



Pittsburghers help grow an award-winning school in Pakistan started by a 13-year-old girl



JOSH EWERS ✓

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

jewers@post-gazette.com

JAN 18, 2024

5:30 AM

Twenty-six years ago, a 13-year-old Pakistani girl gathered a few younger friends and siblings into the dusty low-walled courtyard of her family's one-room home in Gurjanwala and began to teach them. But this was not play. She left her school the previous day and wasn't going back.

Instead, she'd decided to build her own.

"I had a disease, which is to question everything," remembered Sister Zeph, born Riffat Arif.

"In my culture, most teachers do not like this. They don't like this because most don't equip themselves with knowledge. They don't keep themselves updated about what is happening in the world."

On Wednesday, several decades and some 9,000 students graduated later, Sister Zeph is scheduled to appear before the United Nations to deliver a speech about promoting tolerance through education on the International Day of Education.

The honor follows her receiving the 2023 Varkey Foundation Global Teacher Prize and an accompanying \$1 million in funding, awarded for decades spent helping combat the country's many educational challenges through her free, public, grassroots school, [Zephaniah Free Education](#).

According to UNICEF, 22.8 million children in Pakistan ages 5-16 are not enrolled due to poverty, despite the existence of numerous unused “ghost schools.”

At the time of filming in 2014, according to “Flight of the Falcons,” a documentary Channel News Asia made about Sister Zeph, it was 25 million, with over half living in Sister Zeph's home province of Punjab and 63% of them being girls.

Girls stay home

In Pakistan, the male-dominated society deems women lesser citizens who are largely expected to forgo education, stay at home and care for their families and husbands. Abuse is also rampant and considered a private matter. According to the National Institute of Health, Pakistan was the fourth most dangerous country for women in 2021.

That's why Sister Zeph's questioning has always ended with her students, with one exception.

“My work is about tolerance because I had to leave the school because of discrimination,” said Sister Zeph. “In my school, there is zero discrimination and it promotes tolerance.

“I never asked somebody, ‘What is your religion?’ I never asked them, ‘What is your financial background?’ And I even don't ask people how many family members you are or how many siblings you have. I don't ask personal questions.

“I just ask them ‘Where I can help you? Where do you need my help?’ And I

make it possible, by all means.”

A world away from her home country, at the November award ceremony in Paris, Sister Zeph was accompanied by

good teacher

a McCandless woman she'd met on Facebook in 2016, Debra Krischke, whose Pittsburgh-based nonprofit [Inspired Women Paying it Forward](#) was one of just three primary consistent funding sources for the school. Sister Zeph was able to get her students off the floor and power the school through the COVID-19 pandemic with the funding for food, medical support, books and salaries.

“In our culture, fathers work and they earn money and mothers take care of everything at home,” Sister Zeph said. “So she's like a father of the organization and I'm like a mother of the organization. She provides everything.”

Krischke lived in pre-revolution Iran for two years post-college in the mid-1970's with her father, both working for what was then called Grumman Aerospace. There, she and her office helped a woman escape an abusive husband who controlled her passport.

“I was really passionate about women under veil,” explained Krischke of what drew her to her friend's story decades later.

“As the founder of Inspired Women Paying it Forward, I have to be sort of Switzerland. But in my heart...,” she said, becoming emotional.

“(Sister Zeph) is just there in my heart. And that's just the way it is. And it's the way it was. And it's the way it always will be.”

Since their meeting, several chapters of Inspired Women and the connections they amassed have contributed more than \$100,000 to Sister Zeph's cause.

“I always apologized that we couldn't do more, but at least we could do what we could and keep her going until the world would take notice,” said Krischke. “I always told her just keep doing what you're doing and the world will take notice.”

Leaving school

Even before she left her school at 13, Sister Zeph intuitively felt something was wrong with her schooling. She'd learned about the world through black-and-white TV newscasts, her father's newspapers and her own experience.

"My mother had been doing housekeeping," she said. "And when I would go to the houses of those people, their children were different, their lifestyle was different, their books were different. And I would wonder why they have different uniforms, why their bags are different and why they have different books, why every child doesn't have that."

