to public funds. In the last year alone, I assisted with thirty cases to guarantee

women secured status and access to public funds, and fully intend to continue down this line of work.

Graduates, if there is anything I can advise you on, it would be to be proud of your identity and heritage, to not be afraid of failure, remember it's okay to choose love. Earlier, I mentioned that I came here looking for what I called “new beginnings” but by the time I graduated, I left feeling grateful for and proud of the things I brought with me in the first place: my heritage, my social positioning, and my womanhood.