

# M A L A L A B A C K I N T H E C L A S S R O O M

SHE SPENT HER TEEN YEARS FIGHTING FOR GIRLS' RIGHT TO GO TO SCHOOL. NOW THE EDUCATION ACTIVIST IS OFF TO OXFORD.

BY CHRISTINA BOHNSTENGEL

Malala Yousafzai greeted the world of Twitter on July 7, 2017, with, "Today is my last day of school and my first day on Twitter." She was then welcomed by the likes of the UN Foundation, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, Canadian president Justin Trudeau, Bill and Melinda Gates—separately—a plethora of American politicians and celebrities, and the verified account of Twitter itself. In 14 hours, she amassed 350,000 followers. The Pakistani Nobel Laureate's entrée into the Twittersphere set the tweets abuzz, but the fact that it was her last day of high school, was far more monumental.

It was only nine years earlier that the girl who would become known simply as Malala, then 11 years old, spoke out against the Taliban in Pakistan, when they banned local girls from attending school in her hometown of Swat Valley. And then, only four years ago when they shot her in the head for it on her school bus. She was airlifted to Birmingham, England for brain surgeries and treatments, and six months after the attack, she returned to school—now on British soil.



Since then, her life has been a delicate balance—played out on the world stage—of earning her own education, while educating the world about her mission: the right for every girl, everywhere, to go to school.

Her backstory has been widely reported, particularly since the global accolades keep pouring in year after year, including the International Children's Peace Prize, for which she was nominated by Bishop Desmond Tutu; the United Nations Human Rights Prize, awarded only every five years; culminating with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014—at 17 years old, she is the youngest recipient of the world's most prestigious honor. She donated her financial winnings to fund a secondary school for girls in Pakistan, and also started the Malala Fund, a multimillion-dollar nonprofit dedicated to girls' education efforts across the globe. Last year, she topped that when, at 19 years old, she became the youngest United Nations Messenger of Peace.

"I stood here on this stage almost three-and-a-half years ago, when it was my 16th birthday and it was my first appearance after the attack," she said after receiving the award at the UN headquarters in New York City. "I told the world that education is the basic human right of every girl and that no child should be denied this right. I stand here again today and say the same thing, that education is the right of every child and especially for girls, this right should not be neglected. ...Once you educate girls, you change the whole community, you change the whole society."

From her very first speech at the press club in Peshawar, "How Dare the Taliban Take Away My Basic Right to Education?" to her address to the United Nations just five months after being released from the hospital, which received a 20-minute standing ovation, to her words to the Canadian Parliament last year—her last summer before taking the next big step down her educational path—Malala's voice, her words, call out. Her 5-foot 1-inch frame stands tall behind political podiums all over the globe as she calls out world leaders, taking them to task for broken promises and commitments. "When I'm meeting with presidents and prime ministers, I am there to advocate for girls. I'm very focused on asking them to keep their promises and honor every girl's right to go to school," she said when we interviewed her last summer.

"I think it's important that leaders hear directly from girls. One hundred and thirty million girls are out of school around the world today. So many times leaders meet to discuss education and there are no girls present. I will not accept a world where decisions about our future are made in rooms we cannot enter."

When asked about strategies for making her message connect, whether it be with lawmakers, leaders, parents, or local citizens, she explained, "You have to know your audience and the problems they're facing. When leaders tell us they can't afford to spend more on education because their economy isn't doing well, we talk to them about the incredible returns girls' education brings to their communities and countries.

Low income countries could add \$92 billion to their economies if all girls went to school for 12 years." She went on, "Parents in some countries think early marriage is the best way to protect their daughters. To them, we talk about education as the best protection and best insurance for a girl's future."

When Malala joined Twitter last summer, she was still waiting to hear if she would be accepted to Oxford, which had extended a conditional offer earlier in the year, based on her final assignments and test scores. "People often forget that winning a Nobel Peace Prize doesn't mean that you know much in your studies," Malala told Torey Van Oot of *Refinery29*. She applied to study philosophy, politics, and economics (PPE), hoping to follow in the footsteps of one of her role models, the late Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto, who also graduated with an Oxford PPE degree. It has often been reported that Malala, too, hopes to serve Pakistan as prime minister one day.

But her summer plans consisted of more than anxiously waiting for a coveted college acceptance letter. Malala spent her last summer before university traversing the globe on her newly launched Girl Power Trip, through the Malala Fund, a worldwide tour to meet young women who could help carry the mantle of girls education for the next four years and beyond.

"We wanted to do this trip because the reasons girls are out of school vary between regions and countries," she told us in the midst of the tour. "This is a complex problem without a single solution, but I believe we can see every girl in school in my lifetime."

The initial stop was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, during her senior year Spring Break 2017. Lancaster has welcomed more than 1,300 refugees, nearly 20 times more than any other city in the US. From there she stopped in Ottawa to give a speech to the Canadian Parliament, receive honorary citizenship, and chat with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Facebook Live. In July, she took the tour to Iraq and Kurdistan, where she also celebrated the milestone birthday of entering her 20s.

She has a history of celebrating her birthday in a global way. On her 16th birthday in 2013—less than six months after being released from the hospital, and her first appearance since the Taliban shot her in the head—she delivered a speech to the United Nations that was moving beyond her years. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon officially declared her birthday, July 12, "Malala Day."

Yousafzai claimed that Malala Day is, "not my day," but the "day of every woman, every boy and every girl who have raised a voice for their rights." Since then, she has marked each birthday in someplace significant where schooling for girls is struggling or nonexistent. She spent her 18th birthday in Lebanon opening a school for Syrian refugee girls, calling on world leaders to invest in "books not bullets." In 2016, she brought attention to Kenya and Rwanda.



**Above: Meeting Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Below: Speaking at the UN in April, 2017.**



And last year, as she received birthday wishes from the likes of Michele Obama, Jane Goodall, Joe Biden, and Beyoncé throughout the day, she spent her last night as a teenager in the most whimsical way: playing bumper cars, riding Ferris wheels and roller coasters, and eating cotton candy, yet never losing focus of her mission.

Next stop on the Girl Power Trip was Nigeria, where she met with acting president Osinbajo to declare a state of emergency for education. "In Nigeria, government spending on education is so low. They are the richest country in Africa, but have more girls out of school than any country in the world," she said. "Millions of girls live in poverty and can't afford private schools. They have dreams to be bankers and nurses—but instead they're out of school and working low-paying jobs."

"Next I'll be making my first visit to Latin America and I'm excited about that."

On August 17, 2017, Malala tweeted to the world her college acceptance news, "Your Status: Congratulations! Your place at Oxford University O33 for Philosophy, Politics and Economics L0V0 has been confirmed." to which she posted the comment, "So excited to go to Oxford!!! Well done to all A-level students - the hardest year. Best wishes for life ahead!" ✕