By age 12, she'd seen enough to write an article on human rights that was published in the Daily Jang, the largest newspaper in Pakistan at the time.

"I believe that leaders are born," she said. "You can polish them, but you can't produce them, and I was born as a leader."

She recalled her school, where the day-to-day routine was rife with inequality for women and minorities and characterized by beatings at the hands of female teachers who, she believes, often apathetically choose the role over their only other option — a subservient life at home.

One day, while a teacher was out, Sister Zeph recalls walking to the front of the class and teaching. She was beaten by her teacher and teased by her peers for her initiative.

"I felt myself unfit there. I felt like I was not learning anything. And it was not according to the education system that I want. I wanted to be respected as a child," she said. "I wanted to have the right to ask questions and I was not given this."

Over time, the number of Sister Zeph's students grew.

In the early days, she embroidered for eight hours a day to fund her lessons. She'd then spend four hours teaching and providing food for hungry students, before teaching herself for four more hours in the evenings. In this manner, she attained master's degrees in political science and history from the University of Punjab.

Sometimes, she'd visit a family 10 times before they'd agree for their

daughters to attend her school.

“When they were little girls, I had to spend a year or two years to convince their families to send them to the school,” she said. “It was very difficult, because many of them are the girls who are the first one who will belong to the first generation of their families who is getting an education. So, we are breaking the taboos.”

Present and future

Her operation has since grown to feature two buildings (plus an informal setup in another village specifically for child workers) supported by 30 team members currently working with 215 students, each of whom receives 10 years of free education, including IT and English instruction. At her vocational school for girls, students attain additional skills to help them save for college.

These days, Sister Zeph says 90% of her team is comprised of former students, all women. Meanwhile, younger former students are off pursuing degrees in areas like criminology, finance and journalism.

“It gives me power to do more, and it feels like I still haven't done something. I have to do more,” she said. “Because there are practically millions of girls in one country, Pakistan, who need the support.”

As the school grew, so did the danger. She’s been threatened and smeared. The school was shot up on one occasion. And she’s been beaten. Currently, she largely remains at home and maintains a low profile when emerging as news of the award travels.

Why does she continue?

“Because I believe I'm born to be a teacher,” she replied. “Everybody is facing some challenges. Nobody's happy with their life. The happiest person is who is living according to the call. My problem is to teach the children. If I live with my calling, then I'm happy. And I am very happy. I am one of the most contented persons on the planet because I am living for the reason I was born.”

Pittsburgh to Pakistan

Reflecting on the award ceremony in Paris, Krischke couldn't be happier for her friend.

"When the world took notice, well, that was a defining moment in her life and in mine," she said. "But to see someone that you love and have supported all these years reach her dream and know that what we've done and our efforts here in the United States were a part of that ... that was overwhelming."

Sister Zeph is thankful for their friendship, especially through the tough COVID-19 years.

"She was there. Today, she is crying because she's happy and she's getting emotional," she said with a smile.

"Those days, she would cry for how can I make arrangements to provide people food in America, as well as in Pakistan, and maybe in Africa. She is in all corners of the world. Her impact is everywhere in the world."

"And she has the same feelings for everybody who is hungry, who needs education, who needs protection, who needs the woman to know their rights. She is everywhere for women and children no matter what they are going through."

Now with newfound means, Sister Zeph is not done dreaming or building.

"I want to make my dream school. Because, since my childhood, I wanted to make a school in 10 acres, where we can have over 2,000 students, where teachers from all over the world can come and teach them about their culture, about their expertise, about science and technology," she said.

"I want them to be healthy. I want to teach them about themselves, so they can know themselves, so they can know who they are, why they are born, what is the purpose of their life, what they can do to make this world a better place and about social skills. Because in the coming days, the degrees will not have as much importance as your social skills, your AI skills, and what you can give the world."

Josh Ewers: jewers@post-gazette.com

First Published: January 18, 2024, 5:30 a.m.

Updated: January 18, 2024, 2:09 p.m.



Josh Ewers is the Post-Gazette's assistant features editor — and a passionate feature craftsman. He is a West Virginia native and WVU graduate.

✉ jewers@post-gazette.com